

Elders Sermon / COB / 12.14.14

Introduction

- † **[Slide 1: flow]** I was in one church where the whole congregation had to come together to vote before we could buy supplies for the children's classrooms. I was in another in which one person had 100% control and needed to be consulted for every decision. Some churches want a celebrity pastor like some cities have a celebrity mayor; in others the pastor is not even a member of the church and the team of elders are to keep the pastor in line. Other churches have deacons who act like elders and have no elders, or they have elders but the deacons have the power, or they don't have elders or deacons... how do we know what is right?
- † Last week, we followed the development of church ministry structure from the start of the church until a couple of centuries after the apostles were gone. We saw the apostles left a structure which built on what they had developed during their lifetimes and was reproducible over generations.
- Christ was the head of the worldwide church and thus of every local church, and his chosen apostles retained their authority in the worldwide church and thus in every local church through the scripture they left us in the Bible.
 - Each local church had a lead elder or senior pastor who headed up the team of pastors and elders, who together carried out the mission of Christ and the instructions of the apostles.
 - Each local church had other spiritual leaders, some of whom were called deacons, who assisted the pastor/elders in getting the ministry work done. And in every local church there were other believers who carried out the work of the ministry.
 - Now we will look at what the New Testament says about these groups in the local church, so we can pursue the intentions of the apostles, the will of God, and the mission of Christ. Today we will consider pastors and elders; after Christmas we will talk about other roles in the church...

Pastor/Elders

- † **[Slide 2: terms]** As we saw last week, pastors and elders were the same people in the apostolic model. Sometimes they were called elders, other times they were called overseers, and sometimes they were called shepherds, which in Ephesians 4 often gets translated as pastors.
- The English word "pastor" comes from the Latin word for shepherd, itself derived from a verb that means "to feed"; so the English usage suggests the pastor shepherds and feeds the flock of Christ in the church, which is what the elders were doing in the early church.
 - So the pastors and elders were the same people, one team representing the apostles and Christ, by shepherding the flock and overseeing the ministry in the local church.
- † **[Slide 3: implications]** Let's consider some implications of this one team concept.
- First, there should be one unified group of pastor/elders to lead each local church. We can call the paid elders "pastors" and the lay elders "elders," if we want, but they should work together on one team. For today, I will call them all "pastor/elders," to emphasize this point.

- Second, members of the church can become part-time elders, but the criteria for becoming an elder should be the same as for hiring a pastor, since they are the same role in the church.
- Now the senior pastor might be a little different, in that he is the lead elder, and thus [in business terminology] he is the CEO and Chairman of the church and its ministry. You might ask for something more, like seminary training, for him, but – as we will see today – scripture gives one set of standards for pastor/elders and they apply to all pastor/elders.
- Third, we can hire ministry assistants who are not elders, but they also would not be pastors. Linda is paid part-time for administrative support, but that does not make her a pastor or elder. We could hire her to oversee the children’s ministry – which she does already as a volunteer – but if she was not an elder, then she would not be children’s pastor, but a ministry director.
- Fourth, we can hire assistant pastors, but those pastors would also be elders. There is a church that had a pastor and no lay elders. Then they hired an assistant pastor. Years later, they ordained lay elders and formed an elder team, but left out the assistant pastor! So this fellow who had seminary training, pastoring experience, and years as a leader in that church was now reporting to fellows who had not gone to seminary or ever taken on such ministry leadership. That assistant pastor left the pastorate to lead a Christian non-profit, but he remained in that church, so now he is eligible to become an elder because he quit being a pastor! Crazy, right?

† **[Slide 4: Acts 20]** So what do pastor/elders do? [share a playful image of bank directors]

† As we saw last week, the pastor/elders in the local churches represented the apostles, who themselves were teaching, evangelizing, praying, and administrating; so we can expect the pastor/elders were doing the same.

- **Acts 20.28-29 NET** gives us a general impression of this. Here we have the apostle Paul speaking to the elders of the church in Ephesus: **“Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I am gone fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”**
- The pastor/elders were officials who oversaw the ministry of the church, protected the doctrine and people of the church, and shepherded the people of the church.
- The early church writings after the New Testament support this view of the responsibilities of pastor/elders; there was no significant change after the apostles were gone. But let’s explore more *scripture* about what pastor/elders are supposed to do.

† **[Slide 5: Titus 1.9]** **Titus 1.9 NET: He [an elder] must hold firmly to the faithful message as it has been taught, so that he will be able to give exhortation in such healthy teaching and correct those who speak against it.**

- **1 Timothy 3.2 NET: The overseer then must be ... an able teacher...**
- **1 Timothy 5.17 NET: Elders who provide effective leadership must be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching.**
- **[Slide 6: today]** The pastor/elders have the responsibility to protect the purity of doctrine in the church, including correcting those who speak false doctrine. In today’s church, this would include oversight and training of all the teachers in the church and approval of curriculum.

- The pastor/elders also have the responsibility to directly teach in the church. Today, this would include preaching in worship services, teaching in large and small group settings, training and coaching the other teachers and leaders in the church, mentoring, evangelizing, providing biblical counsel, and – very importantly for all these other activities – continuing their own biblical study so as to always be growing more equipped to teach.
- † **[Slide 7: 1 Peter]** **1 Peter 5.1-5 NET: ...I urge the elders among you: Give a shepherd's care to God's flock among you, exercising oversight not merely as a duty but willingly under God's direction, not for shameful profit but eagerly. And do not lord it over those entrusted to you, but be examples to the flock. Then when the Chief Shepherd [Jesus] appears, you will receive the crown of glory that never fades away. In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders...**
- Consistent with Paul's teaching in Acts, Peter's wrote that the pastor/elders should oversee the church ministry, provide spiritual leadership, be an example of spiritual maturity and Christian living, and care for and guide those in the church.
 - **[Slide 8: oversight]** In today's church, oversight would include serving as the legal board of directors, authorizing church decisions, representing the church in public, coordinating with other like-minded churches, ordaining others who become a pastor/elder, deacon, missionary, or recognized teacher in the church [see 1 Timothy 4.14], providing the church with strategic planning and vision casting, establishing procedures that are biblically consistent and effective, and ensuring the various ministries of the church are functioning effectively.
 - **[Slide 9: lead]** Providing spiritual leadership and living by example would include overseeing worship in church services, administering the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord's supper, providing teaching that effectively helps people grow spiritually, leading and coaching other leaders in the church, and exemplifying Christian character and Christian lifestyle, which itself would include living out all the positive commands of scripture.
 - **[Slide 10: care]** Providing a shepherd's care to the flock today includes ensuring the ministries of the church are functioning properly, including those for care and edification [spiritual building up] and providing contexts for other revealed aspects of church life, such as for worship, serving, and evangelizing; it also means praying for the church and its members, praying with them, hearing confession, providing biblical counsel, and anointing them with oil.
- † **[Slide 11: Ephesians 4]** If this is starting to sound like a lot of duties, I agree with you! But we should remember from last week that the pastor/elders can delegate some responsibility, there should be other spiritual leaders in the church eager to help, and every one of us – in leadership or not – should be spiritually excited enough to pitch in, making it possible for all this to happen.
- Let's talk a little about how the pastor/elders and the rest of the church work together. **Ephesians 4.11-12 NET: It was he [Christ] who gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, and some as pastors and [other] teachers, to equip the saints [all believers] for the work of ministry, that is, to build up the body of Christ...**
 - As I mentioned last week and already today, the word translated "pastors" here is actually "shepherds" in Greek, and shepherds in the New Testament are the pastor/elders.
 - I also want to mention that there are shepherds and "other teachers," because "other" is implied in the grammar of the Greek text. It kills me that the same professors who taught me that in seminary left "other" out when they created the New English Translation. Oh well.

- So it is the job of the pastor/elders to work with the other spiritual leaders in the church, such as evangelists and other teachers, so that every one of you becomes equipped to participate in the church's ministry, so that you are ministering to each other and to anyone new who comes in.
- There are only two kinds of healthy believers in the church: spiritual leaders who are teaching and training others; and those eagerly getting that teaching and training to become spiritual leaders. Think about that prayerfully this week. God might be telling you it is time to step up, either to get help becoming a spiritual leader or to get help becoming a better spiritual leader.
- Every one of us should be involved in the ministry of the church. It is not the role of the pastor/elders to do all the work. Their job is to equip the rest of you to do the work!
- This is a very common mistake in churches today. The thinking is that since you hired a pastor, or since there are several elders, they should do all the work. You know who is supposed to do evangelism according to the Bible? You! And who is supposed to grow to be a teacher and mentor in the church? You! And who is supposed to take care of all the logistical needs of the ministry? You! The pastor/elders teach, train, and coach you, but we do the work together.
- And if you don't do your part, we cannot do ours. If I have to spend time figuring out sales tax exemption laws, taking out the trash, calling back on every inquiring phone call, and learning about sound equipment, then I cannot focus on teaching and training you. And even within the teaching ministry, the more of you who become involved and qualified as Bible teachers in the church, the more ministry we can get done together and the more I can do myself [elaborate? new members; marriage group; grief counseling; youth curriculum].

† **[Slide 12: subject]** So you should do your part in the ministry. As you do, keep in mind what we just read in 1 Peter: that those who are younger in faith are to be subject to the pastor/elders.

- This is the same verb as the one used to say the church submits to Christ. It is not Peter's intention to make you my slaves, but it is his intention, as an apostle, to instruct you to fit into the ministry structure the apostles set up. The pastor/elders oversee the church, everyone else in the church submits to the leadership of the pastor/elders in the ministries.
- This would be awful if you had evil or ignorant pastor/elders, right? I have met pastor/elders who did not have integrity and could not be trusted; who sought to manipulate the people rather than serve them; or who neglected some of the duties we just discussed.
- But what if you have good pastor/elders? What if they are willing to sacrifice their own time to help you; with their wives, they give more money than anyone else to meet the needs of the church; and they serve in whatever capacity is needed to push the ministry forward each week? If you respect the character of your pastor/elders and you respect the office of pastor/elder which the apostles created, then you should show respect, i.e. subordination within the ministry, to the pastor/elders God has placed in your church to lead its ministries.
- This makes sense right? We cannot have anarchy in the church, everyone doing as they please [there was a little of that here eighteen months ago]: that is not the scriptural example, would not be nearly as effective for ministry, and would leave the sheep without any shepherding. We cannot have democracy either: that is not the scriptural example and it is letting the sheep lead the shepherd. God had a plan for the church, and we need to buy into it, each doing our part...
- ...and each aspiring to grow into a higher part! Seventeen years ago, I was just a confused visitor to a church, sitting in back on the end so I could bolt if I had to; now I am a pastor/elder. There were a lot of growth experiences in between, which you could experience as well, if you wanted.

- † Within the pastor/elder team, the lead elder/senior pastor has a special part, what Professor Svigel calls being a “prime among equals,” in that he is the mentor/coach of the other pastor/elders, and provides the ultimate accountability for doctrinal purity, spiritual health, and ministry effectiveness.
- We would not want a pastor-dictatorship in the church any more than we would want anarchy or mob rule democracy. The senior pastor/lead elder has a great responsibility, and must have authority to carry out that responsibility, but he leads a team of pastor/elders and is accountable to them, as they are to him. In the early church, he also was accountable to his peers in other cities; we don’t have that today, except in denominations; but I have been developing relationships with like-minded pastors, who could provide some accountability.
 - Scripture teaches that all pastor/elders are to practice servant leadership as modeled by Christ and the apostles: it is not about power for self, it is about empowerment of others. This is true for all of us, whether or not we are in ministry leadership. The blessing you get out of participating in ministry is healing, purification, growth to be more like Christ, but you serve with the intention of blessing others.
 - I think of the senior pastor/lead elder like a head coach in football, he’s the one who gets fired if things don’t go well. I hope that this church is a little more patient about ministry development and success than football team owners are with their head coaches! But believe me, I know, I am being held accountable by Christ, who is going to be more demanding than you! Christ is the chief shepherd, he is my example to follow, he is the one who can give me a reward, a crown of glory, but he also is my judge. He is going to know whether I truly followed him by sacrificially and unconditionally loving you and serving you as a pastor/elder.
- † **[Slide 13: Titus 1]** So, being a pastor/elder is a great honor, but you can see it also is a great responsibility. As you would expect, God has provided qualifications for who can be a pastor/elder in the church. Let’s look at two passages that lay out these qualifications.
- **Titus 1.6-9 NET: An elder must be blameless, the husband of one wife, with faithful children who cannot be charged with dissipation [wild living] or rebellion. For the overseer must be blameless as one entrusted with God's work, not arrogant, not prone to anger, not a drunkard, not violent, not greedy for gain. Instead he must be hospitable, devoted to what is good, sensible, upright, devout, and self-controlled. He must hold firmly to the faithful message as it has been taught, so that he will be able to give exhortation in such healthy teaching and correct those who speak against it.**
 - **[Slide 14: 1 Timothy 3.2-7] 1 Timothy 3.2-7 NET: The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher, not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money. He must manage his own household well and keep his children in control without losing his dignity. But if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for the church of God? He must not be a recent convert or he may become arrogant and fall into the punishment that the devil will exact. And he must be well thought of by those outside the faith, so that he may not fall into disgrace and be caught by the devil's trap.**
 - **[Slide 15: blameless]** Most qualifications for pastor/elders are related to character. This makes sense, for they are to be “blameless” or “above reproach,” in that they are seeking to walk in God’s light and serve the Lord, rather than living in willful sin.

- **[Slide 16: mature]** First, they must be mature and devout believers. This makes sense if they are to be spiritual leaders and an example of Christian living. Note the Bible does not say they have to be old, just mature in faith. And we further note that as a young man Timothy served as an apostolic emissary in charge of the church in Ephesus, and Paul told him not to let his youth deter him in his leadership [1 Timothy 4.12]. Mature in faith, not necessarily old in years.
 - **[Slide 17: doctrine]** Second, they must hold firmly to good doctrine and be able to teach that doctrine to others. We have already seen why that is necessary, to fulfill their teaching duties.
 - **[Slide 18: integrity]** Third, they must be leading lives of exceeding integrity, being above reproach, respectable, upright, devoted to what is good, with an upstanding reputation even among non-believers. We all are called to live this way, as representatives of God and Christ, but certainly our leaders should endeavor to live this way.
 - **[Slide 19: sober]** Fourth, they must be temperate and sober, not given to drunkenness.
 - **[Slide 20: controlled]** Fifth, they must be self-controlled, peace loving, non-contentious, gentle, and non-violent.
 - **[Slide 21: hospitable]** Sixth, they must be hospitable and not materialistic or greedy.
 - **[Slide 22: humble]** Seventh, they must be humble and sensible.
 - **[Slide 23: family]** Eighth, they must have a family life that is well ordered, with children who are not rebellious or wild and a marriage that is intact and in which they are faithful.
 - **[Slide 24: male]** In the Bible and the early church documents, all the pastor/elders were men, and they represented the apostles who all were men. I don't have time today to discuss God's decision to give us different roles in the household and the church. I will be happy to talk with you or you can listen to my sermon on 1 Peter 3.1-12 on the church's website, because we discussed it then. We will discuss women's involvement in ministry the week after Christmas.
- † **[Slide 25: lit]** Last week, I mentioned that we can learn about early church practices from documents which are historical even though they are not scriptural. From these documents, we see several practices which apparently were widely accepted even before the turn of the first century.
- First, the existing pastor/elders prayerfully chose new pastor/elders to add to their team, but each selected individual needed the approval of the congregation before assuming office. This is the approach described in First Clement [44.3-4], a letter from the senior pastor/lead elder in Rome to the church in Corinth.
 - Second, also from First Clement, we see there were no term limits on the office of pastor/elder. So long as a man who had rightfully gained this office continued to perform his duties blamelessly, there was no just removal of him from office [44.1-4].
 - Third, the team of pastor/elders could remove one of their number if he was unrepentantly walking in sin. This occurred in the church in Philippi, according to the letter written to the Philippians by Polycarp, the lead elder in Smyrna [11.1-4].
 - Fourth, new pastor/elders should be ordained in a ceremony of congregational recognition of their qualification and calling to the position, and prayerful support by the church's spiritual leaders. This also is suggested in scripture passages [Acts 6.6; 14.23; 1 Timothy 4.14; 5.22].
 - Now, the early church literature is not inspired scripture, so we do not have to obey it. But we study scripture within its historical context, and this literature can help us to understand how

the early church interpreted things that seem vague to us in scripture. So it makes sense to at least consider how they were doing things back then when we consider how to do things now.

Conclusions

- † **[Slide 26: chart]** Just like last week, I hope you will be encouraged that this church is trying to closely follow the apostolic teaching in this area.
 - We do have one team of pastors and elders who work together under the guidance of apostolic scripture to lead the church and empower those who are in it.
 - We do have a senior pastor/lead elder who heads up the pastor/elder team and is ultimately responsible for the spiritual health and growth of the people and ministries of the church.
 - We try to uphold the scriptural criteria for pastor/elders and our pastor/elders take seriously the responsibilities assigned to them in scripture.
 - Some aspects of today's teaching are not reflected clearly in our church bylaws, but even then what we are practicing is in line with what we just learned. I would like to propose some changes to our bylaws, to clarify in that document what we have learned today. We want our bylaws to reflect explicitly the teaching of scripture, the example of the early church, and what we already are doing as a church. We'll talk about that in the next hour.

- † I also want to inform you of the more personal aspects of our pastor/elder team.
 - As your lead-elder/senior pastor, I am under contract to lead this team and the church.
 - Mark and Jim have been lay elders for several years. They both told me when I came that they needed rest, but they continued to serve. Now God is prompting them to take time off, to get refreshed. I hope we will see them return to the pastor/elder team, but I am excited to see what God has in store for them, for refreshment and opportunities for new ministry and growth.
 - Earl has agreed to return as a lay elder. We will ask you to affirm his nomination in January.
 - Steve, Dan, and Jesse have agreed to participate in leadership training, which would better equip them to serve as lay elders in the future. Thus it is possible that in a year or two, we would have seven men ready to serve in this capacity, a strong foundation for ministry growth.

- † Though this was a theological sermon mostly dealing with a role in the church to which few of you will aspire, let me suggest a few application points from this teaching.
 - First, be careful when affirming people to be pastor/elders. God has created this office to have a powerful and important role in the church, so be careful in whom you put this much trust.
 - Second, keep your pastor/elders in prayer.
 - Third, appreciate and be subject to the pastor/elders, as they live to serve Christ by serving you.
 - Fourth, help us amend the bylaws to reflect what we learned today, what we already are doing.
 - Fifth, pray about your involvement in the ministry: find ways to participate on our ministry teams; avail yourself of our training opportunities so you grow to be mature in faith and equipped for ministry; and be willing to take on temporary leadership roles in the ministry [elaborate? YG; YA; Cleaning; Repairing...]. Let me close now in prayer...