

July 11, 2010

## Church Matters – Leadership Matters

Alright good morning. I'm glad you are back today because this morning the pieces will begin coming together. Once again let me remind us all where we've been. Having studied the book of Titus we found in that letter a compact blueprint from God for what God wants the church that is His to be and to be about – a blueprint that lays out God's plan for the foundation of the church, for the life within the church, and for the structure of the church – its leadership.

We were challenged in every one of those areas to continue to grow – to pursue and become what God wants us to be, but one of the clearest areas for us to begin moving to line up with what God reveals in His Word is in the area of structure – of leadership. If you want to look at it with me, you can do so in Titus chapter 1 – or you can just think back to our study for now – but when Paul tells Titus why he left Titus on the island of Crete in **chapter 1 verse 5**, he says (TEXT).

He then goes on to elaborate on the qualifications and functions of elders within the local churches as the leadership structure of the local church that fits God's blueprint. Now when many of us – especially the long time Baptists among us – hear the word elder, we immediately think of Presbyterians. And while it is historically accurate to associate elders with Presbyterians, it is not accurate to associate them *exclusively* with Presbyterians – nor is it true to think that the term is foreign to us as Baptists.

Elders can be found in Baptist churches even here in America through the 18<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, W.B. Johnson – the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote a book on church life in which he strongly advocated the idea of a plurality of elders in one local church.

Whether through inattention to Scripture or the pressure of life on the frontier where churches were springing up at an amazing rate, the practice of cultivating such a depth of leadership declined. And zoom fast forward to today and the organizational structure of most churches bears almost no resemblance to the pattern found among New Testament churches. As the ministry has become 'professionalized' and practicality has taken the position of primacy, the biblical model has been set aside for something more modern – more efficient.

Countless churches have embraced the corporate business model and thereby marginalized the biblical model. In many churches, the deacons – or some council or board of another name – function as a board of trustees who are in charge of hiring and firing a senior pastor who reports to this board. The senior pastor functions as the CEO. He is the president of the church and is responsible for giving the church vision and success. The members of the ministerial staff function as vice presidents over various ministries – music, youth, children, missions, etc. The congregation comprises the shareholders who – as a body – vote to elect the trustee members.

The result of non-biblical structures like this and others is that churches struggle to understand and implement God's plan for the leadership in His blueprint. Which takes us back to Titus and to this follow up series. In Titus we learned unequivocally that **the church – the local church – the manifestation of the living God in this world – MATTERS to God**. And within this church that matters to God there are certain matters that are crucial to that church fitting God's blueprint. Thus the title of this series – Church Matters. And one of those matters is the issue of leadership – Leadership Matters - and what is understood in Titus 1:5 when Paul tells Titus to appoint or ordain elders in each town – in each local church – is that that **leadership in God's blueprint for His church is to come from WITHIN the membership of the local church**.

That's why we spent the last couple of weeks looking at the truth from the Word that lays out the importance of local church membership – the truth that membership matters. And whether you've never really thought about it or if you have your own position on that issue, I really encourage you to go back and listen to or read those sermons if you missed them. Because as we saw both weeks – **before leadership that fits God's blueprint can come from within the membership of the local church, membership in that church must be MEANINGFUL – it must make a difference – membership matters**. If elders are going to make any difference in the church that fits God's plan, the

membership in that church must be meaningful membership. And today, we'll begin to see why and how that goes together.

You're going to want to hold on today and probably to use your message map even if you normally don't because God has a lot of information for us to begin understanding. So if you don't already have your Bible open to Titus chapter 1, go ahead and get it out and turn to **Acts chapter 20** – if you're in Titus, put your finger there and turn to Acts 20.

All churches have had individuals or an individual who performed the function of elders even if they called them by other names. Our understanding from Scripture on the leadership of the church comes from the two most common names for this office which were episcopos which means overseer and prebuteros which means elder. And though the words are different, they are used interchangeably throughout Scripture to describe sometimes the same office and sometimes the very same men. That's what we see in Acts 20. If you'll look in **verse 17**, we find this: (TEXT)

So Paul has called the elders (plural) of the church (singular) in Ephesus and basically in verses 18 to 27 he gives a big goodbye speech to them and then you come to verse 28 – where he is still addressing the same guys he called elders in verse 17 and in **verse 28** he says (TEXT).

He calls them elders – then he calls them overseers – then he tells them to shepherd – which is the word poimaineien which is where we get the word “pastor.” **So an elder is a PASTOR and an elder is an OVERSEER. All three terms refer to the same office and the same work of leading a congregation.**

If you want to turn back to **Titus** you can, you find another clear example of this when in **verse 5** he tells Titus to appoint elders in the churches and then in describing the qualification of an elder, he comes to **verse 7** and calls these same men overseers.

Elders, overseers, pastors – the men, the office, that God set up as leadership in His church and ***when we understand that all three words are referring to the same source, we can begin to see the role of an elder in God's church.***

Obviously first of all, **an elder is called to LEAD** the church. He is not just a leader in the church, but he is called, with the other elders, to lead the church. In describing the qualifications of elders, Paul says in **1 Timothy 3:4-5** that an elder “*must manage his own family well*” and tells us why that matters when he writes “*if anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?*” Later in the same letter Paul writes in **chapter 5:17** “*The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor.*” It is evident then that one of the main functions of an elder is to lead the church. And let me just say that next week we will re-visit this topic in terms of the authority of that leadership and the final authority of the membership of the church. But for now, another aspect of the role of **an elder is that an elder in God's church is called to SHEPHERD.**

Pastor is another title or term used to describe an elder or overseer and pastor has the same meaning as shepherd. Many times the people of God are referred to as sheep and those who take care of their needs and exercise leadership over them are called shepherds. Peter in **1 Peter 5:2** tells the elders to “*be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care.*” And that is a significant part of the role of an elder.

Church leaders are not cowboys who drive the sheep. They are caring shepherds who lead and protect the sheep. In fact if you want to see how serious God takes this function, take a look at **Ezekiel 34:2-4** with me in the Old Testament. Here we see God laying into the leaders of Israel for not being good shepherds and the basic charge is that they cared more for their own interests than the needs of the sheep. Listen to what God says, (TEXT 2-4)

An elder is a leader, he is a shepherd, and finally **an elder is called to TEACH.** In fact it is clear from the Word that an elder is primarily a teacher. One of the unique qualifications for an elder in **1 Timothy 3:2** is that he must be able to teach. Two chapters later when Paul mentions elders who are

worthy of double honor because they direct the affairs of the church well, he emphasizes their role at working hard at preaching and teaching. Back in Titus where again we find the qualifications of elders, Paul expands on this role more when he says in **Titus 1:9** (TEXT).

The goal of their teaching is not just to encourage believers by giving them biblical instruction, but also to firmly rebuke those who oppose the truth of the gospel. It is through this role of teaching that much of the other roles of leading and shepherding takes place and finds authority through the rightful use of the Word of God.

Now many modern churches – and you may be coming up with this thought as well – **What about church staff and deacons?** Many modern churches have tended to confuse elders with a church staff. The staff are the people that the church in one way or another has set aside full time to work for the church. They are often the people most directly familiar with what is going on day to day. They often have seminary training. They must have a certain degree of godliness and maturity or they would not have been hired in the first place. Certainly **members of a church staff MAY be elders. But simply because someone is hired by the church to perform a certain leadership function does not mean that person SHOULD be counted among the elders.**

A staff member must meet the same qualifications listed in the New Testament to be an elder – so, for example, a staff member who is not able to teach is disqualified. Also – staff members who are not involved in shepherding the congregation – a primary role of a pastor – should not be counted among elders.

Similarly, many churches in practice, if not in doctrine, have confused the New Testament roles of deacon and elder. We have looked before – as recently as a few months ago when we ordained 4 new deacons – at what deacons are focused on. The concern of the deacon are the practical details of church life: some types of administration, maintenance, the care of church members with physical, financial, or other needs – anything in order to promote the unity of the church and the ministry of the Word.

Back in **1 Timothy 3**, the Scripture distinguishes the office of elder (episkopos) from that of deacon (diakonos). The character requirements are almost identical, but elders must be able to teach – an ability that is not required for the office of deacon. In **Acts 6:1-4** we see a further clarification of the distinction. You don't have to turn there, but we read in Acts of a controversy concerning Greek and Jewish widows in the church membership and the distribution of food to those widows. So in Acts 6 verse 2, the disciples gather the whole congregation and say (TEXT 2-4).

The division of labor is clear. The seven chosen men “deaconed” tables which released the apostles to “deacon” the Word – same word is used for both activities. **Deacons then SERVE to care for the physical, financial, and often personal needs of the church and they do so in a way that heals divisions, brings unity under the Word, and supports the leadership of the elders.** Without this practical service of deacons, the elders will not be freed to devote themselves to the roles God has lined out for them.

Hopefully we are beginning to form a picture of the leadership structure God designed – and what an elder is and is not. So let me dispel a few common myths before they can take hold by looking further at **what an elder is not.**

A biblical elder is not **simply an OLDER male.** Though I pray that God blesses our church with more and more godly older men who meet the character qualifications for biblical eldership, chronological advancement – even when partnered with upstanding church membership is not sufficient to satisfy the requirements outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In fact, there are some thirty year old men who are more qualified to be elders than some men twice their age. **Life experience alone does not qualify a man to be an elder.**

A biblical elder is not **simply a successful BUSINESSMAN**. In fact, some of the very principles or traits that get some businessmen to the top of the business ladder may actually put them on the bottom rung of the church leadership ladder. **Leadership in the church is fundamentally different than leadership in the business world – just read Mark 10:35-45 or John 13:1-17**. The church is not simply a nonprofit business. It is the body of Christ and as such it is the most unique corporate institution in the world. It operates on principles of distinctively Christian doctrine, servanthood, holiness, faith, hope, and love. This is not – of course – to say that it is impossible to be a biblically qualified elder and a successful businessman at the same time. It is simply to say that success and leadership in the business world do not always or necessarily guarantee success in eldership in the local church.

A biblical elder is not **simply an involved COMMUNITY member**. A guy can be the president of the PTA – coach Little League – serve on a city council – lead a Boy Scout troop and still not be qualified to be an elder. Serving in the community in these ways certainly doesn't preclude a man from qualifying, but community service alone cannot be our ultimate criteria.

A biblical elder is not **simply a GOOD OL' BOY**. Living in the same location and having the same friends or even being a member of the same church for 30+ years doesn't make a man an elder. Likeability can actually often be deceptive.

A biblical elder is not **a FEMALE**. The qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus assume male leadership in this position in the church.

And finally a biblical elder is not **a POLITICIAN**. It is an elected office – but the man who fills it should not be one who subtly or overtly campaigns for it or one who is noticeably vocal about promoting political positions in the context of the local church.

**So what is a biblical elder?**

**An elder is simply a man of Christ-like CHARACTER recognized by the membership and CALLED by the Spirit to lead God's people by teaching and/or applying God's Word in a way that profits God's people spiritually** – men who display exemplary character and who demonstrate both aptitude and fruitfulness in teaching the Word of God

**–men who have no reservations about fundamental Christian truths**

**– who hold within their congregation and denomination particular doctrinal distinctives without reservation**

**– who are courageous enough to stand on clear biblical issues against the culture or even within the church**

**– who are willing to live a counter-cultural lifestyle in areas where Christ and culture conflict**

**– and whose relational involvement in the congregation reveals a love for the people of God.**

That would be a snapshot or profile of what God has designed.

And **in God's design, there is always a plurality of such men – a PLURALITY of elders in a single church**. In fact scholars say there is never any evidence of a New Testament church being led by a single personality – by a single elder. In that sense, Titus 1:5 serves as a summary example of that when Paul tells Titus to appoint elders plural in each town – obviously as we talked about before, at that point in the spread of Christianity there was usually one church in a town – especially in the multiple towns on an island like Crete where Titus was doing this. Why? **What are the advantages of plural leadership** versus the modern typical model of a single senior pastor?

Let me give you just a few quick practical implications.

First – a plurality of elders **provides biblical ACCOUNTABILITY**. It helps protect pastors from error. Pastors often possess a lot of authority in their churches – often with little accountability. We all know

that we all have blind spots and faults or deficiencies that can distort judgment. If a pastor had little or no accountability, these tendencies can go unchecked. When a church has one pastor with unmatched power then there is no accountability built into the system except for the congregation to fire the pastor. As Alexander Strauch – one of the strongest voices and leaders in understanding elder leadership says – **“Only when there is genuine accountability between equals in leadership is there any hope for breaking down the terrible abuse of pastoral authority that plagues many churches.”**

Second – plurality of elders **provides pastoral BALANCE**. No pastor has all the gifts or the time necessary to do all the work of ministry equally well by himself. There are weaknesses in every pastor’s game. We all need other people to balance out our all-too-human deficiencies. In that balance, there is the freedom for elders to focus on his specific calling and gifting instead of expending massive amounts of time and energy on areas of ministry in which he is not particularly gifted but are still necessary.

Third – plurality of elders **provides BURDEN sharing**. Caring for a church is often too much for one man to handle and can lead to frustration and burn out. Again to quote Alexander Strauch as he shares from his experience, **“If the long hours, weighty responsibilities, and problems of shepherding a congregation of people are not enough to overwhelm a person, then dealing with people’s sins and listening to seemingly endless complaints and bitter conflicts can crush a person.”** Is it any wonder that so many pastorates are short-lived?

Often there is no one to come beside a pastor and encourage him when he is weary from doing good. Solomon’s words speak well into this situation from **Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (TEXT)**.

It is difficult for a congregation to become mature and equipped for the work of ministry through the labor of a single pastor.

Fourth – a plurality of leadership **diffuses congregational CRITICISM**. This is similar to the burden sharing but important enough to be recognized on its own. Under a single pastor – multiple deacon model, the pastor often takes the brunt of criticism alone. Tough decisions can be misperceived, motives can be misconstrued, and before long the pastor becomes the target of all the critical remarks because he is the one perceived to be making all the decisions and casting the final votes – and he usually is.

Under a plurality of elders though, leadership is shared with a body of staff and non-staff elders who have been recognized and affirmed by the congregation. Other men now stand in the gap together. They take responsibility and criticism together. Also – the congregation likely will be more willing to follow tough decisions of a group of both staff and non-staff elders than to follow those made alone by a paid pastor. Some criticism is avoided simply by the increased trust a plurality of non-staff elders engenders among church members.

Fifth – a plurality of elders **LOCALIZES leadership**. It roots leadership in the membership. The church needs to be able to function and grow even if something awful happens to the senior pastor. The last thing we want to do as vocational pastors is to make the church so dependent on us that the church falls apart if we died or God calls us somewhere else. We want our work to continue and to bear fruit long after we’re gone which means leadership must be rooted in non-staff members. And God set that up by calling elders from within the congregation as part of the leadership of the church.

Finally – a plurality of elders **sets a better PICTURE of the church**. Too often there is a gulf between clergy and laity – between the pulpit and the pew. And while the Word lays out all kinds of respect and honor and humility and service lines between the two, a plurality of elders demonstrates that the work of the ministry is not designated for only a select few. When ordinary members show themselves to be qualified, gifted, and called to serve as elders, then it opens the door for others to pursue that character and quality as well. It allows for younger leaders in the church to develop

because no one sees that there is only room for one leader and one ministry in the church. Further more, as we saw so clearly in Colossians, the church belongs to Jesus – not to me or any man. **A church led by a plurality of elders will have in its very system of leadership a constant reminder that the head of the church is not the pastor but the LORD JESUS CHRIST.**

And that is really what we must come to this morning. As Christians, we strive to establish our lives on the teaching of Scripture. And as Baptists, perhaps more than any other historic Protestant group, we turn to the New Testament in order to determine the church's doctrine – including the doctrine of the church itself.

I believe that God has revealed in His Word all that we need to know in order to love Him and serve Him and this includes what we need to know even about organizing our churches. **Our goal – as in all things – must be to look at the BIBLE – recognize some basic aspects of structure and organization that it teaches both in example and in command and then to organize OUR church accordingly.**

For as we learned quickly and throughout Titus – the church is God's – it is composed of God's people – it exists for God's glory. And as we saw in our study of Colossians and as I mentioned just a minute ago – Jesus Christ is the head of the church and how we follow Him matters.

Churches can get away without having elders. It happens all the time. But the biblical pattern – though again that pattern must be sought after to be understood within the pages of Scripture – it is consistent and the practical benefits are clear – both for the pastor and the congregation. The question then isn't why *should* we have elders, but why *shouldn't* we?

**New Testament churches are to be congregationally governed yet led by a PLURALITY OF ELDERS who are released by servant deacons to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer.**

Next week will be crucial in our understanding of the relationship and authority between the meaningful membership of the church and the elder leadership it puts in place. I hope you continue to pray with me as we seek to line up with what God reveals in His Word and that you'll make plans to be here next week for that purpose.