

A Church Led Well

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Let me provide you some hypothetical scenarios of some hypothetical churches. But believe me, these are not hypothetical problems; these are real problems in churches across America and around the world and they are found in every kind of church.

The new pastor at Ebenezer Presbyterian Church has just arrived and has already started a bible study at which he has announced that it's arrogant and wrong to say Jesus is the only way to God. Nobody in the Bible study seems to have a problem with that including the board members who come.

St. Rufus Lutheran Church announced to their members that they are sending delegates to the synod meetings this fall to support the resolution that affirms Same Sex Marriage. When the news was announced most people clapped and cheered.

Black River Community Church can't keep a pastor. Every 3 years, it seems, they chew up and spit out the pastor they hired just a short time ago. The leaders can't figure out why seminaries can't produce competent pastors; everyone they hire, they say, can't figure it out. The church keeps shrinking year after year.

4th Baptist Church believes all the right things; their doctrine seems sound. But they are in a constant state of disharmony. The few vocal leaders scare everybody else from talking at meetings and if you disagree with them, they find ways to marginalize your influence. Most of the people are quiet... at least during the meetings. But when the meeting adjourns gossip runs wild in parking lots, telephone calls and emails. As you can imagine, 4th Baptist makes very little impact in their community.

Sadly, those scenarios exist in many churches today. And there may be a number of factors that contribute to those dysfunctions, but I think it's right to say that those patterns and dysfunctions remain embedded in local churches primarily because of a history of poor leadership. It's absolutely true: humble, godly, mature, courageous leaders guide a church towards harmony and ministry effectiveness while proud, immoral, self-serving, cowardly leaders invite Satan himself into the local church and run it into the ground. Leadership matters.

Over the last few of years, your leaders have studied biblical leadership from the scriptures. And they've become persuaded that God does indeed have a way his church is supposed to be led. It's supposed to be led by certain people and structured a certain way. And I'm happy to report that by the grace of God your leaders serve you well; they love Christ, his church and his scriptures. But they'd be the first to tell you that there's improvement needed. They want to keep growing and serve even more effectively.

When we studied biblical leadership together, we saw that we were doing a lot of things right as a church. But we also came to the conclusion that some important changes needed to be made. Some of those changes are simply due to our growth. As we keep growing in size, adjustments need to be made so we are more efficient and effective in ministry. Other changes are due to what the Bible says. That's how much we regard the scriptures around here; every part of our lives needs to conform to the Word of God. That's why we are starting a new sermon series on church leadership; this is our effort to help you understand what we've learned from the scriptures. Who should lead? What should these leaders be like? What should they do? How should the church be structured? And what's the nature of the relationship between the leaders and the congregation? In due time, the leaders will share with you what changes should be made. We can't and don't want to do that without you. Let's start at the very beginning and examine what happened when a new church was started in the scriptures.

The Apostle Paul was a church planter through and through. He had this burning desire to preach Christ where Christ had not yet been preached. And it's not like he didn't have a pastor's heart to care for people, he did; it's just that God had made him entrepreneurial in nature; he just *had* to start new churches. After planting a church Paul would pass that church onto his ministry partners and leaders in the congregation. But when he did that he didn't throw caution to the wind and say, "OK everybody, you figure out how to do this yourself. I'm sure that whatever you decide will be fine." No, Paul did the opposite. He actually gave some pretty clear instructions. Clear enough that different churches in different parts of the world were doing the same thing; they all had the same basic structure and were led by the same kinds of leaders. The church in Philippi was led and governed the same way as the church in Ephesus and Jerusalem. Likewise, the churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch also had the same kinds of leaders; all the churches on Crete were instructed the same way. And this wasn't just Paul's idea; Peter told the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia the same thing we find from Paul.

So, here's the first big idea I want you to see and believe about church leadership: God revealed his plan of governance in the scriptures. We don't have to guess. The apostles and church planters of the first century didn't delegate that authority to each individual church to figure out what works best for them. Instead, the apostles and NT writers instructed the church on what to do. And thankfully, because it's found in the pages of scripture, we can follow the same teachings.

What we find in the scriptures is that the church of Jesus Christ is to be led by elders; a group of humble, godly, mature and courageous men who gladly assume the call and responsibility to lead, guide, teach and shepherd the church of Jesus Christ. What happens underneath that isn't specified, which means there are options; but eldership is specified. Let's look at 2 verses that show us this. First, turn to Titus 1 (READ vs. 5). Here we have Paul giving prescriptive teaching to Titus; prescriptive teaching means Paul told him (prescribed to him) what to do. Appoint elders, Titus, in every church. It's a command. Also, see how Paul is just repeating the command that he already gave; appoint elders in every town *as I directed you*. I

already told you to do this, Titus; but in case you didn't think I was serious, in case you didn't think it was important, it's the first thing I'm going to tell you to do in my letter.

Elders are appointed in other churches, too. Turn to Acts 14 (READ vs. 23). This is descriptive teaching; that means while in the Letter to Titus Paul prescribes an activity, here in Acts 14 we are told what happened (so, it's a description). You know you should copy or imitate a description when it is also commanded in another part of the Bible. In both cases, after churches are planted elders are appointed to lead the church.

Now, it might be worth pointing out two things: First, whenever there are references to elders it's always in the plural; Paul's encouragement, Peter's teaching, Luke's descriptions in Acts are always concerning elders, not elder. We don't have an example of an elder leading a church independently by himself. That means that a church shouldn't be led by simply one individual or leader, but by a group of leaders. In church-world, we call this leadership a *plurality of elders*. And this makes sense, right? It makes sense in that it's dangerous to centralize power and authority in just one person; instead, with a plurality of elders the authority and power is shared and elders are accountable to one another. It also is wise in that the leadership demands of Christ's church are too much for one person. Spread out the work of shepherding, teaching and leading so that it's all getting done. No one person possesses all the necessary skills and wisdom to serve the church. Have several elders (we're not told the number so, again, there's room for differences here).

The second point that's important to see is that these elders were appointed. That's explicitly stated in both the Titus passage and from Acts. Next week we are going to see the qualities you look for when you appoint an elder, but let's just focus on the reality of appointment right now.

I think there's something in the fabric of this country that loves to nominate and vote. It's very American, isn't it? We vote for everything from President of the United States to homecoming king and queen. And we can vote for a particular person for any particular reason that we want, can't we? I like his view on taxes; he's promised to fix the roads; his last name is Kennedy; I've never heard of him before; but he belongs to my party; she's the most popular girl in school. But the scriptures show the church's elders are to be appointed by a set criteria. The actual appointment process isn't clarified (that means there may be various ways to do it), but the reality of appointment is clear. Some might hear this (appointment: yes; voting: no) and think this is a way to eliminate congregational participation. On the contrary, a healthy relationship between church members and her elders includes an appropriate give and take where the voice of everyone's heard and considered. Effective and humble leaders want to hear and consider the voice of the church. In fact (and we'll talk about this in a few weeks), the church is delegated with certain responsibilities and not the leaders. But there's a big difference between churches approving (voting?) appointed leaders based on the careful consideration by the current elders and throwing names in a hat and voting on who is your favorite nominee for any reason you choose.

The NT pattern, then, is there should be elders in every local church to lead a congregation. Now, if you've been around here a while you might be scratching your head at this point. Well, we have deacons, don't we? Isn't that in the Bible, too? Yes, you're right. We do have deacons. And the Bible does mention them, too. For quite some time our deacons have taken on some eldering responsibilities; someone has to. A church can't survive without someone assuming the roles and tasks of an elder. Your leaders have been doing some of those and most of them in recent years; we want to specify that more clearly.

So what is the deal with deacons? That's an interesting question. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul gives Timothy instructions on what a Deacon is supposed to be like; the personal qualities of a deacon. So, it's seems clear they they exist in the church. But on the other hand, we have almost nothing else in the entire scriptures about deacons. There is nothing else in the NT that specifies their role, their work and their place within the church. That's rather odd, isn't it? In fact, we don't even know if we're translating the word correctly. Our English word for *deacon* is just a transliteration of the word *servant* in Greek. The Greek word *diakonos* means servant. So, did Paul mean to say in Philippians 1 (the only other reference to deacons in the NT), "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and servants" or did he mean to say, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons?" With the historical precedence of deacons it seems it has been an official church role, but I share all this information with you to demonstrate there is much more clarity about the place of elders than about the place of deacons.

Maybe you're thinking, "Pastor, that's what we're doing. You and Tim are the elders; you teach and shepherd. We also have deacons and they lead and oversee and govern." The problem with that is the NT says the elders are supposed to do all of that together. The biblical model isn't that we have a group who does the spiritual stuff (teaching, discipling, shepherding) and we have another group who does the practical stuff (governing and overseeing). And here's what's so important to see, in my view, of these things all fitting together. The authority to lead, oversee, shepherd and guide comes from the scriptures. It comes from the authoritative word of God. That's why elders must be able to teach; 1 Timothy 3 says deacons must hold the mysteries of the faith with a clear conscience; elders need to be able to share them with others. This distinction is what's unique about elders leading a congregation; a band of brothers prayerfully shepherding the flock of God based on the word of God versus a school board or hospital board mentality. God's word is the foundation, authority and wisdom of every aspect of church leadership.

There's a lot more to talk about. And we have 4 more Sundays to do that. Are you sensing that this is important? I bet you can. Here's what I would call a win today. It's a win if together we are agreeing that 1) God's word does have a model for us to follow and commands about church leadership and 2) that a congregation ought to be led by a plurality of elders who together carry the responsibilities to serve the church of God. And who are these elders exactly? That's what we'll talk about next week.

Key Verse: Acts 14:23 ~ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Questions for the week

- In the areas of your participation (work, school, home, clubs), how important is leadership? What happens with good leadership; what are the results of bad leadership?
- How conclusive or clear do you think the scriptures are concerning church leadership?
- What was the most important word you heard this morning in the message? Share that with another.