

The Rightly Ordered Church:
Elders: Who Are They & What Do They Do? (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on April 8, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ In the last few months we've been in the book of 1 Timothy, going through a series we're calling *The Rightly-Ordered Church*. We've been arguing that Paul wrote this letter to Timothy – this young pastor of this young church in Ephesus – with instructions on how to rightly-order a church. In chapter 3:14-15, he says, “*I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.*”
 - **So this letter is full of apostolic instructions for how a church ought to behave, how it should conduct itself, how it should organize itself.** Chapter 2 focused on how to order ourselves rightly when we gather to worship. And now in chapter 3, it's about rightly ordering the leadership of the church.

- ❖ **If we have the eyes to see the church as God sees it, then we'll have the same heart – a heart concerned with making sure the right people are in right place with the right authority to lead his church.** If the church is “*the household of God*”, if it's his family, you can see why he cares so much about who leads it.
 - If the church is his pillar and buttress of the truth – about his Son Jesus – then you can see why he cares about its leadership. **Like a pillar lifts up a statute for all to see, good leadership supports and enhances a church's ability to lift up Jesus for all to see.** But bad leadership obscures and muddles that view of Jesus.
 - **My point is that our concern for good, biblical leadership in the church shouldn't center on pragmatic concerns but theological ones.** It's not just about running a volunteer organization, managing a bunch of ministries. No, we care about leadership because we care about mission. We care about the lost seeing Jesus. We want Jesus to be clearly displayed through our church.

- ❖ There's a good book on church ministry, called *The Trellis and the Vine*, that provides a helpful metaphor of a vine trellis – the lattice, the wooden framework that supports a grape vine. In the metaphor, the vine is the body of Christ, the church, the people. And the trellis is the structure of the church, including its leadership structure.
 - **Now the mission of the church is to be fruitful – to grow and display beautiful fruit for the glory of the vinedresser, in this case, our Lord.** It's for his name. But for the church to be fruitful and to bring God glory, we need strong leadership. Just picture a vineyard with a weak trellis that can't support a growing vine. Without a good trellis, without support and direction, vines grow wild and tend to be unfruitful. **But with a strong trellis in place, supporting the vine as it grows – giving it direction to grow this way and not that – there is great potential for fruitfulness.**

- ❖ So I realize you might think a sermon on elders has little to do with you. But ask yourself this: **Do you want our church to be fruitful, to grow in a healthy direction? Do you care about Jesus being displayed in all his beauty, glory, and power through our life together? If yes, then you should care about church leadership.** You should care about elders. You should know what an elder is, what an elder does, and what to look for in one.

- ❖ Now today we're not actually going to study our passage verse by verse. Pastor Joseph will do that for us next week. He'll focus on what to look for in elders in regards to character and competency. **What I'd like to do this morning is to step back and take a comprehensive look at what the Bible teaches about elders.**
 - If you're new to church, if you didn't grow up in one, I wouldn't expect you to know what an elder is. But for those who grew up in church, depending on your church tradition, you may or may not be familiar with elders and what they're supposed to do. So I want to give you with a brief biblical theology of eldership.

Who Are The Church Elders?

- ❖ Let's begin by asking the question: Who are the church elders? There are at least three ways to answer that. **The first is to say this: The church elders are the overseers and pastors of the church.** In other words, the church elders are those men in the church who have been appointed to a certain office of leadership that we call *elder* or *overseer* or *pastor*. We're using those as synonymous, interchangeable terms.
 - Now I know I just said *men* and if you're wondering why I didn't include women, that relates to the sermon we gave earlier on chapter 2:11-15. **The basic premise there was that Paul's restriction for women in that passage had to do with the office of church elder.** He was teaching that godly, qualified men are to take primary responsibility to teach and exercise authority in the church as the elders. I'll direct you to our website to listen to that message and to consider the arguments there.
 - But regardless of where you stand on the issue of male leadership in the church, I hope we can still agree that elders, overseers, and pastors refer to the same office in the church and to the same people serving in that role.
- ❖ Now if you look at **1 Timothy 3:1**, you don't actually find the term elder but overseer. "*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*" So there's an office (an authorized role) in the church called the office of overseer (*episkopos*). But then if you turn to 1 Timothy 5, you'll notice mention of elders (*presbuteroi*).
 - **So your initial reaction might be to assume that they're referring to two different offices (roles).** And there are some church traditions that do separate the two. Instead of overseers, they call them bishops. **So any denomination that recognizes a bishop – an individual who holds ecclesial authority over more than one church – that structure is based on the assumption that overseers and elders are not the same.** Bishops oversee multiple churches in an area. Elders only lead within a particular local church. You'll find this practice among Episcopalians, Anglicans, Methodists, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholics.
- ❖ Now our church is not within that tradition. **We don't recognize bishops as a distinct office. We see overseers and elders as interchangeable terms.** And the reason is because of how Scripture uses the terms. Turn to **Titus 1:5**. In v5, there's mention of *elders*. Paul tells Titus that I left you in Crete so that you can appoint elders in every town. Then in v6, he gives him a list of elder qualifications.

- But then notice, in v7, he starts talking about an *overseer*. It's a new term, but there's no reason to suggest that Paul has suddenly changed subjects. He's still focused on qualifications. The flow of thought is seamless, suggesting that the terms *elder* and *overseer* are interchangeable.

- ❖ Another example is found in **Acts 20:17**. Turn there with me. Here Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders. “*Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*” He goes on to recount his ministry among them.
 - Then in v28, Paul says, “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God.*”
Remember, he’s talking to the Ephesian elders, and he just said the Holy Spirit has made them overseers with the responsibility of caring for the church.
 - And on top of that, notice how he goes on in v29 to use imagery where the church is compared to a flock and the elders/overseers are functioning as pastors guarding sheep from fierce wolves. That’s introduces our third term: *pastor* (which is the Latin word for *shepherd*)

- ❖ Turn with me to **1 Peter 5:1-2** and again we’ll see all three terms used to describe one role in the church. Notice how Peter starts off in v1 by calling himself a fellow elder when he could've easily asserted his authority as an apostle. He could've pulled rank. But no, instead he speaks to these elders as a fellow elder on the same level.
 - He goes on in v2 to exhort the elders to “*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*”. In those two verses, the word for elder (*presbuteros*), for pastor (*poimen*), and for overseer (*episkopos*) are all present (though pastor and overseer are found in their verb form (*poimaino* and *episkopountes*, respectively)).

- ❖ What this suggests is that **elders pastor** (they do the work of pastors) and **elders oversee** (they do the work of overseers). Now we're going to see what that work looks like in our next point, but the point here is that no matter which of the three terms you use – you’re describing the same person doing the same job.
 - **But you might still wonder why the biblical authors would use three different terms to describe the same office.** The best explanation is because each term emphasizes something different about that same person in that role. **The term *elder* focuses on the man's character.** It's derived from the tribal leadership structure of ancient Israel. The early church, rooted in Judaism, appropriated the term *elder* to characterize the spiritual maturity of their leaders.
 - **The term *overseer* emphasizes the man’s function.** The early church was influenced, not just by Jewish, but also Greek culture. This Greek word and concept communicated the idea of watching over or superintending others. **The term *pastor* also emphasizes function – particularly the feeding, nurturing and protecting responsibilities this leader has over God’s flock.** So using all three terms is helpful to round out our understanding of elders – of who they are and what they do.

- ❖ So that's the first way to answer: Who are the church elders? They're the overseers and pastors. **But here's the second answer: They are the ones who have a noble and necessary role in the church.** I get this out of 1 Timothy 3:1 and Titus 1:5.
 - First, go back to Titus 1. Based on v5, it's clear a church can be a real church without elders. But until it does, it's not a complete or mature church. That's why Titus was left in Crete to "*put what remained into order*" – literally "*to set right the things lacking*".
 - **In other words, a church is lacking something if it doesn't have elders.** It's like how a family is still a family even if there's no father figure in the home. But we all know that something significant is missing. For its own health and maturity that family needs a father in the home.

- ❖ **That's why churches need to appoint elders. Not just because we think it's a good idea or because it works for other churches.** No, we appoint church elders because it's taught in the Bible and because it brings completeness, health, and maturity to the church.
 - **Thankfully, here at HCC, we do recognize and appoint elders.** Some of them are on staff and are financially compensated for the unique work they do as elders. I'm referring to those we normally call *pastors*. We also have elders who are laymen with full-time jobs outside the church, but they're still responsible, along with the pastors, of doing the work of overseeing and shepherding the flock.
 - **I realize we're not used to calling our staff pastors 'elders' or our lay elders 'pastors'.** What I'm trying to demonstrate is that it would be biblically appropriate to do so. But regardless of their title, I'm thankful that we recognize the importance of having church elders.

- ❖ **And I hope, as we continue to develop a healthy theology and practice of eldership, that the idea of being an elder would be considered by all to be a noble, honorable task.** Think back to 1 Timothy 3:1, "*If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*" To serve as a church elder (staff or non-staff) is a hard task. It's a time-consuming task. It's a heart-breaking task. It's a tiresome task. But it is a noble task. **To serve for the glory of our great God and the good of his blood-bought Bride, his beloved Church – to serve his people is a great honor and privilege.** It is truly a noble task.

- ❖ To the men of the church, let me ask you a question perhaps you never considered: **What reason do you have for *not* aspiring to the office of overseer? For *not* desiring so noble a task?** Now I realize not every man is called to the task. Most men in the church won't serve in this role. But is it because you've been called and you aspire to another equally noble task?
 - **There are some brothers wired and gifted in such a way that serving as an elder would be a bad fit.** They aspire to minister primarily outside of the church, in secular environments (the workplace) or perhaps unreached lands. Their primary calling is not to the ministries and members of the local church. That's fine. They desire an equally noble task. But if that's not your calling, if you don't aspire to serve primarily outside the church, then why don't you aspire to this noble task? **Why aren't you an elder?** You could have a reason. I just wonder if you know it.

- ❖ Let's look at our third way of answering the question: Who are the church elders? **They are the local senior team of church leaders.** There is a lot wrapped up in that short sentence. What it implies is that the church is not led by an external leadership body from the outside or by one single man from the inside.
 - **Focus on the word *local*.** What we don't see in the pages of the NT are any clear examples of an outside leadership body having ecclesial authority over multiple churches in a district. That's why we have not adopted a Presbyterian model of governance. Presbyterian churches have their own church elders that they send to a presbytery that has binding authority over the various churches in its district.
 - Some of you might be thinking of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, but there are good reasons for why that's not an example of a presbytery. For those arguments, I'll just point you to Benjamin Merkle's book on *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*. **But the point is that what we see in Scripture are elders being appointed to give *local* oversight to *local* churches.**

- ❖ **Now the other key word to point out is *team*.** We never see in the NT or in the early church, an example of a church being led by one singular elder. They served as a team. **There was a plurality of elders in each church.** When Paul writes to the church in Philippi, he address it in v1 to all the saints "*with the overseers and deacons*". Two clear offices in one church both comprised of more than one person. In **Titus 1**, he is to appoint elders (plural) in every church. That was Paul's consistent pattern when planting churches. In **Acts 14:23**, we read of Paul and Barnabas going from city to city, preaching the gospel, making disciples, and appointing elders (plural) in every church.

- ❖ **There is no evidence of any church in the NT or early church that was led by a single, sole elder.** You won't find a pyramid structure in any church where one man stood on top. Rather, we see a consistent pattern of elders leading churches as a plurality, as a team. That doesn't mean it's unbiblical to have a senior pastor or a lead pastor on your staff. There can be that "first among equals" role, but the stress is on equals. There should be parity among that plurality of church elders.
 - So who are the church elders? **They are the men in a church who have been appointed to a particular office/role within that local church to perform a noble, necessary task of overseeing and pastoring its members.**

What Do Church Elders Do?

- ❖ Now let's ask the question of what church elders do. What is their role in the church? I know we already touched on it when we defined the terms overseer and pastor, but let me say three things in response to that question.

- ❖ **First, they are to feed the flock.** That's one of the most basic responsibilities of a shepherd. You take a flock out to pasture and you feed them. Now when you apply that metaphor to the church, it means the pastors feed you by teaching God's Word.

- ❖ **There's actually only one place in the NT where the term *pastor* is used as a noun to identify a church leader.** It's mostly used as a verb. In **Ephesians 4:11**, it says Christ gave to the church (along with other gifts) "*the shepherds and teachers*". Most commentators think that's referring to one role, that of pastor-teacher. Teaching is definitely an outsized role for elders. We pastor through teaching God's Word.
- ❖ That's why you find it in the qualifications for overseers in **1 Timothy 3:2**. Being "*able to teach*" is asked only of them and not of deacons. It's also in the qualifications for elders in **Titus 1:9**. Paul says, "*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine*".
 - **So an elder's job is *not* to be a theological innovator.** He doesn't have to come up with anything new. He just has to hold firm the good deposit that was entrusted to him. Just tell the old, old story. Just teach people sound doctrine. Just feed Jesus's sheep. This is usually accomplished through preaching, teaching classes, establishing doctrinal positions, biblical counseling, and personal exhortation.
- ❖ Now the second thing elders are to do is a corollary to their task of teaching: **They are to protect the flock**. In **Titus 1:9**, Paul said that in addition to giving instruction in sound doctrine, elders are responsible to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine.
 - When fierce wolves show up trying to draw disciples away with their false teaching (Acts 20:29-30), **good shepherds aren't going to sit down with the wolves and try to dialogue with them.** No, a good shepherd shoos away the wolves. He uses his sling and his staff if necessary. He's willing to confront wolves to protect sheep.
 - **So any healthy church is going to have elders who are willing and able to expose and correct unsound teaching.** Whether it's messages being sent by popular culture or it's something being taught by an individual or group in the church. We have to make sure the teaching of our church is biblical.
- ❖ **But you know, in protecting the sheep sometimes we have to protect them from themselves.** When sheep are messing around with sin, wandering into dangerous territory, loving pastors go after them, lovingly rebuke them, and call them back to the safety of the fold. This means an elder needs to be bold (and gentle) enough to confront their own members with the need to repent of all known sin and to keep trusting in the gospel.
- ❖ So put these two responsibilities together. **On one hand, elders are to build up the church. On the other hand, they defend her.** Just picture with me, those men in Nehemiah's day who were tasked to build up the walls of Jerusalem in spite of all the opposition and all the threat of attacks they faced every day.
 - It says in **Nehemiah 4:17** that each man "*labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.*" **As Charles Spurgeon put it, each man held a sword and a trowel. One to build; one to defend.** That's the job of church elders.

- ❖ The third way to answer our question of what elders do is this: **Elders are to lead the flock.** Just picture elders leading their sheep out to pasture. **Leading them out from where it's comfortable and familiar – to new and better pastures.** The path to get there could be frightening. There could be dark valleys, rushing rivers, and dangers around every corner. But elders keep their eyes on the Chief Shepherd and where he's calling them to go, and they faithfully lead the flock there by exercising oversight.
 - **1 Peter 5:2** says to elders, "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight*". So overseeing and pastoring are not two separate roles. Granted, there are slight nuances, but they're closely related. In the end, both terms emphasize the giving of leadership. **Pastoring (shepherding) is the figurative expression. Overseeing is the more literal expression.** Both communicate the idea of leading a body of people.

- ❖ **This means when you're looking for elders to oversee a church, you're not just looking for guys to serve as board members.** For those with the most managerial experience or the know-how in balancing big budgets. You're not just looking for professionals.
 - **You're looking for shepherds, for pastors, for spiritual leaders.** Most elders won't be seminary-trained – but they should be trained in sound doctrine. Most won't be regular preachers – but they should know how to feed the sheep with God's Word. Most won't serve full-time on the church staff – but they should be willing to give the time it takes to oversee a flock. That's what you're looking for in elders.

How Do Church Elders Serve?

- ❖ So we've considered who elders are and what they do. Now let's briefly consider how they are to serve in the church. Look back at **1 Peter 5**. There are three answers to the question of how do church elders serve.
 - ❖ **First, they serve willingly and not under compulsion.** Listen to v2 again, "*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you*". God expects whole-hearted devotion from any man who would serve as an elder. **If he feels pressured to serve, if he's doing it under compulsion, that's not how God would have it.** He could be the most spiritually mature man you know, but if he doesn't aspire to the office, if he doesn't desire the noble task – then he's not qualified.
 - This principle would really apply to any position of leadership in the church. We don't want deacons or small group leaders or disciplers to serve simply because there's no one else available. Or because others expect them to. If you're serving under compulsion and not willingly, that's no good for you and for the people you're serving. **God's will is for willing service.**

 - ❖ Peter goes on to say that elders ought to exercise oversight, "*not for shameful gain, but eagerly.*" **In other words, they serve eagerly and not for money.** Now you might be thinking, "What money? Elders don't get paid. They're volunteers."

- Remember, your pastors on the payroll are elders. **So when it comes to elders that we do compensate – if they're overly concerned with their paychecks, then they're under qualified.** Shepherding the flock of God is noble task. But you defile it, if you're motivated by a spirit of greed that seeks financial gain. Church elders should be motivated by a spirit of eagerness to serve.

- ❖ And lastly, Peter goes on in v3 to say **elders serve as examples not as autocrats.** They are not be, "*domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*" Now the fact that there's a temptation for elders to become domineering implies that they do hold a degree of authority over the flock. If your elders had no authority over you, then why would Peter have to warn about this?
 - **The fact is church elders have authority over church members.** And with it they're called to lead the church. But they're not to do so like the rulers and leaders of the world who pull rank and lord their authority over others. Jesus told his disciples in Mark 10 that those who lead the church, those who would be great, must become servants. "*Whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.*" (Mk. 10:44)

- ❖ **The point is, when it comes to the household of God, those with the authority to lead, they are to lead by example and not by force of will.** We follow the example of our Chief Shepherd (Pastor) who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk. 10:45) Jesus demonstrated that leadership within God's kingdom is anything but self-serving. It's cross-bearing. It's self-denying. It's centered on the glory of God and the good of others. **If our Chief Pastor took the road to Calvary, the road of sacrificial servanthood, then he expects us to follow the same path. And he expects the elders of his church to lead the way.**

- ❖ Church, I ask you to please pray for your church elders. Pray for their spiritual, emotional, and physical well-being. Pray for the health of their families. Pray as well for our church as we begin a process of nominating and appointing new elders for 2019. And let me end with two applications drawn directly from the book of Hebrews.
 - Hebrews 13:7 says, "*Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*" And Hebrews 13:17 tells us to, "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*"