

## Week 4 Elders and Deacons in a Healthy Church

Welcome to our worship service. We've been talking about what it means to be healthy church, and it's my hope that as you're seeing what that looks like in Scripture, you're becoming more and more resolved not to be simply a status-quo church, but one that is truly healthy and honoring to God.

You know, with regard to this sermon series, it's possible that you may be thinking, "I've believed all of these things we're talking about for a long time." Let me tell you why we're going over these distinctives and committing ourselves to them again: The reason we're being so deliberate about laying these as a foundation for our church is simply because you will not find them in operation in many, if not most, Baptist churches in America today. Folks, healthy is not the norm.

Now, I don't say this with arrogance or condescension toward these sister churches. They are Christ's bride for whom He died. And if we ourselves manage to do anything faithfully, it is only by God's grace. Here's why I tell you about this: What we don't safeguard, we will lose. What we're not deliberate about keeping will erode away. It just takes one generation indifferent to doctrine to hand down a doctrinally-weak heritage to generations to come. On the other hand, my prayer is that we would be the generation to pass on a zeal for sound doctrine to the next. My prayer is that you would see the importance of these doctrines, that you would be passionate about them, and that as a result, you would pass them down to your children. I pray that these children sitting here would grow up in a church where biblical exposition is the norm, where membership matters, where sound doctrine is cherished, where sin is confronted, and where the gospel is known and loved. To do that, we have to have a sermon series like this.

To recap, so far, we've talked about the gospel, which really defines for us the center of the church. If we get the gospel wrong, we've lost everything. Water it down, change it, distort it, and it's not the same. There's only one gospel. God has revealed it in His word. And different gospels don't save.

But if the gospel is the center of the church, then we also need to define the circumference of the church. Who's a member and who's not? Who's in and who's out? So, we turned to a principle called RCM to help us answer this question. In brief, we found that Scripture teaches that only those who are born again are to be members of the local church.

We talked about a number of ways to safeguard RCM, both in the way we receive members and the way we watch over them. And we discovered an important principle called church discipline that gives us instructions on how to restore one another when we fall into sin, and if necessary, remove those from membership who fail to repent.

That's where we've been. Here's where we're going today. Today, we're going to be talking about the officers of a local church, namely, elders and deacons. God in His wisdom and goodness has not only revealed to us what the local church is, but whom He's designated to lead and serve it.

Let's begin with elders, as you'll see on your handout. And let me reiterate again this week that this sermon will be a bit different from one you would normally hear.

Rather than expositing a particular text of Scripture today, we will be surveying a number of texts to see what Scripture teaches about pastors and deacons, as well as making application about both.

## I. What is an elder?

The Greek word for “elder” (*presbuteros*) appears more than 70 times in the NT and has several different uses. It can refer to older men, to ancestors, to a Jewish member of a group in the Sanhedrin, or to the 24 heavenly elders in the book of Revelation, but the meaning we’re interested in today is one who holds the office of pastor in a local church (e.g., Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; James 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1).<sup>1</sup>

There are three words that can be used to describe the office of pastor in the NT:

1. *poimēn* – pastor/shepherd (1x as a noun; 3x in verb form)
2. *presbuteros* – elder (19x as a noun; this is the most common of the three terms)
3. *episkopos* – overseer/bishop (5x as a noun; 1x in verb form)

The reason we can say that each of these terms refers to the same office is that they are all used interchangeably in Scripture:

**Acts 20:17,18,28** From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (from *presbuteros*) of the church.<sup>18</sup> And when they had come to him, he said to them,...<sup>28</sup> "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (from *episkopos*), to shepherd (from *poimēn*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

**1 Peter 5:1-2** Therefore, I exhort the elders (from *presbuteros*) among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,<sup>2</sup> shepherd (from *poimēn*) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (from *episkopos*) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

**Titus 1:5-7** For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (from *presbuteros*) in every city as I directed you,<sup>6</sup> namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.<sup>7</sup> For the overseer (from *episkopos*) must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain...

## II. How many elders should we have?

Answer: a plurality of biblically-qualified, gifted men. However, our goal is not plurality at the expense of qualified men.

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<sup>1</sup> Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 861-63. See also Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority? Elders in Baptist Life* (Washington, D.C.: 9Marks, 2006), 4; John MacArthur, *Answering the Key Questions about Elders* (Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 1984), 4-6.

Passages that support plurality: Acts 14:23; Acts 15:4; Acts 20:17; Acts 20:28; James 5:14; Philippians 1:1; Acts 11:29-30; Acts 15:2,6,22,23; 16:4; Acts 21:17-18; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-2,5.

**Acts 20:17** From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

**Acts 14:23** When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

**Philippians 1:1** Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:

Notice in each of these examples that there are a plural number of elders/overseers/pastors in a single church. Finally, look at Titus 1:5. There, Paul tells Titus:

**Titus 1:5** For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

Apparently, things still remain to be set in order in a church that does not have a plurality of elders.

But isn't having a plurality of elders ultimately optional? Can't we have this structure or not have it, depending upon our preference? Although some would differ from me here, I believe that plurality is the consistent pattern of the NT. In fact, in my estimation Scripture never pictures a local church with only a single pastor/elder. And if I'm interpreting Titus 1:5 correctly, things still remain to be set in order without a plurality of elders in place. The answer to this question, then, is that having a plurality of elders does not appear to be optional. We need to have a plurality of biblically-qualified pastors/elders in place.

### **Blessings of plurality**

1. First and foremost, obedience to Scripture. This would be enough reason even if there weren't any other reasons. When churches are obedient, God is honored and brings blessing to them.
2. Second, it allows a church to make good use of the qualified men God has given it to be elders. It allows it to make good use of the gifts God has given to His church (Eph. 4:11).
3. Third, this structure prevents a concentration of either criticism or praise directed toward any one elder. Often a single elder can be the flash point for receiving criticism (which can be difficult for him to bear) or praise (which might be even worse for him to bear). This structure spreads out both of these over a group charged with giving leadership to a church.
4. Fourth, groups of leaders usually make better decisions than a single leader. There is wisdom in getting the perspective of other biblically-knowledgeable men.

### **III. Authority, visibility, responsibility, and influence among the elders**

It won't be possible for me to say all that should be said about what a biblical eldership looks like in this morning's sermon. Fortunately, we'll spend a little more time on this in Sunday school in the days ahead. For now, I'd like to say a word about one particular aspect of a biblical eldership: the relationship between the various elders.

Principle: Elders are equal in authority, but may differ in visibility, responsibility, and influence.

Here's the biblical basis for the claim I've just made: With regard to authority, notice that the NT nowhere distinguishes between tiers, or levels, of authority within the eldership. The Bible doesn't refer to an "executive elder" and his "assistant elders," nor a "senior elder" and "junior elders." Instead, it simply calls all of them "elders." And here's the conclusion this leads us to in terms of how a group of elders operates: Since no elder carries more authority than any other, in instances of decision making among the elders, each elder receives only one vote and not less than one vote. So, the role I have does not correspond to a greater level of authority over any of my fellow elders simply because I do the bulk of the preaching. The elder board is not a cabinet of advisors, with the preaching pastor as CEO. Instead, the preaching pastor is simply a fellow elder along with them, albeit a more visible one to the congregation. (And of course, as we saw in Sunday school this morning, final human governing authority resides not with the elders but with the congregation as a whole.)

However, with all that said, we must remember to keep separate the issues of visibility, responsibility, and influence. While elders are all equal in their authority, they will likely vary somewhat in their visibility, responsibility, and influence. 1 Tim. 5:17 seems to acknowledge that such a difference might exist between elders in their job responsibilities and possibly the extent of their time that they invest in the work of the ministry.

**1 Timothy 5:17** The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

The elder who does the bulk of the public preaching and teaching will likely be the most visible of the group. This is OK. There's no violation of Scripture in that. Elders who are in the paid employment of the church may also have greater responsibility placed on them because they have more time to devote to ministerial duties. This is OK as well. And certain elders may even carry a greater deal of influence because of their wisdom and knowledge of Scripture. This is fine, too. But in the end, all elders are still equal in authority, meaning they get one vote in elders' meetings.

Let me try to give you a hypothetical example about how this would work. Suppose, hypothetically, that Gary, another elder, and I are discussing the location for our next church mission trip. Let's suppose that I speak up and recommend Peru. Now, Gary and the other elder, being as gracious and wise as they are, would listen to my recommendation and my rationale. But then suppose Gary speaks up and says that he is aware of a particularly good ministry opportunity for us in Thailand, and as he begins to explain the benefits of this trip, the other elder agrees that he is convinced that Thailand is the best trip for us to take. So, it's now 2 to 1 in favor of Thailand. Now, here's what doesn't happen then: I don't get to have my way and start planning a trip to Peru. I also don't get to whine and complain about the decision, saying that I can't believe what a poor decision my fellow two elders have made. Instead, I must defer to their majority vote, as I defer to their wisdom, trusting that they are God's wonderful gift to me since I myself don't have the market cornered on wisdom. Just like the congregation is called to trust its elders, so also fellow elders must trust one another. This is infinitely easier to do when all the elders are biblically-qualified men.

And because differences of opinion are inevitable among human beings, it is absolutely essential that elders be the kind of men who don't insist on getting their way all the time. In fact, one of the qualifications for an elder is that he be "gentle." The word means "yielding, kind, courteous" and describes a man who does not insist on getting his way. Elders must be men who are yielding. If any man serves long enough as elder, he will encounter a situation where the other elders see things differently than he does. It's bound to happen. An elder must be the kind of man who can recognize that the other elders are not dummies for not seeing it his way, but that they are biblically-qualified, wise men, who are God's gift to him to keep *him* from making dumb mistakes on his own. An elder must learn to trust his fellow elders' wisdom in situations like that and submit to it. This is the opposite of fighting, pouting, and holding grudges when you don't get your way. This is the opposite of going to find other itching ears whom you can convince how right you are. Fighters, pouters, grudge holders, and gossips have no place in the church's eldership. Such men are not biblically qualified. Eldership is for the humble and teachable.

A church's elders can drastically shape the climate of a church, can't they? They will affect the way the word is preached, the way decisions are made, the way problems are handled, and in many ways, set the spiritual tone for the body. In so many cases, it's safe to say that as go the elders, so goes the church as a whole. Elders who love the gospel, hate sin, love the word, and love the sheep will, by God's grace, reproduce members who act the same way. Good elders are one of the greatest blessings God will give a church. Bad elders, who handle church life unbiblically, will wound the sheep, stunt the growth of the church, and breed a congregation indifferent to church health and the glory of God.

Now, let's turn our attention to deacons. With all this talk about elders, we didn't want to leave them out, did we?

**I. What is a deacon?** (For our purposes today, we will limit our study to uses of the word that describe the office of deacon in the NT.)

*diakonos* – servant, minister, helper  
Not a governing body or ruling board  
Not a second house of Congress

**II. 3 purposes of deacons – Acts 6:1-7<sup>2</sup>**

- 1.) Deacons are to care for the physical needs of the church (vv.1-2). Here are just a few examples of things I've witnessed our deacons doing in this department: They've organized meals to be brought to the sick. They've made sure that members are provided for financially. They've helped set up and tear down tables and chairs for church picnics, and they're the first to volunteer to take out the trash after Wednesday night meals. Deacons care for the physical needs of the church.
- 2.) Deacons also work to preserve the unity of the body (v.1). You may think, "I've never heard that before." But stop and think about it: the deacon ministry was *founded* to maintain the unity of the body, to resolve a conflict between two groups within the Jerusalem church. One group complained against the other

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory: Basics of Church Structure* (Washington, D.C.: 9Marks Ministries, 2001), 9-13.

because it felt its widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food. What was the solution? The creation of the deacon ministry! Therefore, working to build and maintain the unity of the church should be a primary goal of the deacons.

“Edifying and uniting the church is especially the ministry of the deacons as we see it in Acts 6. Therefore, we cannot have people serve us well as deacons who are unhappy with the church. The deacons are not those in the church who are complaining the loudest or jarring the church with their actions or attitudes. Quite the opposite! The deacons are to be mufflers, the shock-*absorbers*.”<sup>3</sup>

- 3.) Deacons are also to support the ministry of the word (vv.2-4). They alleviate responsibilities from those who minister the word so that they can be free to study and teach it. A congregation will not grow to maturity if its elders are overburdened so that they cannot devote themselves to the ministry of the word. The sheep need to be fed theological steak, not cotton candy, if they’re going to grow up strong in the faith. To do that, a church needs good deacons, who will free up its elders to study hard to prepare to teach. I grieve when I hear stories about pastors serving as janitors and van mechanics at their local churches. It’s not that that work is beneath them. It’s that every hour they spend under a hood or scrubbing a toilet is one fewer hour that they can invest into preparing to teach and feed the flock God’s word. And by the way, notice in v.7 what happened when God’s word was allowed to go forth:

**Acts 6:7** “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.”

Now, do you think that was any coincidence? I don’t. When the apostles were able to devote themselves to the ministry of the *word* as they desired in v.4, the *word* of God kept on spreading in v.7. When deacons serve well, the physical needs of the church are cared for, the unity of the body is preserved, and the ministry of the word goes forth. In short, good deacons are an essential component to a healthy, God-honoring church.

### **Blessing of good deacons**

I love to tell the story about my first meeting with the deacons at OMV. I had heard horror stories about meeting with deacons from other pastors, and so in my first meeting, I very tentatively proposed an idea to them. I’ll never forget them smiling and saying, “Pastor, you know we don’t run things around here. We’re deacons, and that means we’re servants, and we’re here to help you accomplish the things God wants our church to do.” Needless to say, someone had taught them well. And our deacons at OMV have been one of our greatest blessings over the years. In fact, I don’t know how so much of the ministry that the church has done would have ever taken place were it not for our deacons. God has been truly gracious to give us some outstanding men over the years.

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<sup>3</sup> Dever, *Display*, 11.

Today I'm going to conclude with a somewhat unusual challenge for all of you.

Sometime this week, find one of your deacons and thank them for all the work they put in because they love Christ and His church. They have all probably spent hours and hours that you may never know about serving behind the scenes – fixing the things that are broken, making hospital visits, cleaning the sanctuary, visiting the shut-ins, planning mission trips, cooking, setting up tables and chairs and breaking them down, attending meetings, coordinating meals for you when you're sick, and spending hours on their knees in prayer for you because they love you. These are men who deserve our thanks.