

Biblical Eldership - Lesson 1

by John Piper

John Piper emphasizes the significance of biblical eldership and the church's role in upholding truth and ministry.

Duration: 1:13:20

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 10:31

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Elder Responsibilities"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of ministry that brings about salvation, healing marriages, and raising children in the Lord. He refers to 2 Thessalonians 3:14, where Paul instructs not to associate with those who do not obey the teachings of the letter. The speaker also mentions Acts 20:28, where Paul urges the elders to take heed and care for the church, which was obtained by God through the blood of His own Son. The purpose of the church is to demonstrate the authority and power of Christ, as stated in Matthew 16:18.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God is available at www.DesiringGod.org This is the TBI, the Bethlehem Institute seminar on Biblical Eldership as part of the larger fulfillment of a course here called Issues in Spiritual Leadership that has two tracks to it. A track one is for lay folks who simply want a certificate that they took it and we're really encouraging our men at Bethlehem especially to do this if they're dreaming or moving towards eldership some day or some decade.

Then there's a track two for the few guys here that are taking this for seminary credit. I want to begin by reading a verse from Acts chapter 20. You all know that in Acts 20 Paul assembles the elders from Miletus or from Ephesus at Miletus and gives them one of these moving final sermons of his and says in verse 28 something that I'd like to say and then pray with you for tonight.

It says, Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son or other versions with his own blood. So the church belongs to God. He obtained the church at the price of his own blood and therefore the role of the elders to take heed to all the flock is made to have extraordinary significance because of how precious the church is to God.

So let's pray. Father in heaven we swallow hard at the word that to obtain the church was so costly that it required the death of your son. The sins of your people were enormous and we have been purchased at great price and we are not our own.

Now we belong to Christ and we belong to you Father. And you have ordained as we will see that there be shepherds, overseers, pastors, elders to care for this great purchase. And Lord it is a weighty and awesome thing to be called by the living Christ to shepherd the church of God.

And so I pray that there would be an appropriate earnestness about our work tonight and tomorrow and that there would be a sense of glory about this calling and not burden. I pray that pastors here and elders here and those aspiring and those who are here to just learn what the kind of leadership is appointed in the New Testament that we all, oh God, would understand and then live out the kinds of relationships in the church that would magnify Jesus Christ in the world. Lord these are glorious things we're about here and I pray that you would help us.

Give us energy Lord. It's been a long day for many. And I pray that there would be in this room a kind of supernatural enabling that would give us ears to hear and a heart to feel, minds to understand.

And I ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. I think the first thing I'd like to do is just point you to some books.

The text is this one by Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership. There are some of these in the bookstore and I would send you around the corner there to get them if you want to buy them. And then some that are not text but that I have consulted over the years and it helped me.

Hezekiah Harvey, The Church. This is an old 19th century Baptist. Hezekiah Harvey, he also wrote one on the pastor.

Hezekiah Harvey, His Qualifications and Duties. You all know this one, The Reformed Pastor by Richard Baxter. Can't get much more discouraging than that book because it's so good and the stakes are so high and the pattern that he sets for us is just so awesome and the story of his own life is so inimitable.

He's one of those Spurgeon-like people that when you read them you just feel like quitting. But that's alright. The Ruling Elder by Samuel Miller, Presbyterian background from the 19th century.

Actually 18th and 19th. First book I read I think after I came to Bethlehem on the Christian ministry, Charles Bridges. And I thought it was great, still think it's great.

And then this one which I've only dipped into, The Elder's Handbook by Berghoff DeCoster from the CRC, Christian Reformed Church of America. So there's just some more books besides Strouk that you might be interested in consulting as you study these things. And I'm assuming that a lot of you are in process about this.

If you're coming from other churches it may be that you're in flux as to how your church will be governed. And I think I will talk to you about a little history of this at Bethlehem. Before I jump into this though, just let me see if there's any questions about mechanics or logistics, anything like that.

Okay, if there is be sure to grab me. Just some introductory words about the history of Bethlehem here and my tenure here. I grew up as a Southern Baptist in Greenville, South Carolina and never heard of elders.

And had I heard about them I'm sure I would have thought they were Presbyterian. And then went to seminary and I skipped all the polity courses because I thought I was going to be a teacher which I was for about six years. And I'm glad I did that frankly because these things can be learned on the job probably just as effectively as in seminary.

And there you need to do exegesis in theology and church history which you won't do if you don't do it there probably. You have to do this. Your church has to be run.

And so you will get this done or you'll lose your job. You will figure out a way to lead the church, speaking of you the pastor. Came here in 1980 and inherited a system of government which was deacon governed.

There was a council of deacons it was called and there were 24 of them. And 11 standing committees. So every year there was a ballot and it was such that there had to be two choices for every office.

So we needed about 200 people on this ballot. Now the church in those days when I first came had about 300 people in the church. Now this is the sort of thing you get into if you lock yourself into a rigid structured constitution with many boards, many committees and many offices.

It's a dreadful mistake. One of the mistakes is that you got to have losers. You got to have half losers every time you have an election.

And if the church doesn't have the size to warrant that many candidates, it is a prescription for carnal leadership. And there are churches being governed by fleshly people with no spiritual life all over the country because of constitutions that mandate certain levels of leadership and there aren't the people to fill them. And so it's a popularity contest.

The least unfit get called and that's not a way to call anybody into spiritual leadership at any level. The committees or your more ruling type organizations. So I didn't touch this at all for five years or so.

I simply, when I got to a text in my preaching, would talk about the elders. When the deacons were praying and we were talking about what our mission was, I would simply point out, you know, I think this group of guys, and they were men and they were mandated to be men, interestingly enough. We'll talk a little bit about that later.

I said, you know, you are a hybrid. You are doing duties that belong to elders versus one to seven of First Timothy three. And you're doing duties that belong to deacons versus seven to 13 of First Timothy three.

And so this is a hybrid board. And they began to adapt to that, that we're a hybrid, that's what we are. And then over the years, we began to just feel a little bit uneasy with that, that probably there should be a clearer identity of who the governors of this church are.

Where is the authority vested and how do they relate to others? And what about all these committees? Is that a good thing? I forget what the year was, but sometime in the mid or late 80s, I preached a series of sermons on Acts 20 on the eldership, basically, and thus lay before the whole church that we maybe should do some study here. And then the deacons undertook about four years of work on this. And just to make a very, very long and arduous story short, we installed our first elders June 2, 1992.

So if you're in a church and you inherited a governance structure that you think may not be as biblical as you'd like it, it took me 12 years to see come to pass what I think is at this church now a very biblical

structure. Whether we carry it through as effectively as we should and whether we implement all that's there in place, I'm very pleased with the Constitution that now exists. There are no standing committees in this church anymore.

There's only one council of elders. It has a flexible size. Right now, there are 18 of us.

All of the ordained pastors serve on the council of elders by definition. And there have to be twice as many lay elders as vocational elders, we call them. That's not in the Bible.

We just thought that was prudence. And whenever you're doing church government, it'll always be a balancing out of what's clear in the Bible, which is a very small amount, and what is seemingly the work of wisdom, given the culture and the kind of church that you have and where you are in history. And so, I'm very delighted.

In fact, I've always been delighted with the leadership group of this church as a body of men. It has been the sweetest thing. The Lord has treated me with such unbelievable tenderness in these years.

Eighteen and a half years or so now I've been here, and I have never had a council of elders that I felt was in an adversarial relation to me or a council of deacons or, which is more amazing, trustees, or what we call now financial and property administrators. There has always been, in my 18 years here, a kind of collegiality and camaraderie that is simply amazing, given the horror stories that I know happen in other churches. And I think that's partly owing to the Lord's tenderness towards me in knowing what I can and cannot handle, probably, and owing to probably 10,000 prayers for this church and a 126-year history of faithfulness to the Word of God.

And then I think there are some other practical means that the Lord has used to preserve that kind of unity that we'll talk to over these next hours. So, since 1992, then, we've had a council of elders here, and we don't have a body of deacons. As deacons are needed for various things, they can be chosen.

We don't have any standing committees. The elders create whatever bodies seem to be helpful. So, they've created a children's committee, and they've created a missions committee, and they've created a building committee, and they've created a Desiring God board, and they've created a TVI board, and they've created financial and property administrators, and they can abolish these tomorrow, if they want to.

So, the elders govern the church by creating all these things, and they are totally flexible. It feels so good now to have the flexibility to respond to ministry. Because one of the principles we're going to get to in a minute, and I shouldn't jump ahead here, but I'll say it here, is that I think when you have 11 standing committees, the mindset that you create in the church is that ministry consists in serving on a board or a committee.

That is deadly in a church. That is not ministry. Those boards are yeomen who have to bear the gutsy stuff that nobody should want to do to free people to do the ministry.

Ministry ought not to be thought of as board work. Ministry is in people's homes. Ministry is at the hospitals.

Ministry is on the streets. Ministry is where needs are, not making decisions at a board level. So, that should be streamlined as fast as you can get it streamlined in order to maximize and mobilize people for mission and ministry all over the city and the neighborhoods and the nations.

And yet, all over the country, churches think ministry. Oh, I'd serve on that committee, or I'll serve on that board, or I'll serve on that. So, everybody is sitting around going to board meetings all week long.

What kind of ministry is that? That doesn't get anybody saved, and it doesn't heal marriages, and it doesn't bring kids up in the Lord. So, enough on our history. You can ask questions as we go along.

I think I'll save the hymn for later. Okay, the outline that you have there, you can turn to that on the second page, is what I'm going to try to follow now. I'm not sure how many of these we can get through tonight, but I was thinking maybe three of them.

And I'm going to reverse the order of the first two. I sent this off by email today and then realized, oops, I got it wrong. So, I'm going to start with the importance, preciousness, and purpose of the church, because I just want to begin by making sure we feel the weightiness of what we're about here and who we're serving.

You can't talk about biblical eldership without laying the foundation of the church. What is the church? Why is the church? What's the goal of the church? How precious is the church? So, I just want to highlight some of the names of the church and some of the ways the New Testament sees it so that you can feel the wonder of it. The bride of Christ, of course.

Husbands, love your wives as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she would be holy and blameless. So, husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself, for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it just as Christ also loves and cherishes the church, which is His body because she married Him and He married her.

So, one picture that elders should have in their minds as they go about their work is, I am serving the bride of Christ. I am laboring to remove spots and wrinkles. I am laboring to enhance this glory, this splendor here.

And every time it seems to be small and low and nitty-gritty, pause and close your eyes and pray and say, Lord, remind me that this body of people I'm serving is more important than the U.S. Navy or the Pentagon or the Senate or the entire house. This is the bride of Christ. The body of Christ universal and the body of Christ local.

Colossians 1, He is the head of the body, the church. Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I do share on behalf of His body, which is the church, filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions. So, the body of Christ is the church universal.

It's His own body. And it's the church local as well. 1 Corinthians 12, the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, nor again can the head say to the feet, I have no need of you.

On the contrary, all the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable. Then verse 27, now you are the body of Christ. Now, what's remarkable here in 1 Corinthians is that the head is not Christ here.

The image is different. The head cannot say to the feet, I have no need of you. This is a member of the church.

This is part of the analogy. So here, he's thinking of the body differently than it was thought of when he wrote Colossians. And here, he's thinking of the local church as the local expression of that universal body.

And he's thinking of every member as a part of that body relating properly so that none says, I don't need you. The church is the body of Christ, which is probably why Paul was spoken to by the risen Lord on the Damascus road with the words, why do you persecute me? Why do you persecute me when you put my people in jail? You persecute me. The household and dwelling of God, Ephesians 2. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are God's household, God's house, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building being fitted together is growing into a holy temple, in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God.

Now, that is amazing. Is that not amazing? This household and this temple are being built, the people of God are being built into a temple or a dwelling of God. There is a way in which God inhabits the church that is different from the way He inhabits a soul and the way He inhabits nature.

His omnipresence is focused and active in a different way in the church than anywhere else. That is why the expectations for the gathered church in worship and business can be so different. Like, when you are assembled, my spirit is with you, hand him over to Satan.

Something different seems to be going on there than just somebody off on their own, claiming to be filled with the Spirit and acting on behalf of God. A dwelling of God is what the elders serve. And then the pillar and bulwark of the truth, or the pillar in support of the truth.

1 Timothy 3.15 I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God. That could be written as a banner over this meeting tonight and tomorrow. I teach, hopefully biblically, so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

That is an amazing calling. That is an amazing calling. There is no other institution in society with this mission.

It isn't the university. It's not Christian colleges and seminaries. It's the church.

The church is the pillar and support of the truth. That means if we do our job well, the truth stands. And if we do our job poorly, it can crumble.

Generations will suffer if we don't fulfill that mission. The question is, is the church here the corporate, universal, or local? And I think the answer would be, it's the universal church coming to expression in local expressions. In other words, if you say universal church and leave it out there unspecified in the air, it has no concrete place where anything happens.

You've got saints in heaven, you've got saints yet unborn, you've got saints scattered all over the world in various peoples, so where and how is truth being upheld? It's when it becomes concrete in local expressions, I think that this becomes a functional reality. But I wouldn't want to make a hard and fast distinction here. So that's a high calling, and it's especially relevant for elders.

Why? Because we're going to see that elders are charged, and they're the only people that are charged in the New Testament church with teaching. Or, Titus 1.9, with being those who correct according to right doctrine. They're the guardians of right doctrine, the elders are.

Nobody else is called to do that in the church except the elders, according to Titus 1.9 and elsewhere. Now why? Why the church? What's the goal of the church? Because if you say, what's the goal of the eldership? The goal of the eldership would surely be to do something so that the church becomes what it ought to be. And what is that? Here's a few of the things that the New Testament says about the goal of the church.

1 Peter 2.9, You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. So there's the goal. So that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.

Elders should do their work so as to enable that to happen. Go ahead. Okay.

I think probably then I did overstate the case in saying that the only people charged to be guardians of true doctrine are the elders. And you're pointing out that there are others for sure who are responsible in all of their teaching, like the older women in relation to the younger, to get it right. Okay, thank you.

That's very helpful. That was an overstatement. When we get to those texts that I was referring to, Titus 1.9 and Apt to Teach in 1 Timothy 3.2, we'll try to decide now, do the elders have a unique role in equipping people like that so that there's kind of a ripple effect or a trickle-down effect in the church? Absolutely.

Everybody in the church then who is a small group leader, a Sunday school teacher, an adult Sunday school class leader, if you're not an elder, surely you are responsible to help be a part of the upholding of the truth and being part of that bulwark. Good. Keep me careful here.

When we do our work right, this is going to happen, Lord willing. The church is going to shine and declare and proclaim the excellencies of the one who called the people out of darkness or to display the manifold wisdom of God to the spiritual powers of heaven. The Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.

To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things so that... Here's the goal of the church. So that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. That's one of the most breathtaking statements about why the church exists that I know of.

Whether this is demons, rulers and authorities, principalities and powers, or whether it is angels or both, it is big. And that the church God has designed and is guiding and equipping and supplying in the world so that as angels look on and as the devil looks on the manifold wisdom of God will be seen and praised and known or at least recognized if he has evil spirits in mind here. I remember when I first came here I preached a sermon called The Cosmic Church.

In those days we were carrying an ad in the newspaper and I put Cosmic Church in the newspaper. And boy did I get scolded for that because it sounded so New Age-y. I mean, that was almost on the front end

of the New Age back in the early 80's.

But I said, well, what I mean is this, this. And then I preached the sermon from this text. One last observation of why the church.

And here you can see how the church is well. Namely, to show the authority and power of Christ. I say to you that you are Peter, Jesus said, and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

I will build my church so when the church flourishes, it's the work of Christ that's flourishing through whatever leadership structures are in place. With regard to Peter here and the rock, I don't want to go into a lot of detail. Here's my interpretation of that.

It's that Peter represents the apostles and Ephesians 2.20 says that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And so in as much as Peter is the spokesman for the apostolic authority and the apostolic authority is spoken through the apostles and then codified in the New Testament, we are on that rock of apostolic authority. I don't think the rock here refers to Jesus.

I think it is a play on this word Petros. Petros and rock. And I think Peter here stands for the apostles.

I don't find in the New Testament a warrant either for the monarchical bishop, though there may be episcopals among us who would differ with that, or the ongoing papal authority of the Catholic Church. I was talking to a Catholic Wednesday night about that and sharing texts back and forth to each other. Questions on those few passages just to highlight the importance and the preciousness and the purpose of the church.

Okay, let's talk about this word church a little bit. Where does it come from? What does it refer to besides the general statements we've seen? What does the word church refer to in the New Testament? The word church comes from the Anglo-Saxon *syrc*, *kyrk*, which in turn comes from the Greek *kyriakon*, which means belonging to the Lord or the Lords, like the Lord's day. It's this word here, the Lords.

We are the Lords. So one could think of church, this Anglo-Saxon word based on this Greek word the Lords, as the people or the building belonging to the Lord. But, we shouldn't think of it as a building because in the English New Testament, the word church translates the Greek *ekklesia*, which never refers to a building, but always to an assembly or a congregation, the called out ones, *ekk*, out, *ekklesia*, a form of the word *kalao*, call, and never refers to a building.

Therefore, the church is the people who belong to the Lord Jesus. The called out ones would be one way to say it. One even wonders, should you have the English word church? Is it a helpful word? Well, that's a battle none of us ought to spend any time fighting.

It's a given, and the church is the church, and we should just, wherever we are, try to fill it up with as much New Testament meaning as we can. So just let me show you the uses of the actual word church. This is a little bit overlapped from what we've seen, but not much.

There's the universal church of all believers, like in Ephesians 1.22, and He put all things in subjection under His feet and gave Him as head over all things for the church. So there's the word church used for the entire assembly of believers everywhere. Then it's used for all the believers in an area.

For example, Acts 9.31. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace being built up and going in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit it continued to increase. So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee. The church.

Not just churches, but the church throughout all Judea and Galilee. Then it's used of all the believers in a city. Acts 8.1. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem.

The church in Jerusalem. Then it's used for the believers gathered in household congregations in the New Testament. 1 Corinthians 16.19, Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord with the church that is in their house.

So, back to Phil's question here. When you read church in the New Testament, you must simply attend to the context to see is there a local expression of it in view, or a district expression of it in view, or an area-wide or city-wide or a universal-wide expression of the church. The people of the Lord, the ecclesia, the called out one, the assembly, conceived of at these different levels.

And I would be hard put to say that there is an official expression at each of those levels. Like there should be an official church of Minneapolis. I've related to a lot of guys in this city, and some of you may be there, who think there should be an eldership of Minneapolis.

Who are the elders in the Christian church of Minneapolis? This is the teaching of Watchman Nee and others, that every city should have a body of Christ. And you could make a case for that in the New Testament. There was a body of Christ in Corinth, and a body of Christ in Athens, and a body of Christ in Thessalonica.

And then you'd have the elders. But, to me, there's not enough to mandate that, possibly. Maybe there should be some Minneapolis expression like that, maybe, but I couldn't get dogmatic about that, I don't think.

In fact, what you'll find, I hope, anyway, is that on some of these ecclesiastical governance issues, I don't want to be real dogmatic, period. Because some of the things I'm going to be defending, as far as structures go, are, I don't think, as ironclad as some other doctrines are. Which is probably why there is the Episcopal structure, and the Presbyterian structure, and the Baptist structure.

Those three big structures that we all learn about, if we're studying these things in history. Now, this is a thicker pile, and this is point number three on your outline. Any observation or question you want to raise right there about the use of the word church in the New Testament? Yeah, David.

Well, there are about, I think, 200 different names of the church in the New Testament. So I've left out about 192. I didn't even think in those terms.

But the household of God is the Father. But I wasn't trying to think... I've got to make sure I find some names of the church relating to Christ, some relating to the Spirit, and some relating to the Father. But you certainly could do that.

We could do that. Now, let me tell you what you're looking at here. We produced a document in the late 80s, through many long months and years of study.

And this is an excerpt, plus a lot of changes that I made in it today, in which we tried to come up with principles that would guide our study, goals that would guide our study as we were thinking through biblical church governance. So there's 11 of these, I believe. 11 of these principles of biblical local church governance.

And they provide a backdrop against which we will look more carefully at the eldership. And so these are very historically significant for me and for us here at Bethlehem. Some biblical principles of local church governance.

Number one. So I've got a principle and then I've got followed by text to try to support it. The local church is governed by Christ.

Matthew 16, 18, I will build my church. This governance, as well as other texts on His headship over the church. This governance was mediated through the authority of the apostles and their close associates.

I'll come back to these texts. Today, Christ still rules through the words of His apostles, as they are preserved for us in the inspired writings of the New Testament. Therefore, every effort will be made to conform the structure and procedures and spirit of church governance as closely as possible to New Testament guidelines with a constant eye to promoting the glory of God and the advancement of faith.

Now before we look at the text, let me just re-say that in my own words and apply it to our church. Christ is the head of Bethlehem Baptist Church, the local expression of the universal body alongside millions of other local expressions. He rules over this church not by some esoteric, magical, secretive words spoken to elders, but through His apostles, who now are all dead.

We don't have apostles here. I have good friends who lead denominations who do have apostles. It's because they define them differently than this.

But we don't have that office here. The apostles are the book. There's my Bible.

Okay. The New Testament here is the written expression of the word of Christ and the charter of the church and the rule over the church. The elders then are responsible to be apt to teach and to correct people with good doctrine by knowing this book and effectively applying it to their people so that Christ mediates His authority and His power and His teaching and His love through His word and the apostles' teaching of it and the elders' understanding of it preached and taught through that.

Now, of course, I'm going to talk these later principles. There's going to be the priesthood of the believers. But I wanted to lay that down first as Christ being the teacher and the leader and the governor of His church.

Matthew 16, 18, I will build my church. Ephesians 2, 19, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Now, there's all kinds of disagreements as to just what and prophets refers to, whether there was another office there of prophets or whether they were just charismatic prophets here and there or whether this means apostles and prophets meaning apostles who are prophets, which is the position of Wayne Grudem.

And I'm inclined to think that may well be what it means, but I don't think we need to settle that one tonight either. The apostles and their authority, however it was shared by prophets, or whether they are the prophets here, is the foundation of the church. Now, I mentioned inspired writings.

Here's one of the texts I would go to to defend that. 1 Corinthians 2.12-13 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God, and we impart this wisdom in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. So there is one kind of claim in Paul's writings for his own inspiration that he doesn't teach in words taught by human wisdom.

And we could add here 2 Peter 3, where Peter says there are some things in Paul that are hard to understand, and men twist them to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures. So Peter already aligning Paul's writings with scripture. So Paul's writings being inspired are among the apostolic writings that govern the church.

Here are some texts that show the kind of authoritative function the apostles had in the church, which they still have through the writings of the New Testament. He says in 1 Corinthians 7.17 Only let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him, this is my rule in all the churches. Or this is my dictate.

This is my, the word is diatosis I believe in Greek. The ordering. This is the way I order the life of the churches.

So Paul claims amazing authority. None of us should talk this way, but the apostles can talk this way. Here's a couple more illustrations.

1 Corinthians 14.37 and 38 If anyone thinks he is a prophet or a spiritual, or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. Wow.

So Paul at least had a self-consciousness about being the Lord's authoritative spokesman as an apostle, which he was, to write in a way that was virtually the Lord's commandment. And anybody who didn't recognize it, he said, you're not recognized. 2 Thessalonians 3.14 If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of that person, don't associate with him, so that he will be put to shame.

So you get at least those three texts, where the apostle Paul says, I stand as an emissary of the risen Christ, called out by Him, and taught not in words of human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, and therefore what I say holds sway in the church as the governing word. And now we don't have Paul around to talk like that anymore. We only have what he wrote.

And therefore faithful elders will do their best to mediate that through being apt to teach to their congregations. And thankfully, the congregations have Bibles in their own laps at home, where they can get it from the apostles as well. And I said at the end of that principle that we have an eye to the glory of God in all of this.

I base that on 1 Corinthians 10.31, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, including all your eldership and all your church governance and all your constitutional design, do all to the glory of God. Our mission statement here at Bethlehem is, we exist to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things, for the joy of all peoples. So if you say, why are you doing this seminar? I would say, I'm doing this seminar to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things, for the joy of all peoples.

Because I think that if we get the eldership right, if we get governance right, if we get the Spirit right, if we get the Word right, then God's glory and God's supremacy will be wonderfully and passionately honored

more than if we don't get it right. And the joy of faith is the goal too. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, here's what's Paul's life task, for your progress and joy in the faith.

The advancement and joy of your faith, the King James says. Paul wrote what he wrote, said what he said, structured the churches the way he structured them, appointing elders in every church for the joy of your faith. The elders exist for the joy of the church.

They should never forget that. If there's an unhappy church, something's wrong with the elders. Something's wrong at the heart of the church.

If it's not pumping joy out of the elders, something's wrong. It needs to be adjusted. Because that's the goal of the apostolic ministry.

So that's principle number one. Christ governs His church through the apostles whose writings are now in the New Testament and are taught by faithful elders. Principle number two.

The ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members in the activity of worship toward God, nurture towards each other, witness toward the world. Internal structures for church governance are not the main ministry of the church, but the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of the ministry. Oh, that every one of our churches would get this mindset.

The ministry mindset. The ministry mindset that every saint is called to minister. And the pastors, the elders exist to inspire them and equip them and encourage them and strengthen them.

And yes, there has to be the whole hospital dimension of the wartime mentality. You've got to have a good field hospital if you're going to do battle. Otherwise, the morale problem of the frontline troops that are being chewed up day after day is going to be very bad.

So, it's a multi-layered vision of mobilizing ministry, but oh, that our pastors and elders might think, mobilize, mobilize, mobilize the people for the city and the nations and the neighborhoods. Not just, let's have committees and meetings that are nice. So, here are some texts that support that.

Ephesians 4, or one text. 11 and 12. Christ gave some.

Here's the risen ascending Christ giving back to the church. Now, what they need, some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of service to the building up of the body of Christ. So, you have this group here, and then you have the equipping of the saints.

That's everybody. That's not a select group. For the work of ministry, diakonia here, to the building up of the body of Christ.

And then when the body of Christ is built up, it's effective in the world. Holler at me and wave at me if you want to stop on any of these. No, there are not.

And the reason you can tell that is because you don't have this little word as. There's a grouping here. You have as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some, and then you don't have this word, some as, between pastors and teachers.

These are taken as a group. I think it means pastors slash teachers. And we'll see why, because I'm going to argue that pastor, elder, overseer, and bishop are all synonymous in the New Testament.

And they must be apt to teach. That is their main task, governing and teaching, which is what we'll see later. Three, governance structures should be lean and efficient to this end.

This is the end of equipping and mobilizing. Governance structures should be lean and efficient to this end, not aiming to include as many people as possible in office holding, but to free and fit as many people as possible for ministry. And I say, I don't have a text for this, I just say it's implied.

You have to remember the history of these points. These were written before we had our new constitution. These were written as I was trying to work with 24 deacons as to how to rethink governance at Bethlehem.

So we developed these principles, not as conclusions, but as guidelines for how to get to where we presently are, and how to correct where we presently are if we happen to not have it right. So that's where these came from. So we started by saying, it seems to us that if this is true, then this would be true.

Good question. Let's see if I can remember that. I think they could do, just like now, I think they could do two successive three-year terms, if I'm not mistaken.

Any history buffs here that remember back in the dark ages? That's what we have now with our elders. Have to be off a year, then they can come back on. Two successive three-year terms reappointed by the church.

So they could be on six years, and most of them would have been there for six years. It's the gap between those who are just coming on and aren't up to speed yet. It would be terrible if it were huge.

So you've got to stagger it out, so you don't have everybody going off at once, and you need to bring your best ones back on quickly. By best, I mean those who are called and gifted. See, I believe in the church, our mindset shouldn't be, we've got to pass this around so as many people can be an elder as possible.

That mindset is just crazy. It would be like saying, John Piper, you get to preach once a Sunday. We need 51 other guys to preach, because we just need to pass it around.

Well, I think I'm called and gifted to preach. And as long as the church believes that, they'll keep saying, okay, that's your job, that's your elder job mainly. There are other things too.

And then there are other jobs, and guys are good at them. They're just tailor-made at them. And you have to balance that with you don't want to institutionalize a man in a role that then he might become unfit for it, and you can't ever get him out of it.

But you need to have solidity in long term. So, for example, we will lay off, I think, three or four of our 18 at the end of this year. We have brought back on two this year that we laid off last year when they took a year off.

And so the gap feels right now like we will be having new blood over the years, but it won't be such that nobody remembers how this thing is done or what the ethos is. And if you stay in a place long enough, if a pastor stays long enough and builds leadership long enough, it sort of spreads. I'm sure as I look out in this group, there will be many men in this room right here who know the vision of this church, know the heartbeat of this church, and they're not on the council, and when they came on, it would hardly take them

any time to get up to speed just because they've been around long enough to breathe it.

Okay, now that's an interesting question. The question is, why term limits? Do they become a substitute for honest accountability? Sort of. Sort of.

And here's what I mean when I say sort of. Suppose a man loved by everybody in the church, and it serves as a deacon for yea many decades, is becoming a little bit senile. He's saying off-the-wall things at the meeting.

Still a precious man. Loves God, but he's not handling the Scripture so well anymore, and his comments just seem to be from left field. How do you not hurt a man like that and the huge network of people that he has that love him, and yet move him out? Because he's got to get out.

He's making the business hard, and it's not helpful. You're appealing for honest accountability. Go to him.

Talk to him. Yes, amen. I want to be candid.

I believe in candor and honesty and getting in people's face and telling them like it is. But in reality, there needs to be gentle ways of doing some of that. Really, honestly, that's in my mind for why we need to have an easy way every six years to not bring somebody back on.

It's easier not to bring somebody back on than it is to fire somebody in the middle of their life. Devotion to the eldership. But I feel the sting of what you're saying that if we just kind of talk about people behind their back and you have a problem elder and you don't deal with him, you don't deal with the problem elder, go face to face with him, that's terrible.

I mean, you're going to lose your whole camaraderie if you do your business that way. And those guys who are in this room right now know that's not the way we do it here. I mean, when we have tensions on our council, a lot of lunch meetings happen within two weeks to go face to face with those problems and they're dealt with right up front.

But it just seems like there's another reason for it and that is that men need sabbaticals. We even call it that. After six years, take a year off.

Breathe deep. Get a perspective of this church from outside the council. If you're called and you're gifted, you'll be back here within a year or two and you'll come with something fresh.

So I think there probably are reasons to warrant it. I mean, the fact that it's two three-year terms, there's nothing biblical about that. Believe me, you are free to do it, you know, four-year terms, no repetitions.

Go ahead. No, let me explain again just to clarify what we do here. Right now, with the council of elders, an elder is affirmed by the church for a three-year term.

He comes up for reaffirmation at the end of that term and can serve another one without taking any time off. That's almost a given unless he's committed adultery or done something really wacko in his doctrine. If he's a gifted and contributing member and is not exhausted at the end of three years, the church in all likelihood will say, bless you, keep on serving.

At the end of that three-year term, automatically, at least a year off. And then he can be nominated again, reaffirmed by the church and back on. With, you mean, two or three people? Yeah.

The question is, what does a small church do? It doesn't have the luxury of this kind of rollover. And, well, the ones that I am aware of don't insist on it. In other words, you need, and here we're getting ahead of ourselves, you need multiple elders.

I believe that the New Testament teaching is not that there's just one elder, but that there should be several in every church. And so, I would say, think through something that works for the local small 50-person church. Whatever.

I don't have a prescription. Don't take hours. Don't assume this is the way to do it.

I mean, there's some biblical core values here, but those are not biblical. Three years. A year off.

Two terms. That's just pure human wisdom through much prayer and fasting and study and thinking and our tradition, our history, all that. You could do it a very different way than that.

Yeah. There are no term limits for vocational elders. We do not, that is those of us who are ordained, do not have to take a year off.

It's one of the either burdens or perks of being ordained depending on how you look at it. David? We do have to be reaffirmed. Fifteen percent of the people in this church could call my job into question every three years.

That's another thing I didn't mention. We ask for an 85% reaffirmation vote. Now, that doesn't mean that an 84% would unseat an elder.

It means we'd go back to the drawing boards and say, whoa, if 15% of the people in this church find a problem with this man, we need to find out why. Now, we might override that and put him back and say, whatever, I forget what the actual demand is in the Constitution for what he gets, but it's not happened yet, but it could. We want our people to really be excited about their leaders, because if they're not, we're not going anywhere as a church.

Okay, number four. I'll keep opening it for questions, but I can tell they're just going to keep coming if we don't keep moving, but that's good. That's really good.

Please ask those clarifying questions, especially if I've said something that's not clear. Here's principle number four. Christ is the head of the church and spiritually all His disciples are on a level ground.

I said disciples there, not just elders. That's Christians. Are on a level ground before Him, each having direct access to Him and responsibility to intercede for the good of all as a community of priests.

Men, women, old, young, all believers are priests. Sometimes this will be played off against elders or leaders, but let's see if that's a New Testament thing to do. Let me just give you the text here that caused me to see this the way I've said it.

Ephesians 4.15 Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is in the head, even Christ. We are all to grow up into Christ. All the members growing up into Christ.

This is a very famous, Matthew 23.8-11, a Baptist text. Do not be called rabbi, for one is your teacher and you are all brothers. Let's give you a little anecdote here.

When I came to this church, I don't know why it is with churches today, but churches like to have doctors. This is why you create the D-Min degree. Well, when I came to this church, they repainted the sign out front.

Dr. John Piper. Dr. John Piper. I made them redo it.

Immediately. Get that doctor off of there and put pastor. Not because I'm so literal that I get in everybody's face who calls me Dr. Piper, but because there's something meant here.

And I just want to be careful. Do not be called rabbi, teacher, doctor, maybe, for one is your teacher and you are all brothers. Do not call anyone on earth your father, for one is your father.

See, you could overdo that, couldn't you? My son shouldn't call me father. That's clearly not, I don't think, what they mean. This is a warning not to overdo leadership and miss the priesthood of the believer.

This is a warning text. This is a balancing text against all these texts we're going to be looking at tonight that endorse and describe leadership. One is your father, he who is in heaven.

Do not be called leaders, for one is your leader, that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. So surely the spirit here at least is like in the Sermon on the Mount, don't do your alms to be seen by men.

Don't fast to be seen by men. Don't pray to be seen by men. That doesn't mean don't fast and don't give alms and don't pray.

It means your motive shouldn't be that even when you do those things in public, your aim is to get recognized for them. So this is a warning to the Council of Elders. It's a warning to pastors.

It's a warning to people like me who have a letter after my name, a degree after my name, and a lot of you do, to want people to recognize that. I'll just show you how far I've taken this. I have a diploma from Wheaton College, a diploma from Fuller Seminary, and a diploma from the University of Munich.

They're all in a drawer. I've never hung them on any wall in my life. In fact, I have never taken my degree from Munich out of its tube.

It came from Germany in a tube. I took it out to see that I got it. I put it back in the tube.

It's in the bottom file drawer where it's been for the last 25 years. Now, there's nothing to brag about that, and please don't feel guilty if you've got all your diplomas hanging on your wall. As I read this text, I feel... And of course, you could be a lot humbler than I am.

I mean, there are strategies to get the praise of men, right? Besides hanging diplomas on your wall. So I could be writing books because I love the praise of men, right? So you don't hang your diplomas up. You just write books and sign them.

So don't put me in any kind of saint category here. Just know this text is a warning to all of us to beware of wanting to be stroked as a leader, but rather we are to be servants. We are to lower ourselves.

Get down there. Work in the nursery. Say amen, David.

Okay? Work in the nursery. Teach Sunday school classes. Do the things that the saints do.

1 Timothy 2.5 For there is one God, one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. We are not the mediators. One mediator and a saint, a priest of God, can go through the one high priest to God.

And here's a little parenthesis on manhood and womanhood. I hadn't intended to do this, but this may be good. One of the reasons there's such a hubbub about whether women can be elders or not, we don't have women elders here, is because it feels to many, depending on the church they're a part of, like you're excluding women from significant ministry.

And I'm trying to develop the mindset that says just the opposite. Namely, these poor men have to meet hour after hour till 11, 12 at night trying to figure out parking problems and church discipline problems, and the women are out there saving souls and healing the sick. I hope.

Because a woman is a priest to God filled with the Holy Spirit with immediate access to Almighty God, and when she puts her hand on a sick person and prays for that person, God Almighty can heal. And that's ministry and why she would ever want to sit on the council of elders when she could be doing that. Now, maybe she would because she feels like I've got gifts of leadership and competency, so we have to deal with it at other levels too.

But I just want to get out of our heads that really exciting, explosive, supernatural, people-changing ministry is the province of a few guys. It's just crazy. We must get that out of our heads.

And mobilize women and mobilize men to avail themselves of the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, to do mighty work in the city and in marriages. Revelation 1-6 is explicit on the priesthood idea. Christ has made us to be a kingdom priests, priests to His God, and the Father to Him be the glory.

So we are all priests. This is Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Feel free to make copies of this message to give to others, but please do not charge for those copies or alter the content in any way without permission.

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