

Scripture Intro

Good morning! Welcome back to the middle school where the air is hot, the ambiance is cold, but the worship is rich. And, we are now serving Cups coffee for both of you who arrive early. If you have your Bibles, open them or turn them on to 1 Timothy 3 where we are looking at the subject of elders and deacons. If you are very astute, or read JD's weekly email, you know that we skipped the section on women's roles in the church. Not something we do very often, but I told JD that I really didn't want my second to last sermon at Grace to be on women's roles in the church and he graciously moved it to the 15th:)

Sermon Intro

Just to help me get an idea of where everyone here comes from, raise your hand if you came from a church that had both elders and deacons. Ok, now raise your hands if you came from a. Church where deacons did most of the decision making. Ok, now raise your hand if you had a pastor who thought he was the pope and made all the decisions. Lastly, who went to a church void of leadership and the congregation voted on everything down to the color of the carpet?

I had a guy in my office once who wanted to start a house church in Oxford (and I'm fine with house churches). But I asked him, "Would you have elders?" He said, "No." "Would you baptize people?" He said, "No." "Would you celebrate the Lord's supper?" He said, "No." "Would you be teaching the Bible?" He said, "No, we'd just pull something offline." I then said, "Well, I don't know what you're doing in your house, but it's not a church."

That was a bit insensitive of me. I do wish I had been nicer about it, but Jesus established His church and incorporated pieces into it to ensure its faithfulness and fruitfulness and one of those pieces is church leadership.

So, I want to look at this passage and answer three questions about church leadership. First, why we have church leadership. Second, who is the church leadership. And third, what qualifies those in church leadership?

I. **Why we have church leadership**

Why do we have church leadership? Why can't we just 'be the church' without all this organized religion? Well, the answer is in verse 5: **For if someone does not know**

how to manage his own household, (and here it is) how will he care for God's church?

Did you catch that? The goal of church leadership is to care for God's church. The heart of leadership isn't control, power or wealth, although have certainly seen it perverted that way at times. The heart of church leadership is to care for the people of God.

I have a friend who is a retired Presbyterian pastor and whenever someone he knows is considering being an elder, he always asked them, "Who is in charge of the church?" If you can answer this questions well, almost every other piece of leadership will work itself out. Who is in charge of the church? Jesus! Jesus is the head of the church and Jesus is in charge. Not the elders, not the deacons, not the congregation. It's Jesus' church. Ephesians 5:23 says, ...**Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.**

And because Jesus cares about His church, he has decided that there should be leadership to care for His church. Jesus' church is not some social club to further your business or provide your kids good clean fun. Jesus' church exists to worship God and usher in His Kingdom on earth. Jesus cares about His people and His mission. So, he places people in positions of leadership to care for His church while He is not physically with us.

If you have smaller kids at home and you go out to dinner, do you just leave them at home alone? No! You love them so you choose someone to care for them who has exhibited a desire to do so, some natural sense of responsibility and experience. That person isn't there to create new rules, Lord over them or certainly not to abuse them. You have chosen this person to care for the people you love the most in the way you want while you are physically absent.

Now, I'm not saying you all are babies and the elders are the babysitters. Only once or twice has it ever felt like that. I give this analogy thought to communicate the heart of church leadership: love and care.

So, we have church leadership to care for God's church. But to what end? What are these leaders tasked to do? It's not to rule over you however we want. JD isn't going to make you watch Mississippi State football on Saturday. Chris isn't going to make you listen to bad music. I'm not going to make you watch my small village. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians gives us the task of church leadership: **And he gave the apostles,**

the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ - Ephesians 4:11-12

The leadership of the church exists to care for you by equipping you for the work of the ministry. Think serve, feed and lead. That's what church leadership should do. Sometimes that is going to be more defensive in nature. If you go off and join a cult, we'd do our best to convince you to come back. If you leave your spouse without good cause, we are going to do anything in our power to care for your spouse and get you two to a place of reconciliation.

Often it is more offensive in nature. Doing whatever we can can to see that the members of this church are built up in their ability to understand Scripture, obey Scripture and invest in others through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, some of you at this point would ask, 'But Jim, I thought we were a congregational church where the ultimate authority rests in the congregation.' Yes! We are! And as a congregational church, you choose the leaders here. Every year, you can install or remove any of our church leaders including JD.

Before I move on, I want to speak to those here who would be pro-Jesus, but anti-organized religion. I have met a lot of you over the years and I know that there are some very legitimate and often painful things that can happen to bring someone to this opinion. At best you might have seen very contentious, self-serving or hypocritical church leadership. At worst, you might have seen or even experienced abusive church leadership. And if that's you, I want to say how sorry I am. That is not the design and those leaders will stand accountable for the way they led Jesus' treasured possession. Jesus did organize His church though. Here are a few verses outside of our current passage that speak to the organized part of Christianity.

Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith."

Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account."

1 Thessalonians 5:12, "We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

Acts 20:28 (speaking to the elders of Ephesus), "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."

Ok, so that is why we have church leadership, now, who exactly is that leadership?

II. Who is the church leadership?

The organized leadership Paul is writing about to Timothy is overseers and deacons. Let's look first at overseers. Now, someone wonder if we are off to a bad start already because we don't have an office called overseer at Grace. Actually, we do. There are two words in the New Testament used interchangeably for the same office. One word is translated as elder and the other is translated in two ways: bishop or overseer. Both of the Greek words and all three of the English words refer to the same office. There are multiple places you can see this in Scripture, but here is one in Titus:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you - if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.

So, you have this office of elder that can also be called overseer or bishop. I think Bishop Jim has a nice ring to it. Anyway, it's one office and the purpose of this office, as we have seen is to care for the flock. The primary way elders care for the flock is through prayer and teaching the word.

So, how does this play out at Grace? Our elders meet twice a month formally to do three things. First, we pray for every member of this church. We go down the membership roster and make sure that each member is known to at least one elder. We're not perfect so there are times when we don't know how someone is doing and we make sure one of us takes you to lunch to catch up and see how we can be praying for you. Secondly, there are, on occasion, tricky issues we need to prayerfully address. If someone is in gross, unrepentant sin, we need to talk about how we can gently and lovingly call this person back to repentance. That's the defensive part of the office that no one enjoys. Then, offensively, we need to think through how to best platform evangelism, discipleship and worship. So, this involves conversations about hiring and organizing employees, where we worship, where our offices are, how people can plug in and more.

When you select an elder, you are asking that man to make decisions that will cause the church to prosper. Some of those decisions are fun and some are not. But we do this because those who serve in this office answer to a higher authority. Look at Hebrews 13:17:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

So, what, then, is a pastor? The word pastor comes from Biblical commands to shepherd the flock. It also is interchangeable with elder, bishop and overseer, but in our context, we use it to designate those elders who are financially freed up to elder full-time. When I am in Italy and I tell people that I am a pastor, it isn't uncommon for them to ask me where my sheep are. At the end of the day, though, JD, Chris and I are elders. Just three of nine men.

Why are elders only men? Why can't a woman at Grace serve as an elder? As I said, I get to punt to JD on that one on June 15:) And I'm confident he will do a much better job than I would.

Ok, that's elders, what about the second part of the passage: Deacons? The Greek word for deacon literally means 'servant.' A deacon serves. You can go all the way back to Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, to see the origins of this office, but I'm going to go to Acts 6. I don't know if Acts 6 is where we see the actually New Testament office for the first time, but it is certainly at least part of the development of the office. Let's read:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.

Do you see what happened? Men were appointed to serve in a specific capacity so the disciples could be freed up to do the ministry of prayer and the word. And look at the result in verse 7: **And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem.**

At Grace we have deacons who serve in a very specific service areas like media, security, meals, weddings, funerals, ordinances, ushers, facilities and more to free up the elders to do what the Bible teaches us to do. You can see a list of those people this week in your bulletin.

On the topic of deacons and elders, there are a few touchy points I need to address. First, there are some churches who say that elder and deacon are the same office. To that, I ask, why then does Paul have two different lists of criteria for these office with two different jobs? Second, there are those in mostly Southern Baptist circles hold to what is called the single elder system. They say that pastor is the only elder. The problem here is that everywhere Paul went or instructed Titus and Timothy to go, they appointed elders, plural. Here are a few examples:

Ephesus: Acts 20:17, "And from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church."

Titus 1:5, "This is why I [Paul] left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you."

1 Peter 5:1, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed."

The Biblical model is for a plurality of elders in each church because none of us are Jesus. We need very different personalities and giftings to best shepherd the church. I don't think you will find two personalities as different and JD and me, but I can promise you that we are both blessed by having the other as an elder. God help this church if I were your only elder!

Third touchy issue: can women be deacons? This is probably the most debated issue in our passage within evangelicalism today. I have to say that Paul is frustratingly unclear on this point. At Grace (and this is in line with my own reading of Scripture) we do have female deacons or Deaconesses. At the church I'm going to, Orlando Grace, they don't.

Very briefly, here is why we have female deacons. First, why would women in any way be prevented from serving in the church? The role has no spiritual authority or teaching. Second, in the qualifications of a deacon, there is this phrase: **Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded faithful in all things - 1 Timothy 3:11**

The Greek word translated as 'their wives' is literally 'women.' Women likewise must be these things. I think this word is referring to women who serve in this role. The word

deaconess wasn't invented for another couple decades. We have historians like Josephus confirming that they existed in the second century. And, lastly, why in the world would Paul have requirements for the wife of a deacon, but not the wife of an elder?

Again, I do think Paul could have been more clear and I sympathize with people who have come to different conclusions, but this is why we have made the decisions we have here at Grace.

Lastly, what about the staff team? Where is that in Scripture? I think the best way to think about the staff team is as a mixture of elders and deacons who are feed-up either part-time or full-time working as a team to carry out the work of the church.

Ok, we have covered a lot of ground! Now, we have less than five minutes to cover the bulk of the passage:) What qualifies someone to be in leadership in the church?

III. What qualifies those in church leadership?

D.A. Carson says that the remarkable thing about the list of qualifications for an elder or deacon is how unremarkable they are. The list isn't this otherworldly level of morality and gifting. He isn't requiring high IQs, seminary degrees or decades of church service. He's saying we shouldn't get drunk. We shouldn't beat up on people. We should be gentle, patient, hospitable and love people more than money. Crazy!

Paul says **They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. - 1 Timothy 3:9** They must believe they are sinners and their only hope in this life and the next is Jesus Christ. And they need to do this with a clear conscience which simply means that their actions align with their faith.

Now, I realize that there are a couple criteria in this list that are hotly debated. Here is the first: keeping his children submissive. Titus, as I have already read, says his children are believers. Does this mean that all your children have to be believers to be an elder? Does it mean you have to have children? My three year old is pretty hard. Am I disqualified? I think the most logical way to understand this command is simply that an elder has to make his home a priority and sacrificially love his children in a way that gives those in the church confidence that he would care well for them. Now, there are times where you have a qualified man who is genuinely a great dad, but because of specific issues at home with the kids, it's better for the church not to ask for more of their time effectively taking them away from their kids.

Second hotly debated criteria: husband of one wife. Does this mean that an elder must be married? It certainly means he can't be a polygamist, which the church did have in the first few centuries. Largely, they decided that they could keep their wives, but not be an elder. But closer to our context today, does it mean that an elder can never be divorced and remarried? This is especially difficult because of how high the divorce rate in our culture is.

Here is how the elders at Grace have interpreted this. We see Paul saying an elder must be a one woman man. He need to be devoted to his wife in every way. And elder can be divorced and remarried, but there needs to be lots of time and ideally geography between the first marriage and the second. There also has to be clear understanding and repentance for how he contributed to the divorce and years if not decades of proof that he is now a truly good model in this area of his life.

So, overall, these are not crazy expectations Paul has for church leadership. Paul isn't looking for the moral elite. He's simply putting forward those who are exhibiting what every Christian should be exhibiting. The bar is not out of reach for many. Almost every qualification we have, you can find somewhere else in the New Testament commanded for all Christians everywhere. Now, to be sure, elders are not perfect, we are all sinners, but by God's grace, we should be a good example of the Christian life.

But, there are two exceptions to this. Two places Paul does ask something of church leaders, and elders in particular, that he doesn't ask of all Christians. Carson says there are one and a half exceptions. The half exception is that an elder can't be a recent convert. Well, this isn't a huge exception, because every new convert is expected to grow in maturity, right? And, for what it's worth, new convert is going to mean something different in Oxford than it might on the frontiers of India. We know that Paul was appointing elders after his first missionary journey who had only believed for about 18 months. Elders should be mature for their context.

The other exceptions, the qualification for elders that isn't required for every Christian is the ability to teach. Some people have lots of information, but can't put it together in a comprehensive or helpful way. Others can be brilliant communicators, but really have nothing of merit or depth to say. Elders need to be able to do both which Paul calls an ability to teach. Does that mean they need to be able to preach on Sunday? No. But it does mean that you should be able to have a coffee or a meal with an elder and they should be able to clearly teach and apply the word to your life in a way that blesses you and moves you toward Christ.

Those are the qualifications. So, how does someone at Grace become an elder? We don't have some elder training where we put some man on one side of the conveyor belt and out pops an elder. We look for men already eldering. Already exhibiting the qualities of an elder. And, since Paul says **If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task**, we would love for men to come to us and tell us if maybe God has put that on your heart. But, what if you desire the office and meet these qualifications, but still feel unqualified for some reason to shepherd the church of Jesus Christ? Welcome to the team! We all feel that way? I certainly do. But God gives us the grace we need because He loves His church.

Conclusion

Leaders in the church, but elders and deacons, are God's gift to the church and I pray, by God's grace, this church feels that blessing. I pray we are always humble, transparent, faithful and most of all loving.

Having had the opportunity these past six years to serve as an elder at Grace, I have seen imperfect, but repentant men and women give their time to serve the church in valuable ways as deacons. I have seen imperfect, but repentant elders pray for each of you, provide for families in financial need, argue and pray at length over what the Bible would have us do in some truly complicated and exhausting situations, pursue straying Christians and wake up early and stay up late to counsel and disciple.

I am so very thankful for the leadership of Grace Bible Church and the two weeks I have left as one of those leaders. So, I'd like to finish by spending a minute to pray silently for these leaders, they are all in your bulletin. And then I'll close.

Pray

Response: Deacon, Elder, join Grace (Discovery Class)

