

What in the World Is the Church to Be?, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 1207

What in the world is the church to be? And we're going to give you just a basic outline of what God intended the church of Jesus Christ to be. In Acts chapter 2 and verse 42, just reading the text there for a moment, Acts 2:42 says this, describing the life of the early church: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers. And fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. And all that believed were together and had all things common, and sold their possessions and goods and parted them to all men as every man had need. And they continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and break bread from house to house, did eat their food with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." Now, there you have a description of the early church, which really is basic to understanding the purpose of the church, particularly verse 42, and the effect of the church from verse 43 through 47.

Now, we who love Jesus Christ are the church. We are the body of Christ. We are redeemed. We are invisible in the sense that the world cannot see us. And very often we can't even see ourselves. Sometimes, you know, we struggle over whether somebody's really a believer or not. But, we belong to the collective one body. Whether we're alive or in glory, we're still a part of the one body of Christ. We are Christ's church because we love Him. We are His *ekklesia*, His called out ones. His assembly of beloved sons. The church basically is people called of God to be His children. We have become one, positionally, by being united by faith in Jesus Christ. And it was Jesus who said, "I will build My church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." And when He said that, He meant He would gather together His body. He wasn't talking about buildings. He was talking about people.

We are the church of Jesus Christ. We who know and love Him. We are one with each other because we have been born into the family by the Spirit of God through faith in Jesus Christ. We are the living church of the Firstborn. We are the general assembly written in heaven, as the writer of Hebrews states it. We are just men because of Christ. We are a living body, a community of those who are washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. That's the invisible church. The world really can't see who we are. They cannot discern us. They see only the visible church, not the invisible. That is those who are real Christians and those who aren't.

But there is also a visible church, and I believe the Lord intended there to be a visible church. As Paul mentioned at the beginning, not Paul the Apostle, Paul the youth director. As Paul mentioned earlier,

basically, we have a testimony to the world as a visible church. When we gather together on the Lord's Day, we are a testimony to the world, indeed, that Christ is risen. And the visible church has a testimony to bear to the world. Now, some people are saying we don't need any buildings, and we ought to be purely spontaneous, no organization, no building, no structure at all. But I don't think Christ pointed that way at all. I think if you go back to Matthew 18, for example, you find very clearly there that Christ prophesied the church would be a structure with form that would meet together in a given place. Where in Matthew 18, particularly, there are several verses that I believe indicate this. Verse 15 of Matthew 18, "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone. If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." If a brother does something wrong, go to him and tell him. "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that 'in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church."

Now, he must be referring to a visible group of people. The church hasn't even begun yet. It won't begin till Pentecost. Christ is predicting that the church will have a visible form, a group of people meeting in a special local place for the purpose of fellowship, worship, and here, for the purpose of discipline. So, there is, in the New Testament, the definite indication that God intended in His design that there be a visible church.

It would be impossible to take this problem to the invisible church. There would have to be a body set together to meet with this individual consisting of at least more than three people. Christ predicted, then, that the church would be a visible assembly of people gathering together in a certain place, that it would have structure, and that it would have form. And so, as we begin to read the Book of Acts, we find that the invisible church becomes more clearly visible. And, first of all, the invisible church and the visible church were the same. Today, the invisible church and the visible church are not always the same. There are congregations meeting that appear to be a visible church that are not the true church at all. They are the false church. They are the harlot. They are the prostitute church.

But, initially, the invisible church became visible, as they began to gather together in the Book of Acts, as they began to meet together visibly before the world. They met together, first of all, in homes. And then, as the homes would become small, they would expand, and meet together in annex built onto the home. And pretty soon, by at least the third century, the church was meeting in its own building as it grew.

Now, this morning, I want us to look at two biblical aspects of the church. And I gave you rather lengthy outline, because I wanted you to have these references for your future study. But I want you to see two general points about the church: the founding of the church, and the ministry of the church. I want you to see the history of it, where it was, and I want you to see the pattern for it, where it's supposed to be today. Its history and its pattern for today. And I want you to know that what the church was when it began is basically what it's supposed to be today. Now, there are new ways to

communicate, there are new methods, there are new problems that we deal with in the 20th century, and I believe the Lord intends us to be the 20th century church. But we are to have basically, from a spiritual principle level, the identical principles that the first century church had.

First of all, I want you to see the founding of the church, because much can be learned from history. As we read in Acts chapter 2 here in verses 42 to 47, the first local assembly met in Jerusalem. And it consisted primarily of humble people, fishermen and so forth. A lot of poor people. There were some people who had a little bit of substance, but the tremendous number of poor people warranted the fact that everybody who had a lot was willing to give to those who didn't have any. And so, they had all things common. They were persecuted. They found it hard to function within their society, being ostracized because of faith in Jesus Christ. They had a tremendous amount of poor people. And, therefore, it was heavy upon them to provide for the poor in their midst. And thus, they had all things in common.

A principle, incidentally, which exists in no other church throughout the Book of Acts. It was not the common practice of the church to be a commune. It was not the common practice of the church to share everything, communistically or socialistically, not in any way. But, purely in Jerusalem, because of the tremendous number of poor people and the unusual circumstances of the Jerusalem church.

Now, the church at Jerusalem was born in a prayer meeting. It was spawned on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit came and filled those who were waiting in the upper room, and the church began at that point. The body was formed. Baptism of the Spirit took place there and then. And the first local congregation was formed on the same day, the day of Pentecost. It was a thrilling church. The first church of Jerusalem, literally. The interesting thing about it was that they all ministered. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit. They were all exercising their gifts, and the unity of the Spirit and the love of Christ was obvious to the whole world.

And they grew rather rapidly. They had 3,000 additions the first day. They immediately became a large congregation. The church of Jerusalem then was born on one day with 3,000 people. You say, "Well, you can't do it that. You don't have time to get your program going." That's right. That's right. The ministry of the Spirit of God accomplished the purpose. It was the Spirit's direction. It was the Spirit's ministry that brought it all to pass in a unique way. And, interestingly enough, as if it wasn't large enough and those 3,000 were saved, a lot of them were visiting from other places, when they begin to go back to their homes, more were added, so that the church grew and grew and grew and became a large church.

It then moved to various areas of the countryside, and spread, and spread, and spread throughout all of the land of Israel. As I mentioned in showing you the slides on Sunday night some time ago, they found a place in Capernaum which they believe to be the house of Peter, one of the places where the early church met, because it's been pushed open, and there are all kinds of evidences there that a

church met in that place. So, the church in Jerusalem spread out and established congregations wherever they went throughout the land of Israel.

Now, I want you to notice in verse 42, the basic ingredients of their church life. Apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread, which is the Lord's Table in Communion, and prayer. And that was it. That was the whole deal. The only thing you can add to that was the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ. In the streets, they preached it. In the temple, they preached it. In homes, everywhere they had a place to open their mouth, that early church preached Jesus Christ. They met together for fellowship, the breaking of bread, the apostles' doctrine, and prayer, and then they disseminated to spread the Word to the world. They had thousands of preachers in their congregation, and their impact was fantastic. In verse 47, it says, "The Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

Now, with that kind of a situation, they had all the ingredients they needed to have a functioning, God-blessed, Spirit-directed church. They didn't need anything else. There was no human attraction involved. There was no human methodology. There were no gimmicks, no balloons, no contests. The equipment that they had was purely provided by the Holy Spirit, Himself. The ministry was balanced. The ministry was complete. The ministry lacked not one single thing. And the reason was the Spirit of God was directing it, number one. But, secondly, the people were following the Spirit's direction.

Now, today, we've changed a lot of things, and we have a lot more gimmicks, and a lot more balloons, and a lot more contests. and a lot more entertainment to try to get people into the church. And in the measure, it's kind of a compensation for the fact that Christians are not accepting the responsibility of following the Spirit's direction in their life ministry. All the baloney that's been set in motion in the church today is to attract people to substitute for the fact that the people there aren't doing what's right.

Now, they had some social life. It wasn't all business and no fellowship, obviously. They had what they called the *agap* or the love feast, which was the early church potluck dinner. And by the time the church of Corinth came around, they were having problems, because the rich were bringing their own potluck and eating it, and letting the poor bring theirs and eat theirs. And they lost the ministry of sharing at the potluck *agap*. So, Paul had to give them a little instruction on that. They also turned it into an orgy in Corinth, so it did deteriorate.

But, nevertheless, in its beginnings, the church met together for fellowship around the table and ate together, sharing their food. People freely gave to each other. They freely ministered to each other. But may I add again, it was not a communal living. The church was never set in motion to be a commune. We have these groups rising up everywhere, the Children of God and all these other groups, and they have missed the boat on the concept of the commune. That's not a New Testament concept.

And I think one great illustration of that is the 5th chapter of Acts in the 4th verse. You remember Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to the Lord? In verse 4, it said this, and this, of course, was the instruction of Peter to them. They had a piece of property, and they had said, "If we sell it, we'll give so much to the Lord." Then, they sold it and didn't give as much as they promised to the Lord, and so they lied to Him, which was their sin. But verse 4, he says, "While it remained, was it not thine own?" In other words, there's no injunction here that because they were believers, they had to sell their property and turn it over to the commune. It was theirs. Peter says, "If you hadn't of sold it, it would've been yours. It was your own property. After it was sold, was it not in your own power?" When you got the money for it, it was your money. In other words, he never expected them to turn it all over to the church to become some kind of a communistic society.

But the problem was, "Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." The problem is not that you sold your property and didn't give all of it to God. He didn't ask you to give all of it. The problem is you said you'd give so much, and you gave less, and you lied. And because it was the early church and discipline had to be strict because of the critical nature of the foundation of the church, they both dropped dead on the spot for such a lie to the Holy Spirit.

Aren't you glad this is the 20th century church? How often have you promised God, "If only that check comes in, I'll give it to the Lord?" It's the same sin, my friends. It's just that God's a little more gracious at this end. I don't know why, but I thank Him for being such. And as I said, in the later churches, we see nothing of this kind of sharing going on, this kind of commune thing, although we do see the ministry of the gift of giving to take care of the needs of those who have need.

So, it was a congregation that began in the energy of the Holy Spirit and continued in the energy of the Holy Spirit, and they were preoccupied with the Spirit's power and with ministering for Jesus Christ. Now, the leadership of this early church were the 12 apostles. They were the leadership because it took time to develop leaders. Soon, there would be elders and deacons. But they couldn't be novices. They couldn't be new converts. And everybody was a new convert in the early church, so God left the 12 apostles with that Jerusalem church for at least seven years, maybe ten years. And they ministered to them. They acted as elders and deacons. In fact, they did it all. The apostles, literally, served the food. They waited on the tables. They did it all. They were the leaders of those people in that first church, that early congregation. And, later on, after all those years had passed and they felt that some of the men had developed to the place of real spiritual leadership and maturity, then they began to choose some to be elders and deacons from out of that congregation.

Later on, some of those elders were so faithful, and some of those deacons were so faithful, that they were promoted by God to become evangelists and teaching pastors. But meanwhile, the apostles ministered to them as their leaders, and the prophets, as well, who were the foundation of the church.

Finally, after at least seven years, they were ready to send out another missionary and start another church. It took seven years before they sent Barnabas to Antioch to establish the church in Antioch. They wanted that much time to prepare, and to find their own strength, and to establish themselves before they sent anybody out to do a job somewhere else. Seven years.

Now, you can imagine when that thing started at such a small place, that they would've been in a big hurry to get it around the world. And yet, in the Spirit's wisdom, they stayed seven years at least before they began to move out. Then, more churches grew; here, there, and everywhere they popped up. The apostle Paul planted some of them, with Silas and Barnabas and others. And each church became independent. Each church was ministered to by the Holy Spirit. There were no denominations holding them together organizationally. Why bother? They were already one in the Spirit. Why should they have an organization to hold them together? Only reason you need an organization to hold you together is if you aren't together. But if they understood that they were one in the Spirit, that was what they needed, and that took care of it.

And yet, they had a common bond. In Romans 16:16, Paul says, "The churches of Christ greet you." There was a one-ness with each local congregation being independent, yet there was a one-ness. And they were composed of all kinds of believers: Jews, Gentiles, all classes of believers, rich, poor, educated, uneducated, all the spectrum of society, and all were functioning together, ministering together as one. And the only organizational structure they had, the only form they had, was that which was instituted by the Holy Spirit.

Now, that's the basic founding of the church, and that's how it grew from Jerusalem. But the church has changed a lot, hasn't it? It's become very complex, very businesslike. The church today has become, in many ways, a massive organization with denominations, with commissions, with committees, the world council, the national council, with boards, with programs. They cause it to function like a business, not a body; a factory, not a family; and a corporation, not a community. The church today has also become a success game, with superficial goals, and the prize goes to the one that gets the most people packed into the most pews on the most Sundays.

Bruce Larson said, "Almost without exception, successful churches and pastorates are measured in terms of their giving records and rates of membership growth. The obvious implication is that increasing numbers and a swelling budget are the primary goals of the local church." End quote.

You know, it's interesting, if you just check a church's situation, when do they get panicky? They don't get too panicky when the teaching is insipid. They don't get too panicky when there are spiritual problems. When they really get panicky is when the line starts dropping on the graph that charts the attendance and the finances, the money. Churches also become, in many cases, an entertainment center with performances given to placid piles of impotent, unproductive pewsters.

And all the devices are geared to get the people there, not to do something with them once they come. May I say to you out of my heart and from the heart of our elders and the leadership of this church, by God's power and by your ministry of prayer and by your dedication to use your gifts: we, as elders, are going to do everything we can to allow the Holy Spirit to show us exactly what Grace Church is to be, and we must begin with a biblical pattern. And having set that biblical pattern in motion as the Holy Spirit designed it, then we'll take the next step from there.

Now, I want you to see what the biblical ministry of the church is. Second major point. And I want us to look at three letters in the New Testament: 1, 2 Timothy and Titus. Because, in these, we have the pattern for the organization and the structure and the form of the early church, or of any church for that matter. Now, Timothy and Titus were two evangelists. An evangelist in the early church was a church planter. He went to an area where Christ was not named. He won some people to Christ and established a congregation. He stayed with that congregation often as long as a year, maybe even longer, two or three years, until he had taught them sufficiently so that some of them had matured. When some of them had matured, he would then appoint elders in that city to care of that church, and to teach in that church, to minister in that church. Then, he would move to another place where Christ was not named, win some more people to Christ, establish another congregation, stay there for a few years, ordain elders in that city to carry it on. Go to another place, and he just kept doing that. That was the work of an evangelist. He was a church planter.

Now, Timothy and Titus did that. They also occasionally did the work of pastor teacher, which was instructing the people. Even an evangelist was called to do that. But as we look at these three letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, we see the pattern for the church. And to show you that, look at 1 Timothy 3:14. "These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly." Now, Paul is writing to Timothy, who's an evangelist planting churches. And here's what he said. "The reason I'm writing, but if a tarry long, that thou mayest know," here's why I'm writing, "how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." In other words, I'm writing so you will know how to behave in the church. I am giving you the basis of what the church is to be. The principles of the church life. Now, they are very clear. They're not foggy. They're just as lucid as they can be.

Now, I want to show you what they are. First of all, what is the basic task of the church? The basic task of the church is to teach sound doctrine. That is the task of the church. Not to give some pastor's opinion. Not to give you my opinions. Not to recite to you tear jerking illustrations. Not to try to play on your emotions. Not to be a fundraiser. Not to be running around doing this and that. Not to provide programs, entertainment, short little spiritual thoughts, weekly devotionals. The ministry of the church is to teach sound doctrine. To teach sound doctrine. Titus 2:1. See, here's another instruction to the one who's planning a church, "But speak thou the thing which become sound doctrine." That's what the church is all about. These evangelists were to move into the church with sound doctrine. That's

the basis of everything. That's what we are to do.

First Timothy 1:3, "As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus," Paul says to Timothy, "when I went into Macedonia," why? "That thou mightest charge some that they teach no other," what? "Doctrine. Teach sound doctrine only," verse 6, "from which some having swerved, have turned aside unto vain jangling." You take a church that does not have a constant diet of sound doctrine, and they will grab every new hot item that comes along. "Desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor that about which they affirm." If there's no sound doctrine taught, the people who want to teach will grab some that isn't sound. Verse 10, "For fornicators, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine." Sound is the word in the Greek from which we get our word "hygienic." It means healthy, that which builds the body. And any other kind of doctrine that tears the body apart has no place. Anything but hygienic teaching. Positive truth, emphasis on the Word of God.

Now, look at chapter 4 verse 1, we'll skip some other thoughts. First Timothy 4:1, "Now, the Spirit speaketh expressly that in the latter times," that's in our day, "some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits," and not sound doctrine, but what? "Doctrines of devils or demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron." Now, how are you going to protect the church against the doctrine of the devil? How are you going to protect the church against seducing spirits? As a pastor, as a teaching shepherd, my job is to protect the flock. How do I do that? Do I run around looking at everybody's credentials? No. The answer is clearly in verse 6 and 7. "If thou put the brethren," chapter 4. "If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine unto which thou has attained." The only way that you'll ever establish any kind of protection against false doctrine is to nourish people in sound doctrine.

And verse 7, "Refuse profane and old wives' fables and exercise thyself rather unto godliness." Look at chapter 4 verse 13. And here is a pattern for preaching. You want to know how you're supposed to preach, some of you who want to be a preacher sometime, in God's future or in the present, here's the pattern for preaching. "Till I come, give attendance to reading," that's reading the Scripture, "to exhortation," that's firing it out, "and to doctrine," that's explaining it. There is the essence of preaching. Read it, declare it, explain it. That's what it's all about. That's called expository preaching. You read the text, you explain the text, and you preach it, declare it, exhort it. And the word for reading there is public readings, talking about the preaching ministry. We must read the Word. We must explain the Word in detail and in depth, and we must exhort the people. We must declare the truth. Verse 15, here's what the minister is to do. "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them." The concentration of the leadership of the church is to be in the Word of God. Not in anything else, but in the Word of God. Not in programs or any kind of extraneous activities. We are to be absorbed in doctrine. Verse 16, "Take heed unto thyself and unto," what? "The doctrine. Continue in them. There is no other way, for in doing this, thou shalt both save," that is, save from false teachers,

“thyself and them that hear thee.”

The demon-infested teachers that try to get into the church can only be cast aside when the church is involved in teaching repeatedly, constantly, faithfully, sound doctrine, if there is to be protection for the church of Jesus Christ. And if it is to be pure, then there must be, on the part of the elders that lead it, a faithfulness to the Word of God. Not fuddling around in meetings, and conferences, and councils, and running up your gasoline bill. And it's so easy to do this, because some things are good, but they're just not priorities. As a minister of Jesus Christ, I and all others who minister in His name are responsible to God for the purity of the Word. We must teach it in its purity. We must preach it in its purity. We are responsible to protect you from false doctrine. We are answerable to Jesus Christ for how well we do, and how faithful we are to protect the flock and to nurture the flock. That's what Christ expects out of every minister. And it's a frightening thing when you sit down and stop to realize what God expect out of you. That's why James says, “Think twice before you desire to be a minister.” The responsibility is serious. If God gives you the call, though, He provides the opportunity for you to serve Him.

And so, it is that we must give our whole lives continually without stopping until Jesus comes to the preaching and teaching, expository teaching and preaching of the Word of God. And, unfortunately and tragically, pastors talk to me almost weekly that I meet whose hearts are grieved because their churches expect them to do everything under the sun and not what Christ intended them to do, to teach the Word of God. And, thus, their energies are dissipated in all other duties rather than that prime duty.

Now, in 2 Timothy, for example, chapter 1, the message is the same. Verse 13, “Hold fast the form of sound words, hold fast the form of sound words.” You know what that word form implies? It implies that the pattern of the church, when it meets together, its form should be the teaching of sound words, “which hast heard of me in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus.” Verse 14, “That good thing which was committed unto thee, keep, by the Holy Spirit who dwelleth in us.” And then, in chapter 2, he says, “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful man who shall be able to teach others also.” That's what it's all about. We want to teach you sound doctrine, so you can go teach somebody else sound doctrine. That's the beautiful design of the Spirit of God. The ministry that goes to each other in the body of Christ is just part of it. That's what you're to do. As we mentioned in Ephesians, the ministry of the elders and so forth, those who teach, is to perfect the saints so that the saints can do the work of the ministry.

And the key, of course, if you're going to do this, is 2 Timothy 2:15. It says, “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The first word in that verse is the key to any ministry, and I just want to say this morning that it is a great joy in my heart and a thrill to have a church, to be a part of a church, where the cry of the

people is the Word of God, and where you desire more than anything else that I have the time to study. It thrills my heart. And very often I'm sure there are times when people would want to call and would want to speak with me, and maybe in an urgent matter, and, yet, I am buried, studying the Word of God, and for hours at a time. And to know that there's understanding and this is what you know God wants is a joy to my heart. And I thank you for that kind of desire on your part.

And so, it is that the effective ministry is a doctrine ministry, and in order to be effective, it demands that you study to show yourself approved. Especially if you're just learning it as you're going. And it's not the kind of a thing that's cold and unloving. Down in verse 24 of the same chapter he says, "The servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those who oppose him. If God, perhaps, will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth." In other words, you don't do it in belligerence, but in love, in meekness.

Then, in chapter 3 of 2 Timothy in verse 14, he says this, "Continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou has learned them. And that from a child, thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." And how much of the Word of God are we to preach? Verse 16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness." Why preach? Verse 17, "That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

Listen, if we're going to build the saints and mature our own lives, we must do it in the ministry of the Word. That's our passion. And then, he says to Timothy that great climax in chapter 4, "I charge thee therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His Kingdom: preach the Word; be diligent in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and," what? "Doctrine." And so, we see the ministry of the church is simple. Sound doctrine, sound doctrine. Now, that's the basic task of the church. The only way we can ever build the saints is to preach sound doctrine. The only way we can ever please the Lord and obey the Spirit is to preach sound doctrine. Anything less than that is sin. The early evangelists did that.

Then, what was the basic leadership? And, again, we want to look at Timothy and Titus. What is the basic leadership of the church? There are two categories of leaders in the church. This is all the organization they had. Elders and deacons. Now, first of all, there were elders. There was a plurality of elders. No one man was responsible for the church. And I believe this with all my heart, that I believe there must be a collective unity of men that are responsible for the church. That I am just one of those. I happen to have the privilege, by the grace of God, mysterious grace that it is, to be responsible for the teaching, to be the teaching elder, in a sense. But my abilities are pretty much limited to that area alone. And the life of the church belongs to the collective elders who are its leaders under the Spirit of God. I am not any more than any other elder in this church. I am simply

one of those; my particular emphasis is in the teaching ministry. One man is not responsible to do it all. Not at all. The pastor is not the professional problem solver who runs around with an ecclesiastical bag of tools waiting for the next problem to repair or the next squeaky wheel to grease. There's more to it than that.

Now, the elder is also in the New Testament called the bishop. The elder is his title, and the bishop is his duty. Bishop means overseer. He oversees the flock. It's a spiritual ministry always in the New Testament. The elder was always to be concerned with two things, prayer and the ministry of the Word. They were ordained in every city. Paul told Titus in chapter 1 verse 5, "Ordain elders in every city." They came out of that congregation. I believe that the church is best and it is strongest when its own people rise to its own leadership, and we believe that here. That's why we rejoice that every single person on our staff, every one of those who minister to you here, came out of the congregation of this church. We believe that's biblical, that God wants us to ordain elders in this place, trained in this ministry, who can carry this ministry forward. And so, it is a spiritual ministry. These have been qualified by the Spirit of God. They've been prepared and ordained to serve in the local church.

Now, to show you what is required of an elder, 1 Timothy 3. "This is a true saying: If a man desire the office of a bishop," now, that's the same idea; bishop just meaning his work, overseer. He is an elder. It's the same thing. "If he desires the office of an elder, he desires a good work." Now, here's the requirements for an elder, and may I say that I believe we're elders. The staff are elders. There are some of you sitting right there who are elders. You're not on the staff. You have all the qualifications to be an elder, and we're going to pray that very soon God will bring you to that place of real leadership with us as we work together. There's no hierarchy here. None at all. It's a unity of those that God has called to be elders. Now, here are the requirements for elders. And if you feel in your heart, if you feel and believe in your heart that you are an elder, that you meet these requirements, that this is what God would have you to do in leading, I want to know about it, personally, and I want you to tell me about it.

Verse 2, "A elder or bishop must be blameless," that is, he must have an inside good reputation with the believing body. Obviously not perfect. "Must be the husband of one wife," that is, true to his one and only wife. "Temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach." Now, apt to teach does not mean that he has to be a teacher. It merely means that he can communicate his faith. "Not given to wine," and the word given means somebody who lingers long beside his wine, you get the picture? "Not lingering long beside your wine, not violent, not greedy of filthy lucre," that means not after money, "but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity or seriousness. For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" Pretty simple. "Not a novice," that means a recent convert, "lest being lifted up with pride, he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them that are outside." You've got to have good inside report, good outside report, "lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil."

Now, there you have a basic pattern of qualifications for an elder. Men who have these qualifications, if you have that qualification, if you fit that and spend some time in prayer, and, of course, you know you're not perfect. Obviously, we all know that. But if you believe that you can go through that and that that's your heart before God, then God has given you to this local congregation, Grace Church, to rule and lead and teach. Whether you're on the board of elders, quote-unquote, or off, it isn't the issue. The issue is whether or not you're a God-appointed elder. We hope and pray and trust that all God-appointed elders will soon be elders in the sense of our working with them. This doesn't mean that we do this quickly and carelessly, because in 1 Timothy 5:22, it says this. "Lay hands suddenly on no man." Now, some say that has reference to ordaining elders without thinking. Others say it has reference to dealing with those who are living in sin, and the kind of rebuke and so forth. It can go either way. I'm not sure which it means. If it applies to elders, it certainly is an injunction about being careful.

In 1 Timothy 5:17, it says this. "Let the elders that rule well," it indicates that the elders are to rule. In the local church, the elders rule the church because they're right under Christ. They're responsible to Christ. The elders aren't responsible to the congregation. The elders aren't responsible to some board. The elders aren't even responsible to their wives to do all that their wives ask them. The elders are responsible to Christ, and then to lead the church. So, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine." And that shows that you can be an elder and not necessarily be involved in teaching doctrine. There are other capacities in the design of the Spirit. The elders make the decisions. They're not subject to the people. They're not subject to any group. They are subject to Jesus Christ, and to make every decision after prayer and after the Word has been studied carefully, so that they are making decisions with the mind of Christ in the energy of the Spirit that will affect in a positive way the entire congregation.

Friends, it's a high calling. You say, "Does it belong only to old men?" No, it doesn't. Paul said to Timothy, "Let no man despise," what? "Thy youth." It's a good thing that verse is in there. Their elders are to be in persistent prayer. They are to be in a persistent study of the Word of God. They are to search out and know the mind of Christ. And I believe if a decision is to be made among the elders, it would be made unanimously, or somebody doesn't have the mind of Christ. And I believe it should be made by the common consent of those men after prayer and the study of the Word, and fasting may be involved as well.

The elders are to deal with problems in the church. They're to deal with false teachers. Did you know that? In Titus chapter 1 verse 9, they are to face the problem of false teachers. "Holding fast the faithful Word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine to exhort and confute the opposers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, especially they of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not for filthy lucre's sake." The elders are to keep the false teachers out. The elders are also to

discipline Christians who get into error doctrinally. In 2 Timothy 2:18, it talks about “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already and overthrow the faith of some.” That’s a real serious problem. And over in 4:14, “Alexander the coppersmith did much evil,” and Paul says, “the Lord reward him according to his works.” In other words, here’s some heretics in the church. They’re to be dealt with.

You say, “How do you deal with them?” First Timothy 1:19, “Holding faith and a good conscience which some, having put away, concerning faith have made shipwreck, of whom are Hymenaeus and Alexander.” Here’s what to do. “Whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.” That’s discipline, friends. Somebody needs to be disciplined. When there’s a doctrinal error, the person is put out of the fellowship of the body until Satan has brought him to the place, hit the bottom, maybe, and then God begins to restore him.

Then, we also are to rebuke those who sin in deed, not only in doctrine. First Timothy 5, and we’re going to talk a little bit about this tonight. “Them that sin,” what’s the next word? First Timothy 5:20. “Them that sin,” what? “Rebuke.” What are the next two words? “Before all, that others also may fear.” We have the right to rebuke sin publicly. The highest place, then, in the church belongs to the elders, ruling under Christ as the under-shepherd, responsible for teaching doctrine, administrating, disciplining, and protecting the flock, praying for the flock, studying the Word of God. He is answerable to Jesus Christ for that ministry. That’s the beginning of the ministry of the early church. We’ll consider the remainder of it next time.

Our Father, we thank You this morning for Your truth, for Your wisdom. We thank You that we know what the church is to be, to teach sound doctrine. We thank You, Lord, that it’s so clear. Father we thank You for the elders that you’ve given Grace Church, many of the men who serve as elders in a lay capacity. Thank You for elders, Lord, who are here that we don’t know yet. That You’ve sent to us to minister with us, who are not novices, but who are, in all those qualifications, blameless, with an inside-outside reputation that gives glory to Christ. Father, we thank You that some of them are sitting right out here this morning. And, Father, they’ve never really gotten with us, because maybe we haven’t recognized that they are elders that You’ve given us. Father, we pray that they’ll desire the office commensurate with their life, because it’s a good thing, and that they’ll rise to serve with us, to lead this congregation. Father, I would not take the responsibility to lead for one day by myself. I’m sinful. My decisions aren’t always right. I don’t want to do it alone, and I thank You for the marvelous desire of the Holy Spirit that we do it together, with one mind, through prayer and the Word. Father, bring the leadership that’s here to our eyes, that we may see. We thank You for those others who are not elders, but who serve so faithfully, who minister so faithfully in so many capacities, helping, teaching, administrating, serving, visiting, calling on sick, praying, giving, sharing. Father, we just ask You right now to make this church what You want it to be. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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