

## **God's Church, God's Way**

1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday, May 1, 2013; Chuck Newkirk

### **I. Setting the Stage**

Opening Comments:

- Disclaimer – Tonight will be a fire hose. We'll start a conversation tonight that will likely last several 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesdays.
- Differentiate between *Universal Church* and *local church* – this conversation is about the local church.

Opening question: Why should we care about how the local church is structured?

#### **A. The church is the gospel made visible (Eph 3:10).**

1. The truth of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is made visible in the world today through the body of Christ – the Church.
2. We provide a window into the reality of and effects of the gospel to a lost world.
3. To love Jesus is to love the church, submit to the authority of the church, and support the work of the church.

#### **B. The church is the pillar and support of truth (1 Tim 3:15).**

1. It comes with all the authority of Jesus Christ over your life and my life
2. It is not a club or an optional add-on to the Christian life...it is at the very center of what it means to follow Jesus, clinging to the gospel.

Jonathan Leeman writes, “When you open your Bible, stop looking for signs of a club with its voluntary members. Look instead for a Lord and his bound-together people.”<sup>1</sup>

C. The church has an urgent mission: the church exists to glorify God by making disciple-makers of all nations (Matt 28:18-20).

1. Jesus left us with an urgent mission. Heaven and hell are at stake.

We’ve stated it as: *Glorifying God through lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.*

2. Jesus left us with instructions on how to fulfill the mission. We are not just to “wing it” in the content of the gospel or the structure of the church.

## II. Biblical Polity

- A. Our topic for tonight is a portion of something known as ecclesiology, namely church polity.

Biblical church ‘government’ defined: **The Bible teaches the church is to be Christ-centered and submitted, congregationally governed, elder-led, and deacon-served.**

- B. Framework for our discussion - remember the first distinctive of our church constitution:

*Bible-believing: The Bible is the Word of God given to teach us about God and how we should live in His world. It is our final authority for all things. It is the ‘roadmap’ for all that we are, say, and do. God’s voice, speaking through it, must make sense of our past and guide our present and future. Personal and corporate traditions, history, and experience are all important, yet it is God alone through Scripture who is definitive.*

1. The church belongs to Jesus. He is head of the church (Eph 5:23-24, 1 Cor 12:27). He is the Senior Pastor. We submit to him fully and joyfully.
2. Our aim is to honor his directives with utter obedience.

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *Church Membership*, 26. A great image for the local church is an embassy. See Leeman, 277ff.

- C. I hope the church being “Christ-centered and submitted” goes without saying (we are his bride and body), so we will not dwell on this as our first point tonight. Rather, we will treat the other three pieces of a biblical church polity:
1. **Congregationally governed:** God entrusts the final authority of and responsibility for the local church in the membership.
  2. **Elder-led:** God leads, cares for, teaches, and protects the local church through a plurality of qualified and called men who share these responsibilities.
  3. **Deacon-served:** God frees the elders to concentrate on spiritual oversight and provides for the physical care, administrative needs, and day-to-day functioning of the local church through qualified and called men and women.

### III. Church Members: Congregationally Governed

- A. **To be congregationally governed (congregationalism) means:** God entrusts the final authority of and responsibility for the church in the membership.

Sometimes congregationalism is misunderstood to mean the church is led by the masses and simple democracy rules on every decision. That’s not the case biblically, nor is it even possible in a church with more than 15 people.

Nevertheless, the church family is the final court of appeals on certain issues. The Bible demonstrates the final authority of the local church (members) in [four matters of particular importance](#). To be congregationally governed denotes that church leaders are to involve the entire membership in the following issues:

1. Issues of significant dispute between Christians: *preserving unity and promoting holiness*
  - a. Seek repentance and, if necessary, excommunicate the unrepentant in major disputes between Christians (Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 6:1-8)

Matt 18:15-17 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.<sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.<sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

## 2. Issues of doctrine: *guarding the fundamental gospel message*

- a. The majority of the epistles were written to congregations as a whole, not just the leaders
- b. The church itself must not permit the teaching of a false gospel (Gal 1:1-9, 2 Tim 4:3-4...*and leaders are to lead the church through the preaching of God's word so that they will not permit false teaching*)

Gal :2b To the churches of Galatia...vs 6-9 I am astonished that **you** are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—<sup>7</sup> not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. <sup>8</sup> But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. <sup>9</sup> As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

- i. The church itself was held responsible for allowing false teachers to teach heretical doctrine
- ii. There is dance here between the elders and the members in terms of doctrinal teaching – in an environment of love and trust that is to be expected and is beneficial
- iii. This is not the peddling into every minor theological matter, but the responsibility to guard the core of Scripture – the gospel.
- iv. **In Summary of this point:** Leaders are responsible and accountable for the doctrine of the church (Acts 20), but the church body must reject teachers who fundamentally turn from the gospel

## 3. Issues of discipline and restoration: *protecting the purity and reputation of the church and encouraging holiness*

We could spend an entire 1<sup>st</sup> Wed on this single topic: **church restoration ministry**. But we don't have that time tonight. So please allow me to merely introduce it.

- a. Excluding those in significant, unrepentant sin (Matt 18:15-20, 1 Cor 5:1-13)
- b. Welcoming the repentant back into membership (2 Cor 2:5-11)
- c. This is the members of the body protecting the body!

1 Cor 5:1-13 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

<sup>3</sup> For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. <sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

<sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

- d. This is to be a blessing and protection for all of us!

#### 4. Issues of qualification: *affirming leaders (church office holders)*

- a. Deacons (the proto-deacons of Acts 6:1-7)
- b. Elders (think “pastors”):

- i. Ultimately the Holy Spirit appoints elders (Acts 20:28) and gives the desire to qualified men (1 Tim 3:1)
- ii. In the NT it was the apostles or their delegates who selected the elders, i.e. Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5.
- iii. The church voting on the elders helps the church to protect the doctrines of Scripture
- iv. A valid possibility is that elders are to appoint elders, although it seems prudent to have the elders vetted by the church. There are a variety of ways to do this.
- v. The church seems ultimately responsible for dealing with elders in unrepentant sin (1 Tim 5:19-21)

B. A church may determine there is wisdom in asking the church members to prayerfully affirm or deny other decisions: Scripture leaves these opportunities open to the local church in a context of love and trust (i.e. – purchase of property, budget, etc.).

Mark Dever states, “How much further a congregation decides to involve itself corporately in decisions about the leadership, the staff, and the budget, is then a matter of prudence and discretion for decision within individual congregations. Neither nominating committees nor trustees are found on the pages of the New Testament. You look in vain for finance committees or small group leadership teams. Belief in the sufficiency of Scripture, however, doesn’t forbid such structures; it just relativizes their authority. It clearly demonstrates that they are not the essence of the church, and that they must submit themselves to the wisdom of the whole congregation.”<sup>2</sup>

C. **The primacy of a healthy, regenerate membership is probably obvious to you now.** We should see it an issue of vast importance to have a strong, healthy, maturing, fully committed, loving membership.

#### IV. Elders (Pastors, Elders, Overseers): Elder-led

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory*, pg 37-38.

A. The third characteristic of biblical church governance is ‘elder-led.’

1. Elder-led: God leads, cares for, teaches, and protects the church through a plurality of qualified and called men who share these responsibilities.

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders (plural) for them in every church (singular), with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Titus 1:5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

2. Some in the room are likely familiar with the term “elder.” The usage of it you are familiar with may or may not be the model I am proposing.
3. Others have never heard the term, outside of the Mormon usage.

**A. What type of people are elders?**

1. Elders are the kinds of men you want your sons to become and your daughters to marry.
2. They are men in radical submission to Christ, who joyfully make sacrifices for the good of God’s people and the spread of the gospel.
3. They are men of proven spiritual maturity.

1 Tim 3:1-7 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. <sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, <sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. <sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, <sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? <sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. <sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

4. Elders are not the kind of people who push programs and say, “Do this or go somewhere else.” They are not people who want to be above accountability (1 Tim 5:19-20) or are power-hungry. *They are men godly character, sacrificial leadership, and proven fruitfulness.*

## B. What do elders do?

1. Elders are called and qualified men who provide humble, spiritual leadership to the entire congregation under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

2. Key biblical terms:

- a. ἐπίσκοπος (overseer) – Acts 20:28, Phil 1:1, 1 Tim 3:2 Titus 1:7
- b. πρεσβύτερος (elder) – Acts 14:23, 20:17, 1 Tim 5:17, Titus 1:5, James 5:14, 1 Pt 5:1
- c. ποιμήν (shepherd/pastor) – Eph 4:11; verb form in Acts 20:28 and 1 Pt 5:2

Notice elder, overseer are used to refer to the same group of people in Acts 20 and Titus 1.

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood

3. The essence of eldership is **shepherding**, as seen in a hallmark text on eldership in 1 Peter 5.

1 Peter 5:1-4 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 going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> **shepherd the flock of God that is among you**, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.



4. When the Leadership Team did our Bible study through the New Testament, this was one of the clear areas we saw that our church needs to reform our practice to better match the Bible.
  - a. The biblical picture of church leadership is not a Senior Pastor with monarchical control and a leadership team who support the Pastor; rather, every local church is to be led by a *plurality of humble, courageous, mature, qualified, and called men referred to as elders* (pastor, elder, overseer are all synonyms). These men share leadership of the church.
  - b. I am troubled by the amount of authority I currently have and am concerned for the lack of protection and care our structure, and by-laws, and practice provide for you.
  - c. **Not a side issue – who is entrusted with the responsibility to care for your soul could be a matter of eternity!**
  - d. We are continuing to pray for the right time to propose this issue to the church body as a formal structure and practice change. It is beginning to feel sooner rather than later due to increasing demands and needs, but God's timing is always perfect.

#### 5. Elders are men with delegated-authority

- a. Elders function as under-shepherds, following the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ
- b. Picture this group as the leaders on the front lines of the pursuit of Christlikeness, disciple-making/mission, and the obligations of all the members – not as a board at the top of an org chart.
  - i. Elders are not the board of a church, the top status holders, who give the most money, or who win a popularity vote.
  - ii. They are the hard-working, heavy-burdened, servant leaders in the church family.

- c. Elders smell like sheep because while they are shepherds they are also sheep! **They are called to live among the flock not over the flock.**

**6. Imagine having a plurality of spiritually gifted and qualified leaders to shepherd the church!**

- a. Wouldn't that be wonderful!
- b. **Right now, you've only given me that kind of authority.** You are not receiving all you deserve because there is only so much I can do.

7. The specific responsibilities of elders – **what elders actually do:**

Summarizing the biblical teaching on elders is essentially a statement of **devotion to Scripture and to prayer**, as modeled by the apostles (Acts 6:4). The elder role is further delineated as:

- a. **Elders protect the church from false teaching and teachers** (Acts 20:17, 28-32, Titus 3:9-11)
- b. **Elders feed the church by authoritatively and passionately preaching and teaching God's Word** (1 Tim 3:1-7, 5:17)
  - i. Some elders are staff members and some elders are not – see 1 Tim 5
  - ii. I believe a healthy balance is wise
- c. **Elders lead through sacrificial, courageous, humble shepherding** (1 Peter 5:2). Shepherding is to be done willingly.
- d. **Elders care for the spiritual needs of the church** (James 5:14-15, and guide the members since elders will give an account (Heb 13:17)

e. **Elders set an example of Christlikeness** (1 Pt 5:3, 1 Tim 3:1-7, He 13:7)

f. Delegate: Elders are free to **delegate responsibilities** to other members as the gifting matches and needs necessitate.

C. What about “the Pastor?” The Senior Pastor is one voice among a group of equals in this model of shared leadership.

1. Alexander Strauch, probably the foremost American expert on eldership, calls the Senior Pastor a “first among equals”

2. I’d much rather be called “Lead Pastor” or “Pastor for Vision and Preaching” – since Jesus is our Senior Pastor

D. Aside: I would **commend the people who serve currently on the Leadership Team** for embracing many of these kinds of responsibilities and having this kind of heart.

1. Our by-laws do not require the leadership team members to be spiritually focused, pastor leaders, yet I have asked this of them.

2. They have responded well!

3. We currently function much more like an eldership team than the “committee of board supporters to the Senior Pastor” the by-laws call for. We pray for you, seek straying members, call those in sin to repent, hold each other accountable, make decisions as a group, etc.

4. More qualified and called men need to be called upon and recognized as pastors/elders of the COM family.

## V. **Deacons and Deaconesses: Deacon-served**

- A. Deacon-served: [God frees the elders to concentrate on spiritual oversight and provides for the physical care, administrative needs, and day-to-day functioning of the church through qualified and called men and women.](#)
  
- B. Deacons and deaconesses are qualified men and women who fulfill supportive roles of service and care to the church. The Greek word for deacons (διάκονος) literally means “servant” or “minister.” *Deacons serve. Deacons are ministers of mercy.*
  
- C. Functionally, [deacons and deaconesses free the elders to focus on the spiritual leadership of the church by responsibly taking care of the administrative, service, support, and physical needs of the church \(1 Tim 3:1-7\).](#)
  - 1. Deacons and deaconesses act on behalf of the whole body, doing their part to keep the church family healthy, vibrant, unified, and productive; *chiefly this servant ministry exists to provide for the body by off-loading the elders so they can focus on prayer, teaching, and oversight.*
  
  - 2. Deaconate ministry is not trivial grunt work. While God does not call deacons to teach authoritatively or lead authoritatively, the fact that deacons hold one of only two offices in the church demonstrates that God cares immensely about the health of Christ’s body. Administrative and care ministries are essential for a vibrant church.
  
  - 3. [In great wisdom the Bible says remarkably little about what exactly the duties of deacons are to be](#) (see the office listed in Phil 1:1 and the qualifications in 1 Tim 3:8-13). This frees each local church’s elders to determine the particular needs present and the manner in which elders, deacons, and church members will work together to see the needs met. Furthermore, it frees the elders to delegate practical ministries to the deacons as desired.
  
  - 4. The proto- deacons are probably seen in Acts 6.
    - a. Not strictly elders and deacons as we see later in the New Testament, but it does represent a good model to follow.
  
    - b. As the church grew, the apostles of the church in Jerusalem could simply not keep up with the demands of theological oversight and the practical meeting of needs.

- c. Therefore, they delegated some of the important administrative and mercy ministry to proven people of gifting, character, and calling.
  - d. The result was the continued growth of the church.
5. As churches were planted, disciples multiplied, and churches grew, Peter and Paul's consistent practice was to first appoint elders (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5).
- a. This makes sense because the elders are to lead, teach, and refute error (Titus 1:9).
  - b. As the church continued to grow, it seems likely deacons were then added (Phil 1:1), but we are told remarkably little about *what* deacons are to do. The church is free to determine this according to need.
- D. Like elders, deacons must meet biblical qualifications (1 Tim 3:8-13).
1. The primary difference in elders and deacons, in terms of qualification, relate to the absence of teaching as a requirement for deacons.
  2. There is debate over the role of women in the office of deacon (explain this), but we believe the best understanding of the biblical text is that **women and men are free to and should function in the office of deacon** (see Rom 16:1 for Phoebe and qualifications in 1 Tim 3).
    - a. **When qualified men are functioning well as elders, there is no biblical warrant to not have women deacons. In fact, we need them badly!**
    - b. This position is further supported by the fact that the practice of appointing women to the office of deacon occurred early in the history of the Church. For example, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, John Chrysostom referenced 1 Tim 3:11 as "...those who hold the rank of deaconesses."<sup>3</sup>
  3. I believe we have many deaconesses already: we just need to recognize them and train and resource them more effectively.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Oden and Peter Gorday, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 175.

## VI. Conclusion

### A. This is the starting point in a long conversation for our church.

1. I am a shepherd at heart not a business CEO. We are going to take this slowly and approach it spiritually minded.
  - a. We have not dealt with this at length already because the timing has not seemed right and other matters were more urgent.
  - b. God has directed us to focus on spiritual growth, purpose, and small group structural changes.
  - c. But we do need to take steps forward in this area as God directs. The larger the church grows and the more we embrace biblical ministry, the greater the need for this church structure will get.
2. **There is no big roll out plan. No by-laws rewrites are happening behind closed doors. No date has been scheduled to propose a formal governance change. *We just wanted to begin an intentional dialogue with you tonight.***
3. It seems wise next steps might be:
  - a. All of us to seek God's voice through Scripture.
  - b. Encouragement for a revitalization of the deaconate. That is happening this Sunday.
    - i. We have many deacons doing great work already! Thank you.
    - ii. But I could offer better leadership and encourage more structure.

- c. Carefully listen to your questions, insights, and concerns.
- d. Discuss these issues more in-depth at our next 1<sup>st</sup> Wednesday (June 5).
- e. Listen for the Holy Spirit's wisdom and guidance among the church membership.

B. In the end, **the structure is not the point.**

**1. The church at large should focus on the task of disciple making!  
Mobilization of ministry to the glory of God is the aim.**

- 2. John Piper states, "The ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members in the activity and worship towards God, nurture towards one another and witness towards the world. Internal structures for church governance are not the main ministry of the church, but are the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of ministry."<sup>4</sup>

C. I would very much like to hear your questions, insights, and concerns.

## **VII. For Further Reading**

*Bible – 1 Tim, 2 Tim, and Titus*, God  
*Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch  
*What is a Healthy Church*, Mark Dever  
*Church Membership*, Jonathan Leeman  
*Church Disciple*, Jonathan Leeman  
*Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem  
*Bible Doctrine*, Wayne Grudem

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Biblical Eldership*, section 4, principle 2.

*Elders and Leaders*, Gene Getz  
*Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Thabiti Anyabwile  
Elders in Congregational Life, Phil Newton  
*The Church*, Mark Dever  
*Total Church*, Chester and Timmis