

Jason Upchurch - Elders and Elder Rule - Acts 11

This morning I want to spend our time in the Word of God talking about elders in the church. We are at a point in our church where we are about to install our first elder since we began over 5 years ago and that's a big deal for us because we are what is called an elder-rule church. Elders are an important component of how we operate as a church and you need know the place of elders in the local church.

I'm going to be using the word elder but just know that in the Bible the word elder, pastor, shepherd, overseer, even bishop are all used interchangeably. In the American church usually "pastors" are the paid elders, whereas the term "elder" refers to a volunteer position but biblically speaking they are all the same role. Andy is just as much of a pastor as I am, though we may have different gifts and duties within the church.

Tied into this discussion is church government, also called polity. How does a church run and operate and who has authority? Who makes decisions? Interestingly, the Bible has a lot to say about this even though we don't talk about it much,

Most of you know that different churches operate in different ways and it's important to know how a church runs and operates because with any organization or business or whatever the question is: Who runs this place? Who makes the decisions?

And there are different models that people follow. For the most part I think people are trying to be faithful to the Word of God when they choose what type of church government they operate under, but I do think some models are more faithful than others.

Let me talk about 3 of the more common models here in the US. The first is a **congregational** model. The congregational model says that the major decisions of the church are made by the voting members of the church. So church membership in these churches isn't just a formal commitment to other believers for the purpose of purity and service, it's also a signing on to actively participate in the authority and decision making of the church. To some extent all members are exercising equal authority - it's an egalitarian model.

In congregational churches the congregation votes on the major things, while the elders handle the day to day pastoral duties and teach the congregation. So the congregation votes on the budget, who the elders are, changes to the statement of faith, land purchases...big issues. The elders or deacons may provide guidance but ultimately the biggest decisions are made by vote of the membership.

On the surface this might not seem like a bad idea. Aren't we all equal in Christ? Don't we all have the same Spirit and read the same Bible? But it this is unwise in many situations. I remember being a member of my baptist church when I was 16 and voting on the \$600k budget. I had no idea what those numbers meant - but I was a voting member!

I was listening to a sermon a few weeks back by a baptist pastor - baptists are almost always congregational. And he said a couple times in the sermon that he serves at the pleasure of the church - they could dismiss him with a 51% vote at any time. That's kind of crazy to think about. A simple majority could fire the entire pastoral staff and change the doctrinal statement or decide to drain all the church's finances on a whim. Now, some churches use different voting percentages but that's still pretty crazy.

I also don't believe that congregational polity is biblical. First because there are no passages anywhere in Scripture where the congregation is called to exercise this kind of leadership and authority or vote. When people seek to defend this model they cite a few verses but it's pretty crazy the stretches they make to get to a voting situation. Actually, almost every time in the Bible when the congregation gets their way, they end up making some pretty bad decisions. Paul and John and even Jesus in Revelation write letters to congregations who have gone off the rails, many times in contradiction to their godly elders.

Now, I will say, when the elders here make decisions we want feedback from you guys. Whether you're a member or not, we value your input. And depending on the ministry we'll delegate decisions to you. You don't have to run absolutely every single thing by us. But if we're about to make a big decision we want your input.

There is also **presbyterian** polity. In presbyterian polity the members of the church elect elders to an elder board called a session. And then some of the elders on the session are part of what is called the presbytery. The presbytery is a group of like minded churches in the area and the presbytery has a certain amount of authority and influence over those churches. And some people from the presbytery are part of a larger general assembly that has authority over the presbyteries. It's sort of a representative democracy kind of form of church government.

They get this model from the book of Acts where we often see groups of elders and apostles working together and making decisions for all the churches.

While there is some wisdom here that wise pastors from one church would be able to give input to other churches, I don't think Acts is necessarily giving us a church government model so much as just telling us what happened in the time of apostles.

Now, when I have an idea about ministry or our church I will occasionally ask my pastor friends. Those guys have a lot of experience and a lot of wisdom and I would be foolish not to ask them their opinion from time to time. But they don't have any authority.

I believe the Bible teaches a third model called **elder rule**. Our church is an elder rule church. And what this means is that qualified men lead the church; the elders have the authority.

The Bible indicates there should be multiple men leading, they should be qualified by meeting biblical standards, and that they actually are giving the ability to lead the church. I believe this is the clearly stated biblical model.

Now, are there downsides to this model? Yes, if the elders are poorly vetted. If they don't meet the qualifications. If there's a sinful agenda happening.

But what I think we see over and over by pattern and explicit teaching is that godly elders are to rule in the church. And that phrase elder **rule** is a biblical phrase that comes from **1 Tim. 5:17**: the elders who rule well are worthy of double honor, especially those who teach.

So the elders of RBC rule the church. That sounds a little authoritarian, I hope you don't view us as authoritarian. NIV says the "elders who direct the affairs of the church." That's the idea. We want to rule lovingly and gently like a shepherd with sheep but we are given authority by the Spirit.

So, if the church is led by the elders, who the elders are becomes a really big deal, doesn't it?

Okay, where does this come from? Where do we get this concept?

1. It's rooted in the OT. Throughout the OT there are continual mentions of elders leading in key situations. When Moses is going to lead the people out of Egypt he goes to the elders of Israel. Actually if you read the Exodus narrative there is almost always a group of elders that follows Moses and Aaron to help make decisions.

Every town in the OT had elders that ruled the town, like a city council. They would sit in the gate of the walled city and would judge, govern, make laws, so on. When Boaz wanted to marry Ruth he gathered the elders of the city to witness. The elders were also responsible for the spiritual health of their cities.

That elder leadership continues into the NT where we see Jesus often interacting with scribes and Pharisees but also with the elders - the spiritual leaders of synagogues throughout Israel. Early in the book of Acts the apostles are preaching to the rulers of the people and the elders about Jesus.

Here in **Acts 11** we see the first time elders used in a church situation is when Paul and Barnabas take money to the elders at the church in Jerusalem. **Read Acts 11:27-30**

The money that is sent is sent to the elders. Not the apostles, elders. Why? Because they have the authority in the local church at Jerusalem.

Now, if you've been in baptist churches or in some non-denominational churches the deacons are the ones in charge of the finances. They do the budget, they write the checks. And sometimes it's almost like a check on the elders or the congregation. Now, I'm all for accountability but we never see deacons do that in the Bible; it's always the elders.

Look at Acts 14:19-23. What we see here is that not only are elders appointed, but we get the model of a plurality of elders in every church. Multiple elders at every church. **Read**

Now, a couple of observations. First of all, multiple elders in every church. It is dangerous to a church's health to have no elders. And it's also dangerous to have just one elder. Why? Because people - even Christians - will gravitate to a leader. If there are no elders the leader they are gravitating to is by definition not qualified to lead the church. That's a problem.

When I was applying for ministry jobs 6 years ago I ended up talking to a people who were the de facto leaders of churches and it was really weird. They weren't qualified to lead, but they had a position of leadership, and now unqualified people are trying to figure out who should have authority over them.

I don't like movie references in sermons, but you know in the Lord of the Rings how the steward of Gondor didn't want to give up his power even though he knew Aragorn was the rightful king? That's the weirdness that happens.

The other weirdness that happens is when there's only one elder. Or an elder who is surrounded by just yes-men. That's how cults are made.

Now I know some of you are really wondering why this matters. And especially you younger guys. A lot of you are going to grow up and move away and when you do the first thing you're considering as you move is where you'll go to church. And when you find a church you need to not only look at the doctrinal statement, but you also need to understand how it operates. Is it a personality cult? A tyranny? Are deacons functionally running the church? This is super important for the health of the church.

When Andy took a sabbatical a few years ago I was very nervous because I was the only acting elder. That's a dangerous spot to be. So I met with Tim and Ellis and Chuck on a regular basis and Andy joined in when he could. Why? Because I can't be an echo chamber. And any big decisions we made we brought to the whole church. "Well, we trust you, Jason." You guys I don't trust me. God's design is to have godly men working together to shepherd the flock to advance the Kingdom.

One other thing here is that appointing elders is a big deal. **Read 23**

I want you guys to be in earnest prayer about the leadership of our church. I want you guys in the next few weeks to fast at least one day for the leadership of our church. We need wisdom. We need godliness. We've seen up close leaders crash and burn. We've seen a church close - no more gospel witness in a whole community - because of failed leadership. I'm asking you to pray earnestly for us for wisdom and grace and that God would bless our church through adding Chuck as an elder.

What else do we see? **Turn to Acts 15:1-6, 22-23** This is the second Jerusalem council. The first Jerusalem council said that Gentiles could be part of the covenant. This one is about whether or not they need to be circumcised to follow Jesus. The answer of course is no. But notice that elders have authority. **Read**

So the elders are listed among the apostles. They're on equal footing with the direction of the church. This is where our presbyterian brothers get the idea that some elders can exert authority over other churches. I disagree that this is a model for us to keep using, but you can see where they could get that here.

But elders are not JV. They're not second fiddle. As time goes on and the apostles die off the elders take the place of the apostles when it comes to church authority not because the elders are especially anointed to do this or something, but because the elders are charged to guard the apostolic teaching. The apostles died, but now the elders carry on their message.

Turn to Acts 20:17-38 This is Paul saying goodbye to the Ephesian elders. And we see here a few things. Not only does Paul pass the baton to these elders, but his life and leadership is the model they are to follow. This is one of the clearest transitions in church leadership from apostle to elder we see.

And just to be clear: I'm not an apostle. My job as an elder is to uphold what the apostles all taught. So I only have authority inasmuch as I'm upholding their teaching correctly. Does that make sense? Now, notice the heart behind Paul's words here: he's saying to the elders "imitate me." **Read 17-38**

And that's it. Paul officially hands over the church to the elders. Interestingly, Jesus in **Rev. 2** warns the church at Ephesus. Although they did a lot of good things they had lost their first love. They were going through the motions and didn't love the Lord from their heart. They were also adopting the teaching of the Nicolaitans - probably sexual immorality. The things Paul warned about began to come true just a few years later. Elders always have to be on guard.

So we see the pattern of elders gently leading. There should be - as much as possible - multiple elders. And we've seen some of their attitude. But let's look at the heart of an elder and qualifications.

Turn to Ephesians 4. What is the job of an elder? What do pastors actually do for the church? Paul talks here about what God has designed pastors to do. **Read 11-14**

What do pastors do for the church according to verse 12? We equip the church for the work of the ministry. People often say that pastors are in full time ministry. Actually we're not. Pastors and elders don't minister directly. We equip the church for ministry. We're like armory at an army base. We're the ones handing out guns and bombs and jets and gear to fight the war.

Our job is to equip you to minister. You guys are on the front lines of ministry. You guys are training and praying and preaching and studying and discipling. It's not that we don't do that. We do. But our primary function is to equip you to go do that.

I say that because a lot of people can get this idea that the pastor has to do everything. Lead this group and go evangelize and preach 4 sermons a week and so on. And those things are good. But really we're called to equip the saints for the work of the ministry to the end that people are built up in the faith.

Who does this? **Turn to 1 Tim. 2.** Who does God allow to lead his church? This is important. Not just anyone can be an elder. And, just to make it clear, women cannot be elders. For most of you you probably know this but the office of elder/pastor/shepherd is reserved for qualified men. **Read 12-15**

So women are not permitted to teach or exercise authority in the church. That's exactly what elders are called to do in the church as we'll see in a minute. I don't know if you saw the news, but Saddleback church - Rick Warren, Purpose Driven life, mega church - was just booted out of the southern baptist convention because they have female pastors. The SBC actually took a stand - 5 years too late - but they took a stand.

This is clear in Scripture. The role is reserved for men. Why? It's a creational order: God made man first - to lead. Eve was deceived, not Adam. Now I'm not going to unpack all of that but it seems as though there were implications not only from creation but also from the fall that prevents women from leading.

And there's only about 20 different scholarly opinions about what it means that women are saved by childbearing. Obviously salvation is by grace alone. But it seems like what Paul might be getting at is that the wife's role is restored by her raising up godly children, if God so gives her children.

So women don't teach to mixed groups - they obviously teach other women. And they don't exercise authority. Both of those are things elders do. **Read 3:1**

So then Paul transitions to elders. Someone needs to aspire to this role. We can't coerce men into this role. They have to want it. They have to aspire to it. Peter will say the same thing. Reluctant leaders are bad leaders. So they have to want it and they have to be qualified. **Read 2-7** Riff

Interestingly, most of this list are things we're all called to. Above reproach, not drunk, not violent or quarrelsome. Except elders have to have met these requirements. Not perfectly; sometimes people look at this and think there's no way anyone can ever be an elder. No one is looking for perfection. But I think if someone fits the bill in large part, that's what Paul has in mind.

Two things about elders: they have to be able to teach. Not necessarily preach, but teach. Explain passages of the Bible, explain theology. Part of shepherding is feeding the flock so they need to be able to do that. We've seen Chuck feed the flock with Lord's Supper homilies, teaching Sunday school. He's taught the men's Bible study - he can handle the Word of God and teach. Is he up for preaching? Probably not but he could if needed. If Andy and I died, one way or another he'd make sure you were fed the pure Word of God.

Elders also can't be a recent convert. The term "elder" implies some life experience. Not necessarily an age requirement, but a maturity in the faith requirement. I became a pastor at 28. Charles Spurgeon was preaching in his teens and became a pastor at 19. Some old men have no business being elders. Age isn't the primary issue, maturity is the issue.

Look at 1 Tim 5. Read 17-18

Just a couple of comments here. Elders who preach and teach are worthy of double honor. What does that mean? It means they should be paid. Honor is respect, double honor is payment. **Read 19-21**

Elders are not above church discipline. What happens if I fall into unrepentant sin? It needs to be established by 2 or 3 witnesses. If so, then it's told to the church. No elder is above rebuke. Elders are not above accountability. But elders are also entitled to the whole process of judgment. **Read 22-25**

When you lay hands on someone, the church is officially and visually saying "we approve of this person for this role." And we aren't hasty in laying on of hands. We don't rush this. Our candidacy process is slow. You have to be a member for 2 years before becoming a candidate. Then the candidacy is 1 year while you come regularly to elders meetings and we ask questions and watch your life. Why? Because this is a big deal. Not all sins are conspicuous - obvious. It takes time to see a man's life. We don't want to be hasty.

Turn to Titus 1. Here we see another list of qualifications. Most of them are the same as we saw before. There's a couple additions. **Read 5-9**

So two key notes. One: children are believers. Does that mean every child of an elder needs to be a believer? My answer to that is "no" for 2 reasons. First, that would mean every time I have a child I am disqualified from the position because babies aren't saved. Second, the word can mean faithful - the idea is "are the kids are generally submissive to the parents."

Second, we also see in **Vs. 9** that not only does the man have to be able to teach the trustworthy word, he has to also have the fortitude to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine.

This means your elders need to have spine. They need to be able to go toe toe with false teachers and people who stir up division. And that means they need to be able to call each other out if a fellow elder is going astray. You have to have elders who have a backbone to shoot the wolves who have been masquerading in shepherds clothing.

This is essential. **Turn to 1 Pet. 5:1-5**

This is Peter's admonition to elders. Interestingly, the apostle Peter identifies himself first and foremost as a shepherd here. **Read 1-5**

Peter is in the trenches with the elders he's talking to. He knows what it's like to shepherd the flock and so he gives some commands.

First, exercise oversight - leadership/authority - but willingly, not under compulsion. If some of you have a desire to be elders here, that's a really good thing. Come tell me and let's talk. It's not humility to have that desire and hide it. It's pride. On the flip side, if I think you might be an elder and you really don't want it, great. I'm not going to twist your arm.

It needs to be a desire. And not to lord it over people, but to be a godly example to the flock. And it's hard work. Shepherding can stink sometimes. It can be hard. But Peter promises a great reward. **Read 4**

There is a reward for faithful shepherding. There is a crown for doing the job well. And here's what Peter charges to the rest. **Read 5**

Why do people subject themselves to elders? Because we're given this charge. It's a weighty task to lead. To speak into peoples' lives with authority knowing **Jas. 3:1** says that we'll be judged with greater severity. Knowing **Heb 13** that we'll give an account for every soul in our charge.

So we're humble toward one another: pastors as we lead, the flock as you follow. And we rejoice that if we do this well, God will give us grace and glory.

Pray