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TRAINING NEW ELDERS AT JACKSON WAY BAPTIST
CHURCH IN HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

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TRAINING NEW ELDERS AT JACKSON WAY BAPTIST
CHURCH IN HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

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For the glory of God.

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PREFACE

This project is first and foremost for the people at Jackson Way Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. My love and appreciation for them continues to push me to be the best pastor for them, and to lead them in the way that is biblical, faithful, and eternal. It is the elders' desire that every member at Jackson Way Baptist Church is loved and cared for to the glory of Christ Jesus.

I would also like to thank my precious wife, Devin, and our children, for encouraging me in this process, I love you all so much! Also, I would like to thank my supervisor, Shawn Wright, for helping the project be the very best for the local church. Lastly, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for his continued mercy and patience as he has led me up to this point. May he be glorified in and out of the pulpit! *Soli Deo Gloria.*

John Pond

Huntsville, Alabama

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If the church is to make an impact, it must be serious in its commitment to the Word of God, specifically allowing the church to be led by the voice of God through the Pastoral Epistles. If leadership is crucial, then the church must believe and celebrate the model for leadership that is demonstrated in the Pastoral Epistles.

The vision of this project is to help Jackson Way Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, transition from a church that is led by a single pastor to a church led by a plurality of elders. In doing so, it is vitally important that the church discovers biblically qualified men in the congregation, and trains them to be ready to lead and care for the people of Jackson Way Baptist Church.

Context

Jackson Way Baptist in Huntsville, Alabama, is not unlike a lot of churches in the Bible Belt of the United States. However, to know the strengths and weaknesses of this church, the history reveals the concerns of the church and explains the issues that keep it from being biblically healthy. Jackson Way Baptist Church (JWBC) is over one-hundred years old and has an incredible history. Most Christians in Huntsville would testify that JWBC is one of the most recognized churches in the city as being a healthy and growing group of people. Simply stated, JWBC is well known and well respected by Christians and non-Christians. JWBC was also said to be one of the first churches to be on live television in the 1960s. The very engineers working on the rockets to put a man on the moon for NASA also helped this church in Huntsville put Sunday services on live television.

After many years of growth in membership, JWBC continued to reach people

who did not attend church. The church's desire to grow by reaching lost people came from a sincere heart to see people come to know Christ. However, by the 1990s and early 2000s, the church began decreasing in number. For a church driven by numerical success, this decrease was tremendously difficult to accept. As a response to this downturn in attendance, JWBC began to look at other churches in Huntsville and the state of Alabama and noticed something interesting. Those churches were building bigger buildings that also included recreational spaces, such as basketball courts and student ministry spaces. JWBC found itself in a building war of keeping up with other churches to maintain its draw in the city. Again, this all came from a sincere heart for reaching people, but embedded in this desire was also a fear of losing numbers. The church began to find itself in a pattern of submitting to whatever new vision seemed to promise instant results of more numbers.

With the desire to keep up the grand status of JWBC, members put their hope in leadership. The season came for the church to put all its hope into the deacons as they became the main leaders of the church. The by-laws were changed and the church became deacon-led. I have been told that a chairman for many years ran the entire church and everyone knew it, even the pastor. This deacon provided the vision and direction of the church, and nothing was done without his approval. The pastor was to preach and lead the staff, but this deacon had major oversight and influence over the pastor and did so with much force. Unfortunately, it was not until this deacon passed away that the members and even the other deacons realized how unhealthy a deacon-led system of leadership was to the church. Therefore, the church decided to rebound and go to the other option of being pastor-led. In an effort to lead the church back to its glory days, JWBC gave all the power to the pastor. There were still committees and deacons, but the church on paper and in practice became a pastor-led church in response to a deacon-led church that did not work out.

However, there were several issues within the pastor-led model. One major

weakness that still affects the church to this day is the idea that whatever the pastor thinks must be the plan of the almighty God. This is because one of the major strengths of JWBC is that it is filled with sweet and kind-hearted people who want to grow but also do not want to cause any hardship, especially for the pastor. Therefore, if the pastor gets up to the pulpit on a Sunday morning and tells the church that God told him to sell the property and move fifteen minutes south of the city, most of the church would agree. The other problem of the pastor-led model was that the vision constantly changed. Not only did the church see a different lead pastor every five years, but whatever pastor they had at the time changed the vision to increase attendance. If a new book was published and had an influence on other churches, then that pastor would push attention to that new direction. Also, if the pastor attended a conference that especially influenced him, he would come back and create a lot of energy toward a new idea and direction. Through the years, the people at JWBC became exhausted. The members wanted to grow numerically and get back to the influential church it once was. However, by changing models of leadership and changing vision and goals, a lot of people in the church, in addition to some staff, decided to leave. Not only was the “whatever works” method not working, but the church had become tired and discouraged.

Despite these issues, JWBC to this day has many strengths. First, JWBC continues to be a people that loves the Lord, loves each other, and desires to reach those far from God. The church knows that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for this world, and that sin separates people from God and eternal life. JWBC has always been committed to not only reaching the city of Huntsville for Jesus Christ, but also joining the Southern Baptist Convention by giving their finances to help missions around the world through Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon. Every year JWBC hosts a mission’s celebration Sunday where the church focuses on the new year and giving toward mission’s efforts locally and around the world.

Second, the people of JWBC know and have communicated that one thing they

have been missing for the last thirty years is the regular preaching of God's Word. Previous staff members have voiced their desire to recover the preciousness of the preached Word of God, and if that happens the church will grow both deep and wide. The church has been starved of biblical truth for too long. Anyone who comes in and simply expounds the Scriptures will not only be successful in the eyes of the Lord but also welcomed by many remaining members. Not only does the preached Word of God help nourish starving Christians, but it also instructs the church.

As I was being interviewed for the position of senior pastor, I made sure the search committee and leadership knew that I had no creative vision for bringing in more people, but that I had been mentored and disciplined into trusting the timeless attraction of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the power the Holy Spirit by the focus of the Scriptures. It was apparent after only a few months that the people at JWBC in their exhausted state were overjoyed to hear the bell for orthodox Christianity ring once again. The simple truth that they heard was that if Christ is the chief shepherd of the church and the true leader, then his Word, not man's opinion, must be what guides the church.

Lastly, JWBC members know that a great gift has been given to them: a growing city. The leaders of Alabama had once said that Huntsville would outgrow Birmingham in the future. The projection that Huntsville would be the largest city in Alabama happened sooner than anyone had thought, as Huntsville is now the largest city in the state as of 2020.¹ This growth in Huntsville is due in large part to the growth of the Defense Department and Space Force. The FBI continues to expand down from Washington, DC, to Huntsville, and NASA continues to grow in the city as well. Many contractor companies for missile defense that work alongside the military are also centered in Huntsville, as well as employees from the Department of National Intelligence. Huntsville is growing every day, and every church in Huntsville is experiencing growth, which provides an

¹ Ramsey Archibald, "Huntsville Rockets Past Birmingham in 2020 Census, now Alabama's Largest City," AL.com, August 13, 2021, <https://www.al.com/news/2021/08/huntsville-rockets-past-birmingham-in-2020-census-now-alabamas-largest-city.html>.

incredible opportunity to see people come to know Christ as their Lord and Savior. Not only do the people at JWBC know this, but they also want to take full advantage.

Rationale

It is important for JWBC to not only install a plurality of elders but also install a training program because of the church's past and for its future. It is sad that JWBC lost so many people in the past thirty years due to not having the kind of shepherds that would provide biblical depth for its people. Too many churches like JWBC hit the panic button when attendance began to drop, and they eventually gave in to the culture of gimmicks and tricks to reach people. However, if the church has the right shepherds, it will not give in to the "whatever works" ideology. The Lord did not leave the church without instructions for its people to be faithful and fruitful. The Pastoral Epistles communicate principles to help the church know how to lead God's people in God's way.

JWBC can do nothing about the past, but in hopes of not seeing the church close its doors, something must be done about the present and future. By training qualified elders to help lead the church, the people of God at JWBC will be led, fed, properly prayed for, and protected from false doctrine. The leaders of JWBC must understand that people are more than just faces in the pews or financial givers to the annual budget. God's people are souls who need to be loved and cared for as they journey through this broken world. As church members wrestle through their own sins, couples try to honor God with their marriages, parents try to find the best way to disciple their children, JWBC must be trained in way that they can shepherd God's people to live lives that honor Him.

JWBC has a responsibility to look at the landscape and spiritual temperature of the nation and assess the next steps to prepare for a season of difficult days. Unfortunately, the American church finds itself in a season where many self-proclaimed Christians would rather stay at home, watch church online, and not be involved with the congregation in worship, discipleship, and missions. Unfortunately, COVID was not helpful to JWBC as many people learned to form bad habits by watching church online

from the home, the lake, or the beach. At JWBC, it took a year to help people come back to church and show them the importance of the church gathering together, which was not easy. Therefore, it will take a strong and biblical understanding of Christian leadership to navigate the strange days we are in and that are upcoming. Trained and qualified elders who are led by the Holy Spirit are best suited to navigate these issues, as opposed to putting all the responsibilities on the shoulders of a single man, such as the pastor. The mistake of putting all the responsibilities on one pastor could lead the pastor to be discouraged and overwhelmed as he attempts to lead, shepherd and care for the entire congregation by himself.

JWBC can also train its leaders to continue to build up the pulpit so that expository preaching can continue to guide the church with God's word. As people at JWBC have been helped and encouraged by coming back to the Bible on Sunday mornings, the leaders will need to be trained in such a way that secures the steady proclaiming of the Bible for current and future generations. As temptations come to please fallen man and to tickle ears by entertaining people, the elders of the church can not only build up the vision of expository preaching but also guard against any future changes.

If JWBC trains a plurality of pastors in the correct way, then not only does the present time of the church improve, but the future is more likely to be stable as the church continues down a path of consistency, rather than changing a philosophy of ministry every time there is a change with the single pastor.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train new elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama.

Goals

The following goals were pursued to ensure that this project was fruitful for the

incoming elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church.

1. The first goal was to determine and list the core objectives for training incoming and future elders.
2. The second goal was to create a six-month training program that includes the core objectives to give the incoming elders the foundations they need to lead, care for, and shepherd members.
3. The third goal was to implement the six-month training program for incoming elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church.

A specific research methodology was created to measure the successful completion of the three goals.²

Research Methodology

Three goals were established to accomplish the purposes of this project. To measure the effectiveness of these goals, several research instruments were utilized.

The first goal was to determine the core objectives for training the incoming elders, as well as the state of knowledge and confidence the elders were in before the actual training. The incoming elders' training needed to communicate a robust design to ensure that the church was committed to train elders and ensure that they were well equipped to shepherd the Lord's people. I measured this goal by sending a survey to the incoming elders which asked them to communicate how efficient they feel in the fields of biblical theology, leadership, teaching, and shepherding.³ Success for this goal was realized when the surveys were received and then analyzed for the current competency of each incoming elder. Further clarification was given as I spoke with the elders one on one about their surveys where I learned that most of them had a solid understanding of some of the training but they lacked confidence in applying the material into certain ministry situations at JWBC.

² All the research instruments used in this project were performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

³ See appendix 1.

The second goal was to create a six-month training program that includes the core objectives to give the incoming elders the foundations they need to lead, care for, and shepherd the members. This goal was evaluated by a group of five pastors around the country who see the training program as sufficient for equipping elders at JWBC.⁴ Each group member had been a pastor for more than ten years, held at least a Master of Divinity degree, and had elders and training for their elders in place for more than five years. In addition to the pastors evaluating the training program, I was also able to interview these men and listen to their perspectives of how they train their own elders. The time spent with these pastors helped forge a training program that I believed could work at JWBC. The goal was seen as successful when four out of the five pastors had marked all areas as sufficient or better.

The third goal was to implement the six-month training program for the incoming elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church. The heart of the training program was a discussion guide that helped the elders apply the reading material to actual ministerial situations at JWBC. I measured this goal by giving the elders a post-training survey that asked them to communicate how prepared they think they are for leading and caring for the church. In addition, I asked them to assess whether they think this program would be good for future incoming elders at JWBC. This goal was seen as successful when in a one-on-one meeting with the pastor, the elders gave positive feedback on the training program.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following words and phrases are used in this project and are defined below.

A plurality of elders. The words “elder” or “overseer” are used interchangeably throughout the New Testament. Nonetheless, the meaning of the word elder communicates

⁴ See appendix 2.

the office of a qualified man who is exercising oversight through leading, teaching, and caring. Wayne Grudem defines elders as “the main governing group in a church in the New Testament.”⁷ Thus, a plurality of elders is a group of men overseeing the church under the authority of Jesus Christ and his Word.

Elder candidates. According to the by-laws of JWBC, elder candidates are biblically qualified men who have been voted on by the congregation to potentially be elders but are in the process of completing the six months of required training and are waiting to be installed as elders.

One limitation of this project was the assumption that the men going through the training were honest when asked about their knowledge of God, the Scriptures, and the church at the beginning of the training, as well as the conclusion. Another limitation was that JWBC does not currently have a group of elders, so there was no current elder board to mentor or advise incoming elders.

This project also had a few delimitations. First, the training course for incoming elders was restricted to six months. The six months of training was to help the elder candidate see the whole scope of the elder position and for the training group to be able to slowly and methodically flesh out all the reading and apply it to real situations that could come up in the church. Second, the training course for incoming elders was restricted to only men who met the biblical qualifications and had been voted on by the congregation to be an elder candidate.

Conclusion

As the church continues to understand how to be effective while living in such difficult times, the church must never be distracted from the main mission of the Great Commission. Therefore, the church needs more pastors, not less. Training elders to lead the local church is not just a recommended model from a group of people with certain

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 928.

theological convictions, it is God's design given as a gift through the Holy Scriptures. As churches continue to await the Lord's return, they have the responsibility to ensure that their leaders are trained for the gospel ministry so that they can best shepherd God's people God's way.

As JWBC desires to lead and train future elders, the necessary steps to accomplish this mission need to be implemented. In chapter 2, I will discuss the biblical and theological basis behind the idea of elders in the local church. Chapter 3 will examine the practical benefits of having elders in the local church. Chapter 4 will explain the details and description of the project itself. Lastly, chapter 5 will offer an evaluation of the project.

CHAPTER 2

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR HAVING ELDERS

In churches today, and especially in the Bible Belt, most people would say they believe that the Bible has authority over their lives. It is written on the websites of most churches, Christian schools, and many parachurch ministries. Obviously, as Christians who believe the Bible as God’s holy and inspired Word, this cannot be overlooked and is worth celebrating. To say that God’s Word has authority over God’s people is to confess that God’s people are not God, and that his Word gives guidance on how to live in a way that pleases him as creator. God’s people would not say that the Bible is their only authority in the world but is their first and top priority.

However, what does the sufficiency of God’s Word mean, and what does it look like for a local church? When a Christian thinks about the sufficiency of God’s Word, the question must be asked, will the Bible help with this issue? It is one thing for believers in Christ to say they believe the Bible has authority in their lives, it is quite another to say the Bible matters in every nook and cranny of their lives.

Therefore, when it comes to the church and how its leaders understand the function of the church, they must turn to God’s Word. Second Timothy 3:16–17 reads, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”¹ The Christian, and especially church leaders, must ask what this passage means for the church’s government. To push this question further, leaders are really asking who is in charge of the church. A healthy church will come to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations come from the English Standard Version.

the truth that Christ is the head of the church, which will lead that church to follow the teachings of the Bible above their own thoughts or feelings. A healthy biblical church will see the Bible as its guide in every theological and practical circumstance.

Lastly, not only will a church that is following the teaching of the Bible be healthy, but it will also be attractive to healthy Christians. When a healthy church follows the Bible, even to the point of how it structures its church government, it shows believers they are serious about not only believing the Bible but also applying the Bible to every part of the church.

The thesis of this chapter will be to argue that there is biblical evidence that shows the existence and benefit of a plurality of elders in the local church. To defend the argument for elders in the local church, this chapter will look at four key texts in the New Testament: Titus 1:5, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Acts 20:17-38 and 1 Peter 5:1-5.

Wisdom from the Pastoral Epistles

Thankfully, Christ has not left his church without instructions. The Lord has given the church a great deal of details of how his church will flourish. The Pastoral Epistles show the way the church should be led by its leaders. When churches take the Scriptures seriously, they will examine key passages that show that elders are critical to the healthy growth and care of the church. One example is when Paul is writing to Titus: “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). Paul is communicating that the church in Crete should have elders to keep things in order, which leads the reader to assume that the church in Crete was out of order when no elders are in place. One can assume that Paul had been to Crete before preached the Gospel, helped establish the church and then desried for Titus to install elders to keep things in order. This might lead some to think that Paul was not suggesting elders be in place in every church as a mandate. While there is not a passage suggesting that every church in the New Testament must have elders or else, Paul does not use any language to suggest elders are only for certain church with

certain problems.

It is interesting to note that the writing of Paul's letter was meant for others to see in the church and not just Titus, especially when it came to putting elders in the church. William Mounce expounds on this idea when he states,

While written in the form of a personal letter addressed to an individual, the content of this letter is for public dissemination. In Ephesus the church was older and the problems more serious, urgent, and ingrained. In Crete the problems were more those of a new church – no administrative structure, pressure from outside Jewish groups, evidence of sinful behavior. Titus does not have to remove bad elders; he must appoint good ones who can take care of potential and actual problems.²

Thus, for Titus and the other Christians in Crete, Paul advises them to put elders into place and that will only help the church not only to be organized but also to be holy before the Lord.

It should be noted what God's expectations are when it comes to the elder's character. In 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Paul is giving Timothy qualifications for these individuals, called overseers. William Mounce helps set the stage of the context when he states, "The major problem in the Ephesian church was its leadership. From within the ranks of the church, a group of false teachers had sprung up who were perverting the gospel and teaching a message that ultimately stemmed from Satan."³ There are plenty of churches today that put a lot of emphasis on leadership as the critical component of success. It seems that the New Testament, while not making too much of leadership, does not shy away from presenting a model of leadership that should be used in the local church.

A study of the word "overseer" in Greek shows that this word is used interchangeably with "pastor" and "elder." More importantly, when we see the word here in 1 Timothy 3 and in other places it is used in plural form. Paul then gives qualifications

² Mounce, D. William, *Word Biblical Commentary, Pastoral Epistles*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000, 392.

³ Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Pastoral Epistles*, 184.

for deacons, so right away the reader sees that overseers are not deacons and that this is a group of people not just one pastor with all the power.

As Paul lays out the qualifications for an elder, one can see very quickly that it is noble to desire to be an elder. Churches who begin the transition to an elder-led model of church leadership can take notice of men who show a desire to be an elder. John MacArthur reminds the reader of the meaning of Timothy's instructions:

The word Aspires is from *orego*, a rare word, appearing only here, 1 Timothy 6:10, and Hebrews 11:16 in the New Testament. It means "to reach out after," or "to stretch oneself to grasp something." Desires is from *epithumeo*, which means a passionate compulsion in this context for good rather than for evil. In contrast to *orego*, this verb refers to the inward feeling of desire. Taken together, two terms describe the man who outwardly pursues the ministry because of a driving compulsion on the inside.⁴

The man who aspires to the office of an overseer does not wake up one day and decide to take on a new ambition, as if it were a New Year's resolution. This individual does not sit back on a Sunday morning in the pew thinking he could do better than everyone else. This man has spent a lot of time alone with the Lord and is convinced in his heart and mind that he is called to serve the church and love the people of God by being an under shepherd to the glory of Jesus Christ. This is a desire that the man cannot shake off and cannot stop thinking about. This desire comes from God and not from the man.

The second qualification seen in 1 Timothy 3 is that an overseer must be above reproach (v. 2). This does not mean this individual is perfect, but it does mean he lives a holy life. He is not entangled or addicted to a certain sin and has a clear conscience before himself, his family, his church, and his Lord. As he stands in front of the mirror, and more importantly in front of the Word of God, this man is fully dependent upon the grace of Christ working in his life. He has also done the hard work of discipline and repentance to walk in a manner of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thomas Cranmer says,

Just as the condition of the state is ruined when it is governed by people who are stupid demanding, and burning with ambition, so in these times the Church of God is struggling, since it is committed to the care of those who are totally incompetent

⁴ John MacArthur, *1 Timothy, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 95.

to assume so important an task, in which respect it has fallen very far short indeed of those rules of the blessed Paul, which he prescribed Timothy and Titus.⁵

The other qualification in this Pastoral Epistle is that the overseer must be the husband of one wife. Over the years there have been many opinions on this verse. Discussions about an elder or pastor of one wife have caused churches a lot of stress. Does this qualification of being the husband of one wife mean if the man was ever divorced that he can never be qualified to be an elder? Or is Paul telling Timothy that a single man can never be an overseer, which would mean Paul himself would be disqualified because he was single? When the Christian reads the qualifications from Paul, the reality is all would be disqualified if these qualifications were speaking of past sins, because all people have a past, and most have a past represented in the description of what Paul is saying disqualifies a man from being an overseer. Therefore, Paul is obviously referring to the present condition of a man. This means that some discernment is required because the man in question might be a man of one woman and has been for up to two years perhaps. However, is that a long enough track record to consider this a man of one woman? Discernment is needed to keep the church's conscience pure. The church should be able to look at a candidate for an elder and see that he is presently fully dedicated and faithful to a lifelong commitment to one woman, his wife. However, if he is single, he must not be involved in inappropriate relationships with any woman that would go against biblical principles of being sexually pure. Benjamin Merkle also provides a helpful cultural context that needs to be considered when he says, "In many cultures, it is not only permissible but also a sign of blessing to have more than one wife. According to the Bible, however, Christians are to be monogamous."⁶ Merkle's insight is helpful because it sheds light on the probability that Paul is more than likely saying that a man must not have more than one wife at the current state of his ministry.

⁵ Thomas Cranmer, quoted in Lee Gatiss, *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2019), 158.

⁶ Merkle L. Benjamin, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 125.

Next, the apostle Paul tells Timothy that an overseer must be sober-minded (v. 2). When the church considers a mind that is sober, the church should think about a mind that is not drunk on things that do not matter but is wise and discerning about the things of God and his people. A sober-minded man of God more than likely would have studied the book of Proverbs and knows what God delights in and what God hates. One would also think of the character Christian, in the book *Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.⁷ The sober-minded pilgrim is fully aware of the traps and dangers along the road and is careful to navigate such danger with wisdom and dependence upon God. Or, as MacArthur writes, "This quality is the result of being temperate. The prudent man is well disciplined and knows how to correctly order his priorities. He is a person who is serious about spiritual things. This does not mean he is cold and humorless, but that he views the world through God's eyes."⁸

Next, the apostle Paul urges that an overseer must be self-controlled (v. 2). This suggests a man who is not controlled by abrupt emotions, temptations, or outside pressures from the world and its sinfulness. The picture Paul is painting for the church indicates this man is controlled by the Holy Spirit and consistently experiences the steadiness of his emotions. Thomas D. Lea explains, "To be 'self-controlled' pictures the leader as a sensible person. The adjective describes a person who is trustworthy and balanced in judgment, not flighty or unstable. This would be an essential trait in the character of an overseer."⁹ This is important to the church and a crucial trait of overseers because they are not just called to preach but also to lead the church. They will lead God's people spiritually and financially when it comes to the building and grounds of the church. Therefore, in dealing with finances, property, policies and procedures, and the souls of

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Process* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1684).

⁸ MacArthur, *1 Timothy*, 106.

⁹ Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 110.

God's children, the church does not need men who fumble around with their emotions. The church needs leaders who are steady under trial and are firm in their convictions.

The apostle Paul then brings up a crucial attribute of qualification: an overseer must be respectable (v. 2). Paul is advocating for overseers who are filled with the Holy Spirit and are generally respected by others. The elders in the church need to be leaders whom Christians want to follow because they know something about their personal life, and it is worth imitating in their own life. People in the church look at an overseer as someone they trust and admire, and they recognize that the church is better off with them than without them. When the time comes for an overseer to lead or make difficult decisions, the overseer needs to be respected by the people inside and outside the church so that the leader does not lead people to a place where no one else is willing to follow. Therefore, the attribute of being respected is a major component of being qualified as a leader in God's household.

Next, Paul brings up the qualification of overseers and the manner of hospitality (v. 2). Lea states,

In relation to other believers Christians needed to be "hospitable." Traveling Christian groups (3 John 5–8) would be dependent upon the kindness of local Christians as they passed through communities while spreading the gospel. The task of caring for Christians and other "strangers" was highly respected in both Christian and Greek culture (Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 5:10; 1 Pet 4:9).¹⁰

Paul seems to be describing a man who is involved in the community of believers within the church and outside the church. This man sees his home and his belongings as a gift from God to be shared and open to all who are in the family of Christ Jesus. This overseer does not hide in seclusion away from his brother and sister in Christ but sees biblical fellowship as an opportunity to invite people into his home to continue in worship of Christ. R. Kent Hughes offers a story that is helpful here:

As a young man, the missionary statesman-to-be E. Stanley Jones experienced the ultimate in hospitality when he was preaching his first evangelistic service among the poor mountaineers of Kentucky. The meetings were held in the schoolhouse.

¹⁰ Lea and Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 114.

Says Dr. Jones: At the schoolhouse, I was invited to stay with a man and his wife, and when I arrived I saw there was one bed. The husband said, “You take the far side.” Then he got in, and then his wife. In the morning we reversed the process. I turned my face to the wall as they dressed, and they stepped out while I dressed. That was real hospitality! I have slept in palaces, but the hospitality of that one-bed-home is the most memorable and the most appreciated.¹¹

At the heart of a hospitable elder is a desire to bring others close to him and his house, regardless of if it feels comfortable. While the elder may see his home and privacy as places of retreat and rest, the overseer loves to allow people in close, even if it costs him. The man of God is ready to be selfless with the gifts he knows God has bestowed upon him.

One of the most important qualifications that sets the overseer apart from a deacon is teaching. The key ingredient to the task of teaching is the word “able.” Paul was not suggesting that anyone who teaches is qualified to be an elder in the church, but rather an elder is recognized by the church for his ability to teach. His teaching has been observed, commended, and encouraged by the body of Christ during multiple seasons in the life of the church, whether they are good times or bad times. This is a crucial category because Paul commands young Timothy to preach the Word in season and out of season (2 Tim 4). The elder must also have the words of Christ on his mind as Jesus commands Peter in John 21 to demonstrate his love for Christ by feeding God’s people with God’s Word. Matthew Henry observes that an elder “is both able and willing to communicate to others the knowledge which God has given him, one who is fit to teach and ready to take all opportunities of giving instruction, who is himself well instructed in the things of the kingdom of heaven and is communicative of what he knows to others.”¹²

The church needs more and better preaching of God’s Word, not less. Looking back on history, the church was in its best days when God’s Word was being proclaimed in mighty ways from the pulpit to ordinary people. Therefore, the church must heed the

¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *1 Timothy*, Preach the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 142.

¹² Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan: NJ. Fleming H. Revell, 1721), 815.

Holy Spirit and the written Word of God to make sure overseers who can teach God's people God's Word are in the pulpit. People need the Lord, and people need the Lord's Word.

Does this qualification for elders given by Paul mean that every elder is called to preach God's Word on Sunday mornings? Paul certainly uses the word preach when he addresses Timothy in his second letter to preach the Word, but is his same intention in his first letter when he says elders must be able to teach? If Paul meant that all elders should be preaching on Sunday mornings, then he would have used that word. It seems Paul thinks that elders should be equipped to teach the church the doctrine of the Holy Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jeramie Rinne writes,

Be encouraged by the fact that teaching takes place in a wide variety of venues. It isn't confined to the Sunday morning sermon. Elders can feed the flock in large gatherings or intimate settings. You can open the Bible for a Sunday school class, a home group, vacation Bible school for kids, or a one-to-one mentoring relationship. Look for teaching needs anywhere in the church and step in to help.¹³

Next, the apostle Paul brings up the issue of alcohol by stating that the overseer must not be a drunkard (v. 3). The Scriptures do not forbid drinking alcohol. However, there are many verses about the biblical principle of not being a drunkard and about how the Christian must never be a stumbling block to others. Each church must examine their own convictions about alcohol. While JWBC does not judge people on their consumption of alcohol, the church will provide discipline to any leader or layperson who abuses alcohol and struggles with being drunk. When it comes to being an elder and overseer of the church of Jesus Christ, struggling with alcohol not only limits one's influence as a leader but also limits one's ability to discern right and wrong, along with what is best for the church.

Next, Paul commands Timothy that elders must have a character of gentleness (v. 3). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul demands that the overseer not be

¹³ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 48.

violent, but to be gentle. Sometimes a violent man is praised in American society for being a person of conviction, passion, and life. An angry or violent man may receive concerning looks, but anger and violence are often considered small sins that do not need to be addressed. If Shepherds in the church are to model the character of the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ, then it makes no sense that these men would be known in the church as violent men. Elders should have the ability to rely on the Holy Spirit and to reject unhealthy emotions that may be harsh or in a spirit of anger. When men think about leaders in the church who provided a good picture of gentleness in ministry, Jonathan Edwards is a good example. Dane Ortlund, in his biography on Jonathan Edwards, discusses the gentleness trait that he saw in Edwards's ministry and personal life with his family, and he appropriately titled the chapter "Gentleness: The Aroma of the Christian Life."¹⁴

After Paul addresses gentleness in a godly man, he then brings up the important issue of a man not being quarrelsome (v. 3). It is difficult to imagine an elder overseeing a flock with great love and at the same time be a man who likes to start quarrels. Rather than being a man who likes to argue, the elder should again examine Christ and see him being gentle, meek, and willing to sacrifice himself for the good of those in his flock. A man who starts problems and strife in the church probably does so because he has other ambitions than just serving others. It is possible this man desires to cause problems in the body because he lacks confidence and security in the sovereignty of God. Thomas Schreiner contributes to this idea when he says,

Overseers are not wimps, but their demeanor should be gentle and kind. Some people are prone to fighting and arguing and debating, but the inclination of an overseer should be to avoid conflict if possible. If it means standing up for the truth, he must join the battle. But he must not be known as a person who is always itching for a battle.¹⁵

¹⁴ Dane Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 89.

¹⁵ Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014, 99. Since this is a multi-author book, give Schreiner's chapter title. See the style guide on right formatting. See how I formatted the

It is important to note that the qualification of not being quarrelsome should be seen as a matter of the heart and soul of the elder, just like the rest of the qualifications. These qualifications are not simply seen as tasks a man can check off but the heart and mindset of a man who loves God before he loves a title in ministry. It is also important that the elder does not have a heart for fighting because he is dealing with God's people who are sinners and people who need God in their lives. Os Guinness words are needed here when he states, "One of the more unfortunate side effects is that much apologetics has lost touch with evangelism and come to be about "arguments," and in particular about winning arguments rather than winning hearts and minds and people."¹⁶

Next, Paul says an elder must not be a lover of money. An elder being considered to lead the church should love Christ and his family and not be in love with the things of the world, especially when it comes to his finances. As Christ said, "Where our treasure is, that is where our hearts will be also" (Luke 12:34). The easiest way to find out where a man's heart is, is to consider where he is spending his money. A man whose heart is filled with the pleasures of the world and attaining wealth is not suited to lead the church.

In 1 Timothy 3:4–5, Paul brings up the issue of the overseer and his household, and how his own house and family should be managed well and have members within it that are submissive. The idea is that a man can pretend to look godly in front of the church and appear to be someone he is not. However, this is impossible when it comes to his home and family where he cannot hide who he truly is. The tall task of being a Christian in front of those who are around you a lot of the time, like one's family, is a good and healthy tool that reveals what kind of man an elder is. John Chrysostom says, "Even those who are without the church have the saying the one who is a good manager of a house would

place: publisher, year in parentheses for the *40 Questions* book and make sure all your new footnotes are formatted correctly. Also, it's "Kregel."

¹⁶ Guinness, Os. *Fools Talk: Recovering The Art Of Christian Persuasion*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2015, 18.

be a good statesman. For the church is, as it were, a small household.”¹⁷

Paul’s instructions about the elder’s home may bring up the question about pastors who may have a child who is not a believer. There has been much speculation about this qualification, and has led some people to believe that if a man does not have a child who is a believer, then the father could never qualify for being an elder. However, Paul does not appear to be saying every person within the house must be a Christian, because that would mean only a handful of pastors would qualify to be an elder under Paul’s recommendation. It does appear that Paul is suggesting that elders need to lead their homes by managing them in a way that honors Christ and trusts him with the results. Nowhere do we see in the New Testament that any person can make another person

believe in God. Thomas Schreiner helps make the point on elder’s children when he says,

The term also means “faithful” (1 Tim. 1:12, 15, 3:1, 11; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:2, 11, 13; Titus 1:9, 3:8). The word is ambiguous, therefore, and can be read to mean that the children of elders must be “faithful” or that they must be “believers.” It is more likely that the reference is to faithful children are to be submissive and obedient to their parents and to the father in particular. What is mandated is that the children are obedient, that they are “faithful” children, not that they are believers.¹⁸

Therefore, it does appear that Paul is urging the church that an elder must be someone who is faithful to lead his home and his children in obedience, and that his house is not one of chaos and disorder. Benjamin Merkle also contributes to this point when he says, “The point, of course, is not that a man must have more than one child but that whether he has one child or many children, he leads them well and they are submissive to them.”¹⁹

Thus, the argument that claims that elder’s children must be believers does not fit with what Paul was trying to say nor does it fit with the Scriptures. This argument also

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *Timothy, Titus And Philemon*. (Columbia, MD: Lagare Street Press, 2022), 78.

¹⁸ Merkle and Schreiner, *Shepherding God’s Flock*, 107.

¹⁹ Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 131.

does not consider the point of an elder who is not married. An unmarried man who does not have children to lead could very well still be qualified, as Paul himself was not married.

The last two qualifications for overseers that Paul mentions in 1 Timothy 3:6 have to do with the concept of the overseer not being a recent convert and being well thought of by outsiders. This qualification goes back to the idea of knowing who the individual truly is by other people who know him in the church. Regarding Paul's concern about a new believer, a recent convert has not had enough time to understand and prove they are truly following Christ, and not the sinful world. Thomas Scott writes, "It would not, however, be generally advisable to appoint those to the ministry which conduct had been remarkably scandalous until a competent time has elapsed to advance the reality of their repentance and to retrieve and reestablish their characters."²⁰

Jesus telling his disciples in Matthew 16:24 to take up their cross and follow him communicates the principle that discipleship takes time. The church needs to see Christians who have spent years denying themselves and following Christ regardless of how easy life seems to be at the time. Therefore, it also means that this list of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 should not be seen as the only qualifications for an elder, as if this is all they need to do. William Mounce agrees when he says, "Timothy must be sure that they exhibit a high degree of moral fiber; they must be above reproach. It is an official list, one that must be held to, but it is not exhaustive and is to be understood as an ad hoc list."²¹

While no church should expect its leaders to be perfect, if that were the case no man would be able to serve the role, but that the leaders should be set apart as different.

²⁰ Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible with Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations* (London: Forgotten, 2018), 233.

²¹ Mounce, *Word Biblical Commentary, Pastoral Epistles*, 184.

Some would say that all Christians should be different than the world and that is true. However, the church needs to be able to see their Christian leaders living above reproach in a way that encourages holiness in the congregation. Certainly, the church of today does not need to see any more church leaders who are not qualified to lead or were never qualified to lead in the first place.

A Personal and Powerful Principle

God has a desire for the elders of his church to be prepared. The picture the church sees in Acts 20:17–38 is a dramatic and passionate picture of Paul’s plea to the Ephesian elders. As Paul is getting closer to his death, he offers what appears to be an emotional charge to the elders that he will never see again on this side of heaven. This text is valuable to the church today because it delivers an image of what matters most in difficult times. Brian Vickers gives good counsel to Christians when he states, “Paul’s goodbye to the Ephesian elders is a testimony to his own faithfulness in ministry, a word of encouragement to fledging pastors, and a warning of things to come in the churches.”²² Paul clearly states that false teachers are coming and that the elders must prepare themselves for the serious and urgent task before them. T. J. Tims, pastor of Immanuel Church in Nashville, planted by Ray Ortlund, told me that the elders at his church studied this chapter for close to three years because of the beautiful nourishment it provided for them as they sought God to lead the church.

Paul begins by reminding the elders in verses 18–21 of how determined he was to live out his ministry in a sincere way as he lived among them. Paul desires that the Ephesian elders see the obvious evidence laid before them by his actions over a lengthy period. He stresses that he served the Lord with humility and tears that happened under trials, but that the trials never pushed him away from serving the people in the church. Specifically, Paul is reminding them that he preached the gospel of Jesus Christ and

²² Brian J. Vickers, *Acts*. In *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 9, *John–Acts* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 524.

called all people to repentance. He then moves into communicating to the elders that he is convinced suffering awaits him, but also that he does not count his life of any value and that his ministry that he received from Christ is more important than anything else. After Paul confesses that he has declared the whole gospel of God to them, he switches the conversation and focus from himself to the elders by telling them to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock, over whom the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. This is a clear reminder that elders are not simply thrown into the elder circle by mere men who cast votes. Rather, a church that has a qualified elder can be encouraged that they were given that individual by the Holy Spirit himself and that God is active and involved firsthand by gifting Christians qualified elders. It may be a temptation for some people in the church today to think that a plurality of elders is a model that people like Presbyterians use, or some other reformed circle. However, the language that Paul uses in Acts 20:28 to communicate the role of the Holy Spirit brings it to another level of thought. Paul is telling the elders in Ephesus something they already know: that God has called you to be an elder at the church, not anyone else. Therefore, it is important, while some may question the model or role of elders in the local church, they must not outright reject an office that God is involved in. F.F. Bruce contributes to this thought when he says, “Luke calls those men ‘elders,’ but Paul speaks of them as ‘guardians’ and ‘shepherds.’ There is little or nothing of intuitionism in the part which they are seen to play here.”²³

Another interesting phrase that Paul gives to the Ephesian elders is in verse 28. As Paul reminds the elders that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers, he adds on the phrase, “to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” F.F. Bruce remarks again, “Their responsibility was the greater in that the flock which they were commissioned to tend was no other than the church of God which he had purchased

²³ Bruce, F.F. *The Book Of The Acts*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988, 389.

for himself and the purchase price was nothing less than the life-blood of his beloved Son.”²⁴ This phrase that Paul gives is a connecting point to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How important is the role of the overseers to Paul if he would bring it to the level of joining it with the image of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross.

Therefore, it is another phrase that encourages the church that the plurality of overseers or elders is more than just a man-made model, but a system that the church sees in Scripture that is cherished. Benjamin Merkle makes this point clear when he says, Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit made them overseers. They were called and given authority by God and no by man. Therefore, the office of elder does not derive its existence, or authority, from the congregation. The elder’s authority comes from Christ, and the congregation’s role is that of recognition of God’s gifting and calling.²⁵

The goodbye that Paul gives to the Ephesian elders was just as emotional as the introduction as Paul weeps and prays over the elders, reminding them of the hard work and suffering that lies ahead, not just for Paul but for them as well. He shows the Ephesian elders and the church today that elders have the privilege to oversee and care for God’s people in God’s church. Paul shows a side of himself that testifies to his compassion and love for these men that flows out of a love for the church, which in turn flows out of love for Christ. Adam Clarke writes,

Tenderness and sympathy are not inconsistent with the highest state of grace period Paul warns his hearers day and night with tears. His hearers now weep sore at the departure of their beloved pastor. They who can give up a Christian minister with indifference have either profited little under that ministry or a backslidden from the grace of God. The pastor should love the father’s converts as his children, and feel themselves one family, under that great head, Christ Jesus.²⁶

Throughout this conversation with the Ephesian elders, Paul is showing them and the church today a crucial insight into his own heart. First, Paul’s heart and mind are both engaged in the gospel ministry. R. C. Sproul says in his commentary, “Paul did not

²⁴ Bruce, F.F. *The Book Of The ACTS*, 389.

²⁵ Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 97.

²⁶ Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 783.

go to the people simply as a scholar instructing them in theology; his heart was with them. He wept and prayed with him and endured all manner of attacks and suffering from hostile hands for their sakes.”²⁷ Paul’s passion, conviction, intellectual rigor, and love come through in this one address to the Ephesian elders. This should also remind readers of his plea to the Church of Corinth where he speaks of love being the greatest of all spiritual gifts (1 Cor 13). It is possible to have a love for the act of ministry or the gift a person possesses over the people in the church. That kind of behavior of neglecting people is not what Paul is modeling for Christian leaders.

The Ephesian elders are also encouraged by Paul to understand that there is a reality of protecting the Christians in the church from those who want to harm them by teaching a false gospel. The enemy loves to bring in people to disrupt the gospel ministry. MacArthur writes, “It is not enough for a faithful shepherd to feed and lead his flock, he must also protect it from predators.”²⁸ One way that Paul protects the sheep is by having elders preach and teach the whole counsel of God. When the congregation hears the whole counsel of God on a weekly basis, they are being trained on how to distinguish between God’s voice and the voices of false teachers.

Another point that should be mentioned here in relation to Acts 20, and should not be overlooked, is that Paul is testifying to the Ephesian elders that suffering is real and normal for the Christian leader. There will always be the temptation for Christian leaders to avoid suffering, but Paul demonstrates to the Ephesian elders then, and to the Christian church today, that suffering is simply part of the life to which they have been called. Henry points out,

When he was as sorrowful, yet he was always rejoicing, and an all things more than a conqueror. Those that have their conversation in heaven can look down come on not only upon the common troubles of this earth the pawn threatening rage and the

²⁷ R. C. Sproul, *Acts*, St. Andrews Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 346.

²⁸ John MacArthur, *Acts*, *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1996), 226.

last of hell itself, and say that none of these things move them, there's knowing that none of these things can hurt them.²⁹

The Christian and Christian leader can always draw near to Christ, as Christ himself understood suffering more than anyone. As Christians lean on Christ, they can be assured that whatever they are facing is temporary, and not worth comparing to the paradise that is their heavenly inheritance.

Real Ministry Through Shepherding

1 Peter 5:1-5 is another text that shows the church how appropriate the office of elder is. Just like Paul's thinking in Acts 20:28 where he brings the office of elders up to the thought of shepherding God's people whom Christ died for with His blood, Peter makes a similar statement in 1 Peter 5:1. The beginning of the paragraph is also fairly serious as Peter says, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ." Peter is in no way saying that church government is on the same level with the Gospel. However, like Paul, Peter does not show his thinking about shepherding the flock of God as mere administration, but actual people whom Christ was sacrificed for. This is yet another text that shows how serious caring for God's church is, and a tool to do that, according to Paul and Peter, is elders.

Through the reading and study of 1 Peter 5:1-5, it is evident that God's desire is for his elders to be focused. The context is Christians scattered throughout the region, and Peter is encouraging them in their suffering. In 1 Peter 4, Peter encourages the Christians who are living in exile with the idea of how to suffer well, especially when they are living in a culture that is against them. Peter then goes on to discuss how the elders should focus on the flock in front of them and not be distracted. This has obvious relevance for the church of today as church leaders face several distractions within and outside the church. While there are differences between Christians in 1 Peter and Christians today, the same temptations of distractions are alive and well. These issues can lead to a group of elders

²⁹ Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 263.

that are not focused on the hearts and souls of the people God has put in their care. MacArthur encourages leaders in the church, “Shepherding the flock is a serious, sobering responsibility, and elders are accountable to God for their ministry. Christ’s under shepherd’s face a daunting task but faithful oversight brings eternal reward in the form of greater service and joy in the Lord’s heaven.”³⁰

The church was designed by God and called by God to have a structure of leadership governed by elders, which is seen in 1 Peter 5:1–5. If the church is serious about following Christ and glorifying him on earth as they await his return, then the church must have a biblical form of leadership. David Helm points to the urgency of leadership: “From his vantage point, as long as the church remains far from home, and as long as she continues to exist in the fragility of refining exile, she will need faithful shepherds. And the role of the elders is that of a shepherd.”³¹

What makes 1 Peter 5: even more interesting is that it comes from Peter, who understood what it meant to be an elder, had suffered, and had walked with the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ. If anyone knew the instructions of Christ when it came to being God’s people, it was Peter. The Christian gets insight into Christ’s call on Peter’s life as Jesus is walking on the beach with him (John 21). As Jesus is asking Peter if he really loves him (John 21:17), Jesus makes sure that Peter understands that if he really loves him, he will feed the people of God. Henry notes, “It was the peculiar honor of Peter, and a few more, to be the witnesses of Christ’s sufferings but it is the privilege of all true Christians to be partakers of the glory that shall be revealed.”³²

Of all the things that Jesus could have said to Peter in John 21, it is important to note that Jesus told him to feed His flock. Jesus did not tell Peter to make sure to stay

³⁰ John MacArthur, *1 Peter, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2004), 271.

³¹ David R. Helm, *1 Peter, Preaching the Word* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 223.

³² Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1233.

relevant with the times, to speak in a way that entertains people. In fact, Jesus did not give Peter whom He called, “the rock on which He would build the church” any special instructions outside of feeding His people. Of course, Peter learned a lot about ministry from following Jesus, but in this case the emphasis that Jesus is putting on Peter to show his love for Christ by feeding the church is superior to any other thoughts that Jesus would want to press in on Peter. We know this to be true because Peter is making an emphasis of that truth in this letter to Christians in exile. When Peter is addressing the elders, there is one point he makes above all others, and it is the same points that Jesus made to him.

Peter also encourages the elders when he says he is likewise a fellow elder and understands their sufferings and distractions (1 Pet 5). However, the crucial point he makes in verse 2 is that one motivation for shepherding the flock is the glory that is to be revealed by the coming of Christ. Peter goes on to say that shepherding God’s people should be done with a loving, not selfish, attitude. It is also interesting that in verse 2 Peter uses the term “among you” to the church leaders. The application for the church today is that an elder cannot serve with joy and shepherd with proper oversight while being distracted with flocks somewhere else. Church leaders need to be focused on the people God has called them to and the current place God has them instead of thinking about “other places” or greener pastures. Jones Spence seems to have the same thought when he says,

It would seem that, even in the apostolic age, there were sometimes such opportunities of gain (see Titus 1:11; 2 Tim. 3:6) as to be a temptation to enter the ministry for the sake of money. St. Peter uses a strong word in condemnation of such a motive. But of a ready mind. This adverb (προθύμως) occurs nowhere else in the New Testament; it has a stronger meaning than the preceding word ἐκουσίως, willingly; it implies zeal and enthusiasm.³³

³³ Spence-Jones, H. D. M., ed. *1 Peter*. New York, NY: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909, 207.

Peter is calling the elders to be focused by being willing and not under compulsion, not for shameful gain, eagerly as opposed to domineering, for the purpose of being an example to the flock. The kind of oversight Peter is suggesting here is focused humility that involves the heart. An elder who is ministering under compulsion or selfishness is likely to burn out when faced with opposition or issues in the church that are naturally going to happen. Elders need to be men who know they are called by God and already provide the attributes of humility and compassion so that when issues arise they can fall back on their calling by God. The motivation behind this encouragement is when Peter reminds them that the chief shepherd will appear again and therefore these elders are needed to minister to the flock in a way that glorifies Christ (1 Pet 5:4). In other words, elders in the church need to be reminded that they are the under-shepherds of the chief shepherd, Jesus Christ, who will appear again one day. Thomas Schreiner points out, “Jesus here is called ‘the Chief Shepherd’ (*archipoimenos*), a rare term that occurs nowhere else in the New Testament or in the Septuagint. The designation of Jesus as the Chief Shepherd reminds the leaders that they are fundamentally servants, not autocrats.”³⁴

There may be a temptation for some in the church to think that elders are men who tell the church to do whatever they see right in their own eyes. However, it is obvious from 1 Peter 5:1-5 that this is not the case. Bruce Ware makes this clear when he states,

As under-shepherds, then, they stand in a relation to Christ in a manner even greater than that in which their own people stand to them. They must acknowledge that their role and all it involves is simply and solely to carry out the will of another, to advance the work of one greater. And this cannot be a matter merely of formal acknowledgment; it must rather be a matter of daily and prayerful submission.”³⁵

³⁴ Thomas. R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary, vol. 37 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 236.

³⁵ Ware, Bruce. *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal, 2014, 286.

The reward for elders that shepherd the flock of God is stated in 1 Peter 5:4, when Peter encourages the elders by reminding them that Christ will again appear and that each elder will also receive a crown from him. Unlike the world and ministry of uncertainty, displacement, and persecution, this crown will be a reward that is unfading and eternal. Sam Storms contributes to this idea when he writes,

The crown in view is not one made of gold, studded with diamonds and other precious jewels, but is an “unfading” (*amarantinon*; lit., “made of amaranths,” which was a “dark red flower known for its resistance to fading” wreath). This is the only time in the NT that the term “crown/wreath” is linked with “glory” (*doxa*). The genitive construction here could be either of quality, hence a “glorious crown,” or (more likely) epexegetical, “the crown that is glory.” If the latter is the case, then Peter is describing the crown as the eschatological or consummate glory that all faithful believers in Christ will share or experience upon his return.³⁶

The unfading crown of glory that Christ will provide every faithful and biblical leader in the church is the encouragement that they need to continue to be faithful, regardless of the circumstances they are facing. The main idea that Peter is pushing is to shepherd and feed the flock of God that belongs to the Almighty himself. Jones Spence reminds the church of the need and priority of God’s people being fed.

Just the words you would expect from Peter. They take us back to that early morning when his Master thrice bade him feed his sheep and lambs. To feed the flock is essentially the minister’s task. The Word of truth is the great sanctifying agency in the hands of the Divine Spirit, and it is the minister’s business so to present this that sanctification shall be the result. There never was greater need of plain practical Scripture teaching than now, when the pressure of business leaves, I fear, too little leisure for Scripture study. It should not be so, but so it is.³⁷

So what does this text have to do with elders in today’s church. If Jesus emphasized the importance and focus of loving Him by feeding His flock, and Peter emphasizes it in his letter to the elders, then today’s church cannot see this as an option. Churches today must see the priority of feeding God’s people and one way to do that is to

³⁶ Sam Storms, *1 Peter*, in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 12, *Hebrews–Revelation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 301.

³⁷ Spence-Jones. 1 Peter. 228.

build up the focus of preaching and teaching. However, the common pastor knows how much work needs to be done in each week. How can one man prioritize feeding God's people, when there is so much other administrative tasks to be done? The answer seems to be clear that a plurality of elders can help the church share the load and vision of ministry so that God's people are getting fed on a regular basis.

Conclusion

Key texts in the New Testament describe what kind of elder God desires for the church of Jesus Christ. These elders are to be qualified to the holy standards of God, prepared for the sufferings and incorrect doctrine of the world, and focused on the people God has placed before them. These are the expectations God himself has communicated to the church; expectations that are meant to be obeyed. Humans will always create their own version of success when it comes to leadership in the church, but God's Word stands clear as it provides the power and authority to be sufficient in giving instructions to the leaders of his church.

Where Paul encourages Timothy and Titus on the qualifications of elders within the church, he also provides a clear picture of what leadership should look like. Also, Acts 20 shows the urgency and need for elders as they help keep the church healthy. Lastly, the church can be encouraged by the weight of Peter's words as he exhorts church leaders to care for the flock of Christ. In addition to what the church sees in the Bible, the church can realize other natural benefits for having elders in the church.

CHAPTER 3

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF ELDERS

This chapter will look at the practical benefits for churches who make elders part of their leadership structure. This chapter will examine six ways having elders in the church can benefit the local church: leadership vision, better together than alone, essential shepherding, the priority of preaching, the dangers of false teaching, and the need for church discipline.

The Leadership Vision

This section will first address the influence a leader can place on a church when it comes to the overall vision and direction of a congregation. Second, the New Testament provides a clear picture of how vision affects the life of elders in the church. Lastly, biblical vision for church leadership can be healthy for the church and for the leader.

First, every church desires to have a clear, concise, and compelling vision to help lead the people of Christ. Churches that have elders as their leaders trust in their elders to provide a biblical and clear vision. When leaders seek to provide a vision for God's people, it should result in the spiritual well-being of the church. Mark Dever and Paul Alexander make a good case for elders and leadership: "One of the most significant human dynamics in the church's continuing spiritual growth and health is the kind of leadership it is following. When biblically qualified men are leading a church with

character and skill, it is a deep and wide blessing for the unity, holiness, and spiritual growth of the church.”¹

Second, the benefit of a plurality of elders leading the church is widely seen in the New Testament, as the church can view the impact these men had in leading God’s people. In his book on elders, Alexander Strauch states, “According to the New Testament concept of Eldership, Elders lead the church, teach and preach the word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the Saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, Elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.”² These elders’ actions are the normal rhythm of a church that uses the elder-led leadership model. If the church’s vision is to lead people in these characteristics, then it is a benefit to have multiple pastors working together instead of just one by himself.

Lastly, most people would agree that leadership is important, especially in the church, but how leadership is practically fleshed out is also important. First, leaders need to begin by leading themselves daily as they follow the Lord and care for their families and their own bodies. Second, the main leader in a church that has no elders must be responsible for leading the staff. Third, the pastor who is on his own must lead the people of God within the church as well as committees and deacons. The good thing about elders is that they work together with the pastor to lead the congregation, and the pastor potentially does not feel like he is all alone. Dever and Alexander suggest, “Godly elders can help us select a pace for change that the congregation can keep up with. They can also help us formulate plans, articulate goals, and handle sensitive situations better than we may do if left to ourselves.”³

¹ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches: A Practical Guide for Deliberate Leadership* (Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2021), 185.

² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1991), 24.

³ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 31.

An issue that hurts the church of today is the church can sometimes look just like the world, specifically when it has division. One of the goals of any leader is to keep the unity within the church that Paul often pushes for in the Epistles (Eph 4:1–3). Harold Senkbeil states, “Not only do godly elders provide an example—they also prevent much division and strife by handling potentially volatile situations with care.”⁴

Also, the vision and leadership of the church make sure that their witness to the outside world is healthy and productive. A plurality of elders can offer the value of accomplishing the work of a New Testament church when they unite around clear and powerful biblical goals. A vision that the congregation not only agrees with but also participates in on a regular basis will have a great potential to impact the outside community. Strauch offers a solid and clear statement: “The church’s evangelistic credibility and witness is tied to the moral reputation of its leaders.”⁵

Better Together than Alone

Looking into the idea of how multiple elders can benefit the church as opposed to one elder carrying the church by himself, I first want to state that a typical church staff cannot always step into the overall matters within the church, as they are focused on their individual ministries. Second, it is important to address how a pastor handles criticism, which if done in isolation can be toxic. Third, the idea that delegating certain pastoral duties to other trusted men of God can only be a good thing. Fourth, a plurality of elders can potentially help with the mental health issues pastors may face. Next, it is possible that churches rely too much on the pastor’s personality and charisma, and when that pastor and his personality leave, the church has no direction or identity without that leader. In addition, this section will consider how pastors make difficult decisions,

⁴ Harold Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls* (Bellingham: WA: Lexham, 2019), 200.

⁵ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 201.

sometimes on a regular basis, and how this can be too much for any one man to handle. Lastly, a plurality of elders can help provide space and depth for every leader.

First, a church that has a staff along with deacons is usually busy doing their assigned tasks and can sometimes lack the flexibility to assist the pastor in other church matters. The main idea of a pastor/elder is to preach, lead, shepherd, teach, communicate vision, and help the sheep when they get off course. Therefore, it can be difficult to find other staff members to come alongside the pastor to help. A youth pastor in today's church has the main job of ministering to youth, the children's minister is ministering to children, and deacons are serving in many different ways in the church.

Second, it is common for pastors to receive criticism from the congregation—criticism that takes humility and maturity to navigate. At times, the criticism is serious or helpful to the health of the ministry. Other times, the criticism pastors receive is toxic and discouraging to the ministry. When the pastor is assisted by both staff and elders, there is another layer of accountability around him to receive criticisms or ignore them. Dever and Alexander make this point clear: “The provision alleviates the pastor from bearing all the criticism, because now leadership and decision-making responsibility are shared among the group. Other men can now stand in the gap with the pastor, and they can take both responsibility and criticism together.”⁶

Third, the church that aims to be healthy and biblical does its job by submitting to Scripture and being obedient to God's Word. Therefore, while the church is being a light to the world and community around them, it must ensure that the staff and leadership are working its ministries at a pace that is fair and balanced. One way the elder model helps the church today is by making sure leaders can sufficiently accomplish the tasks assigned to them, as they are spread out among a plurality of pastors. Strauch contributes to this idea when he states,

⁶ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 77.

It was never our Lord's will for the local church to be controlled by one individual. The concept of the pastor as the lonely, trained professional—the sacred person over the church who can never really become a part of the congregation—is utterly unscriptural. Not only is this concept unscriptural, but it is also emotionally and spiritually unhealthy.⁷

Fourth, there will never be a perfect church with perfect leadership on this side of heaven. However, as of late, the church has seen a rise in pastors who are burned out and mentally unhealthy. In extreme situations this has led to a rise in suicides among pastors.⁸ Pastoring is hard, even with a plurality of elders, but the church has witnessed an uptick in depression among pastors along with anxiety, suicide, heart disease, and obesity. Timothy Witmer writes, “We look at the plethora of reports that come out year after year about pastoral burnout and the alarming number of clergy leaving their churches or leaving the ministry altogether. Might not one of the contributing factors be that they are not receiving the help they need and shepherding the flock prescribed in the scriptures?”⁹ This is where elders can be a positive thing for churches of all sizes that long to see their pastors be as healthy as they can in and out of the pulpit. It is reasonable to think that a pastor's ceiling of productivity might go up if he was more focused on people, preaching, and prayer, and also had other men around him to take on some of those duties.

Much has been written on the physical and mental health of great men like Charles Spurgeon, and the tremendous ministry that God was so pleased to work through him. John Piper discusses how Spurgeon took small steps in being healthy just by being outside: “For all His talk about spending and being spent, Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth-century London pastor, counsels us to fight for joy by resting and taking a day off and opening ourselves to the healing powers God has put in the world of nature.”¹⁰ However, it may be worth considering if the world could have gotten fifteen to twenty

⁷ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 43.

⁸ Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Why Pastors Are Committing Suicide,” The Gospel Coalition, November 23, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-pastors-are-committing-suicide/>.

⁹ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 43.

¹⁰ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 188.

more years out of Spurgeon if he did not do so much on his own. Spurgeon had help, but if he did not have to control so much under his own name, he and the church might have been better for it. Elders do not guarantee healthy pastors, but a plurality of elders could decrease the number of pastors who fight depression and anxiety due to feeling the entire ministry is resting on their shoulders.

Next, in addition, a single pastor-led church can struggle when a pastor leaves the church, dies, or is fired due to sin. When the church is built on one man's personality and charisma, the church runs the risk of dying when the pastor dies. Dever and Alexander write, "The last thing we want to do as vocational pastors is to make the congregation so dependent on us that the church would fall apart if we died, got called somewhere else, or (God forbid) fell into some disqualifying sin."¹¹

Thus, the value of a plurality of elders offers the idea that a single man is vulnerable when he is left by himself to lead a church. Earl Radmacher offers, "Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God's will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a 'check and balance' on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people."¹² It may also be risky to ask one man or one pastor to be the sole carrier of the effort. Dever and Alexander explain,

No pastor is broadly gifted enough to do all the work of the ministry equally well by himself. There are weaknesses in every pastor's game. We all need other people to balance out our all-too-human deficiencies. When you surround yourself with godly men whose gifts, passions, and abilities balance yours, you provide more well-rounded leadership for people to follow.¹³

The value and benefit of having multiple pastors is appropriate when thinking about the local church and all the events and programs that happen in a regular calendar year. Jeramie Rinne states, "Start with the obvious: having multiple elders spreads out the

¹¹ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 177.

¹² Earl D. Radmacher, *The Question of Elders* (Portland: OR, Western Baptist, 1977), 7.

¹³ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 175.

pastoral workload. Many hands make light work, teamwork divides a task and multiplies a success, and all those other proverbs prove true for elder ministry.”¹⁴ A plurality of elders, under the great shepherd leading the church, makes a lot more sense than just one man with God’s people. Not only does this make logical and even business sense, but it is probably what most people want in the congregation. Congregations might at times question their own confidence in their one pastor, but a plurality of many pastors could help the church have great confidence in the church’s leadership. Dever and Alexander note, “The congregation likely will be more willing to follow the tough decisions of a group of both staff and non-staff elders than to follow those made alone by a paid pastor.”¹⁵

Additionally, in preaching and the overall guidance of the church, a pastor on his own may be tempted to go back to his own ideas and past experiences as opposed to the overall guidance of the Scriptures. A plurality of elders made up of church members can help lead the church as they see they are being led by the Scriptures. John MacArthur writes,

A plurality of elders in the local church also preserves it against imbalance. It is common that dominance by one leader results in his evil domineering over the flock, often with an overemphasis on some doctrine or practice that is out of harmony with the rest of Scripture, exposing people to serious doctrinal error and unbiblical practice.¹⁶

It is easy for pastors who operate on their own to get swept up in emotions and make big shifts within the church. Churches want pastors who are passionate and have a vision. However, churches need to protect pastors from themselves by having a plurality of elders that can help in particular situations by saying things like, that is a good idea, that is not a good idea, or the timing is not good. A pastor who is unsure of the future or is anxious about troubled times may desire to change directions at will, when all that is

¹⁴ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God’s People Like Jesus* (Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2014), 88.

¹⁵ Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 176.

¹⁶ John MacArthur, *1 Peter, MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 2004), 264.

needed is a group of men to come alongside and help move the church forward with trust in Jesus.

Lastly, a plurality of elders may benefit the pastor in his life and ministry. Piper writes in his classic book, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, “Without time of unhurried reading and reflection, beyond the press of sermon preparation, my soul shrinks, and the specter of ministerial death rises. Few things frighten me more than the beginnings of bareness that come from frenzied activity with little spiritual food and meditation.”¹⁷ The more churches encourage their pastors to find the time to feed themselves, the more that churches can be assured they are getting the best out of their pastors. If a church has a plurality of elders, then there should be enough space in the pastor’s annual schedule for reading that encourages him, pastoral conferences that feed his soul, a book allowance that helps him to read things that speak to his weary soul, and regular moments in the day for prayer and reflection. Regardless of the model of church government that a local church chooses, every church wants their pastor to be healthy in life, in ministry, and in his family. The value of having multiple elders in a local church might just help foster the balance that everyone is looking for, which might in turn make the church healthier.

Essential Shepherding

This section first points out the primary passion of the church leaders. Second, Christians should not see the church as some big overblown mission, but as a place devoted to seeing people reached for Christ. Third, leading a church can be messy. If the church is not simply a business, but a ministry to real people, then it will get messy. Lastly, a plurality of elders helps ensure that every person in the church is reached and disciplined.

First, the primary job of pastors is to shepherd the flock. MacArthur writes that 1 Peter 5:2 “clearly states that elders have the most serious, delegated stewardship, to

¹⁷ Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 80.

shepherd not their own flock, but the flock of God.”¹⁸ MacArthur’s statement is in line with the reality that leaders will be held accountable before God for each member in the church. This is a sobering thought for anyone in leadership attempting to guide God’s people to holiness. The pastor has a serious job of handling what belongs to God, which should impact how believers think about the pastoral office. Christians should see their pastor and pastors as men focused on the well-being of each individual church member and their relationship with the Lord.

Second, Christians may be tempted to see pastors as professional CEOs of a company, just like they experience in their own professional world, but pastors should rather be seen as shepherds who are caring for people’s souls. Pauline Hamilton reminds church leaders about the main goal of ministry when she writes, “Man before business, because man is your business.”¹⁹ Richard Gamble explains, “The duties of the elders were to keep watch over every man’s life, to admonish amiably those whom they see leading a disorderly life, and where necessary, to report to the assembly which will be deputized to make fraternal correction.”²⁰ Thankfully, plenty of churches still hold to this high view of pastoring and make sure there are enough elders in the church to care for its people. Marion Clark, who was an assistant at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, witnessed that the pastor had a passion for every member of the church: “I don’t want a single member of 10th church thinking that they are not cared for. Not one.”²¹ Christians expect churches to not be led by the surrounding culture but by the Bible that feeds the flock, as Christ demanded. In this sense, the church’s mission is simple when it has several elders doing the right work in the right way. When this happens, leaders will help

¹⁸ MacArthur, *I Peter*, 267.

¹⁹ Pauline Hamilton, *To a Different Drum* (Littleton, CO: OMF, 1984), 38.

²⁰ Richard A. Gamble, “Switzerland: Triumph and Decline,” in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, edited by W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 57.

²¹ Marion Clark, “Tenth Community Assistants: It’s about Relationships,” internal document of Tenth Presbyterian Church, quoted in Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 135.

the people of God see what is primary and what is secondary. Dever and Alexander again give good insight into the ministry of elders: “The examples set by Elders will be significant in helping shape the congregation’s idea of what spiritual maturity looks like.”²²

Third, shepherding God’s people is not always easy and fun; rather, it can be messy and lonely. However, this is what it means to be a real church that the Lord desires. Senkbeil sums up the reality of ministry: “That’s what it means to be a servant of Christ. You get your hands dirty among his earthly and earthy people. But you do it because you have life in your hands to give them.”²³ Elders are helpful in these scenarios because with each messy situation, a group of men with different gifts work together to love the bride of Christ together.

Next, one man cannot operate by himself and shepherd each person in the local church. Some may argue that deacons exist to come alongside the pastor and assist him with pastoral duties. However, Acts 6:1–6 notes that the purpose of deacons is to serve wherever they are needed, and not necessarily for the purpose of shepherding people’s souls. If a church has five-hundred sinners in it, a pastor shepherding the people by himself is limited in what he can actually do, but with more pastors comes more possibilities of ministering to more people. A pastor and his staff could spend years pouring into people, but they might struggle to adequately shepherd the people of God by themselves. That may be alright for some who think that no one pastor is expected to pour into everyone, but it becomes more complicated when the pastor misses a hospital visit or is called back from vacation because someone died suddenly in the church. A plurality of elders can help the church in that every member will be cared for. With multiple men working together, a godly leader is ready to encourage, visit, counsel, or listen to any one person at any time.

²² Dever and Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches*, 196.

²³ Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 25.

The Priority of Preaching

Within the topic of preaching, I will first point to the likelihood of time limits on one single pastor. Second, every church, regardless of its thoughts on church government, should hold preaching in high regard, and see it as essential. Lastly, a church with multiple elders has the opportunity to share the pulpit, which helps avoid the danger of building a church around one preacher's personality.

First, it is worth mentioning the priority of preaching and how a plurality of elders can be valuable to the pulpit. A church following the model of having a plurality of elders opens the possibilities to impact the regular Sunday morning preaching. In a given week, a pastor can get pulled out of his regular routine of study to counsel, preach a funeral, or help a staff member. However, opportunities open up when a pastor has other elders who might be able to do some hospital visits or contribute to meetings. This does not mean that churches must have elders to have great preaching, but elders can clearly be a benefit to the pulpit in a local church. Certainly, all churches desire to have strong preaching, as they see it as a major need in Christianity today. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "I would say without hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian Church today is true preaching; and as it is the greatest and the most urgent need in the church, it is obviously the greatest need of the world also."²⁴ Lloyd-Jones was certainly a beloved preacher by so many Christians around the world, and especially believers in the United Kingdom during his ministry in the mid- to late-1900s. However, what kind of preaching would come out of this great man and great church if he was expected to do everything at the pastoral level by himself? It could be argued that one of the reasons such great preaching exists in church history is because churches were set up not only by the power of the Holy Spirit but also by the organization of a church that allowed the main preacher to spend the necessary time to prepare.

²⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 17.

Second, church history has taught the present church enough about the importance and power of preaching, especially when preaching is emphasized. MacArthur is certainly correct when he says, “One of the clearest lessons we learned from church history is that strong biblical preaching is absolutely vital to the health and vitality of the church.”²⁵ Biblical preaching, therefore, must be viewed by the people within the church as the best thing for them individually as well. In other words, the average member of the congregation should see the devotion to preparing and preaching God’s Word as something that is mainly beneficial, as people are fed not by man but by God himself. Charles Jefferson writes, “Everything depends on the proper feeding of the sheep. Unless wisely fed they become emaciated and sick, and the wealth invested in them is squandered. When Ezekiel presents a picture of the bad shepherd, the first stroke of the brush is—he does not feed the flock.”²⁶

Lastly, the preaching of God’s Word is not just important for a one-time event on Sunday morning. The priority of God’s Word being preached from the pulpit on Sunday guides the church throughout the week and throughout the life of the church. It is a beautiful thing when elders guide the feeding of God’s Word and God’s people. Albert Mohler reinforces this idea: “God is most beautifully praised when his people hear his Word, love his Word, and obey his Word.”²⁷ As great as this sounds, a logistical element goes back to the idea of time needed to prepare such a service for God’s people. The great preachers I have had a chance to be around were gifted partly because they had churches that supported their pastors having ample time during the week to prepare for Sunday’s sermon.

Preaching God’s truth has been an essential part of God’s work among God’s people, and the church needs to continue to trust in the preaching of God’s Word. Lloyd-

²⁵ John MacArthur, quoted in Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 11.

²⁶ Charles Jefferson, quoted in Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 23.

²⁷ Mohler, *He Is Not Silent*, 74.

Jones reminds Christians, “The pastor should stand ready to define, defend, and document his own deep convictions. The primary task of the church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the word of God.”²⁸ If this is the case, then the regular preaching pastor must be supported by the church to make preaching great again, and to this end he needs elders to support all the other work within the ministry of the church.

It is also worth noting that with a plurality of elders leading the church, the people of God get to be fed by more than just one voice. With different elders preaching every now and then, the church benefits from the gifts of multiple men instead of just one. Every individual church needs to hear from other men of God who are called to preach. Jeramie Rinne says to the regular Sunday morning preacher, “There’s still one major problem facing your teaching ministry: you are going to die. When you die, you will, by God’s grace, leave behind many well-taught Christians. But will you leave behind skilled teachers to carry out the work?”²⁹ If the ministry of the local church rises and falls on one preacher, the church will suffer if that one man leaves. If a church truly cares about its teaching ministry, then it should involve others, which is where elders can help. Jonathan Leeman and Mark Dever advise, “Limit the percentage of main-slot preaching. Mark, with the elders’ agreement, limits himself to preaching 50 to 65 percent of Sunday mornings. That way, other voices have the chance to grow and gain authority. And the congregation depends more on the Word than on one man.”³⁰

The Dangers of False Teaching

False teaching is not unusual in today’s churches; therefore, the church needs to be aware and on guard. Second, a church that has a plurality of elders likely has more time to look for false teaching and handle false teaching when it happens. Lastly, when

²⁸ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 27.

²⁹ Rinne, *Church Elders*, 55.

³⁰ Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 108.

multiple elders work together to protect the church, the church sees the men that they trust working to keep the church committed to God's Word.

First, another reason why elders can be valuable in the local church is because false teaching is just as pervasive today as it was in the New Testament. The church needs to make sure that more than one pastor is keeping his eye on how Satan may usher in false teaching to cripple the sheep. However, false teaching does not just come from outside the church. False teaching can also spring up from within. MacArthur states, "The plurality of godly leaders, as designed by the Lord, not only provides more ministry care, but offers some important safeguards. First, it helps protect the church against error."³¹ At times, people think false teaching comes from outside the church by people who intend harm. False teaching can also come from good-hearted people from within the church who do not intend harm.

Second, how difficult would it be for one pastor to do all the work of the ministry and then try to keep track of all the teaching happening in the church, in Sunday school classes, and in small groups. It is not impossible, but having called and trained men around him can certainly make a pastor's job easier. Thankfully, a plurality of elders helps keep an eye on doctrinal errors inside the church. Rinne contributes to this idea as he reminds church leaders, "Do you know what's being taught in your church? Use your elder credentials to slip into a youth talk or sit in the back of a woman's event. Help out a few times in Sunday School. What kind of spiritual nourishment are your people receiving?"³²

Lastly, a plurality of elders can also help the church because many men are gathering information and using their God-given gifts of wisdom, discernment, and patience to see if an error from within the church is worth confronting a church member. These men will be able to see, more than an overworked and stressed pastor on his own,

³¹ MacArthur, *1 Peter*, 264.

³² Rinne, *Church Elders*, 53.

if a situation is worth engaging in, or simply something to be prayed about and see if the problem continues. Senkbeil observes that when it comes to knowing when a pastor should engage in a church issue, “If there’s to be a fight in your church, make sure it’s a good one. Fight the good fight, not the bad fight. A bad fight is with your parishioners or among them. The good fight is against the devil and his minions, not against human flesh and blood.”³³

When false teachers do come in from the outside of the church, elders must be ready to keep them away. Hopefully the elders have done a good enough job of teaching members how to spot false teaching, but if it does come, the church must not be timid to act accordingly. Rinne points out the importance of this: “Predators hunt sheep. Just as shepherds ward off lions and wolves, so elders must ward off false teachers.”³⁴ The church needs to be reminded that a lot of the epistles in the New Testament address false teachers for a reason.

A plurality of elders also can encourage good teaching through good reading. In each congregation, chances are there are multiple Christians reading a wide range of books, listening to podcasts, or even listening to sermons on YouTube. The beauty of elders is that they will probably have a good pulse on what the congregation is taking in for Christian truth so that they can encourage good material that is aligned with the gospel. One way elders can do this is by recommending books to be given out to members or having a bookshelf in the church where solid books and biblical instruction can be located. It is the elders’ responsibility to make sure church members are taking in gospel truth and not anything that would be harmful to them. John Piper has been quoted many

³³ Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 202.

³⁴ Rinne, *Church Elders*, 51.

times in regard to reading good, godly books outside the Bible. He suggests, “Books don’t change people; paragraphs do, sometimes even sentences.”³⁵

There will always be difficult tasks that pastors have to oversee in the church. Looking out for false teachers and bad teaching is not a task that overseers dream to do. However, guarding the flock against false teaching is something pastors are challenged to do as they protect the flock from outsiders and insiders.

The Need for Church Discipline

There are many things to consider in this section on church discipline. First, is the danger of churches being timid of church discipline. Second, every church needs to be protected from the sin that can divide and damage the church. Third, a plurality of elders is needed when the pastor himself comes under discipline. Lastly, a plurality of elders can be beneficial when they help the entire church go through a painful season of church discipline.

First, another virtue of a church that has elders is that they can help lead the congregation when it comes to church discipline. Any church, regardless of the model of government, should not be timid to practice church discipline. Mohler makes a strong case for the dangers of a church that avoids discipline: “The decline of church discipline is perhaps the most invisible failure of the contemporary church.”³⁶ A church with a plurality of elders could be helpful when the practice of church discipline is needed. A plurality of pastors helps carry the entire ministry load for the church. Therefore, when an issue comes up in which church discipline is needed, the more pastors walking through the issue the better.

Second, with a plurality of elders, a local church has a good chance of giving

³⁵ John Piper, *A Godward Life: Savoring the Supremacy of God in All of Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1997), 24.

³⁶ Al Mohler Jr., quoted in Greg Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 179.

all its attention to shepherding the sheep, especially when it comes to sanctification and sins. Although no one in a local church is perfect, certain situations require action by approaching an individual who is living in sin, not only for their benefit but also for the church's. Greg Allison offers his insight into church discipline: "Some sins are so dangerous, in terms of their potential to wreak havoc by corrupting the lives of church members, and are so reprehensible, in terms of the blight they bring by degrading the name of Jesus Christ, the members engaged in such sins are to be excommunicated immediately."³⁷ It is no wonder why so many churches have collapsed due to sin in the church. A pastor who is leading on his own must make difficult decisions, while juggling all his other duties, as to whether a person should remain in the church. It also becomes tempting to excuse sin when that member in sin is someone the pastor respects, or who gives a lot of money or sits in a leadership position. If a church has a plurality of elders, the decision could not just be on the one pastor but on all the elders, especially as the congregation voted for those men to help lead them.

A church where elders communicate that they love the members so much that they will not allow them to ruin their lives by running away from Christ and not toward him in repentance is a healthy church that is safe for everyone. When people think about church discipline these days, they think of something negative, such as getting excommunicated. However, churches who have gone through the long process of church discipline know that as time goes on, church discipline is a healthy action that shows gospel love to one another. Leeman states with good clarity, "Churches must not practice discipline for the sake of retribution, but for the sake of Gospel love."³⁸

Louis Berkhof reminds the church that when it comes to church discipline, "the primary consideration is the maintenance of the holiness of the church."³⁹ This is crucial

³⁷ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 195.

³⁸ Jonathan Leeman, *Church Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 130.

³⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1932), 599.

because not only do the elders wish to help struggling sheep come back to the fold, but also because the outside world is watching. How many atheists today use the excuse that because the church is full of sinners that they will never follow Christ? Obviously, there is more going on than just that, but the church should do all it can by guarding against sin in the church to maintain its witness and ministry to the outside world. The outside world watches the church daily—it sees the good, the bad, and the ugly. With this realization, the church must use every tool to make sure church discipline is done correctly and in love. Leeman submits, “The world doesn’t need a Christianized shadow of itself. It needs something full of light and flavor, something distinct.”⁴⁰

The third element within the issue of church discipline is pastors failing morally. The church needs to discipline a pastor who has been caught in sin or has caused severe damage inside the church and in the community with the upmost seriousness. Strauch states, “The elder qualifications empower each congregation and its leaders with the right and the objective means to hold back or remove unfit men from leadership.”⁴¹ Churches who have a single pastor can at times be the victim of pastors who have all the power. If one pastor has all the power, it is more difficult to release him from his job if he chooses not to repent. The value of having elders in the local church means that the congregation can see a group of pastors, approved by the congregation, working together to set a plan in place that is best for the pastor and the church.

Fourth, a plurality of elders has the discernment of a group of men coming together and exercising all their wisdom as opposed to the issue falling on the shoulders of just one man. Church discipline is not as easy as some might think, and it does require wisdom and patience. Leeman wisely points out, “Moving forward on church discipline can produce volatile discussions. For such occasions, a man surely wants to stand shoulder

⁴⁰ Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 15.

⁴¹ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 71.

to shoulder with mature leadership who share his convictions.”⁴² First, the group of elders must decide when discipline is warranted. When discipline is needed, that church does not want a burned-out, lone ranger pastor going into the situation by himself. The church is going to want godly men who have experience dealing with private and public sin. They are not men who have a desire to catch sinners in the act and punish them. These are godly men whose hearts break over the news of sin in the life of a brother or sister. The church can expect these men to go to the sinner with many tears and a plan of hopeful restoration. Exercising church discipline takes a great deal of wisdom and guidance from seasoned and godly men who have the ability and time to pour their hearts and minds into a situation and person.

Lastly in regard to church discipline, a plurality of elders helps with the blow that comes to the church when discipline is needed. If a pastor by himself comes to the church about an issue, members might wonder what exactly is going on and even at times question the pastor’s wisdom. However, when a group of pastors come to the church with broken hearts pleading with the sinner to repent, there is a better chance the church will trust the elders’ decision. Leeman writes, “It’s important to make sure that a church’s leadership as a whole is on board with church discipline, both in principle and in any give instance of practice. If one pastor or elder leads the charge while others sit back, because they are doubtful of either the principle or the application, disunity in the church will result.”⁴³

The purpose of church discipline is to help a church continue to walk in holiness and love one another as they live to glorify the Lord in word and in deed. Church discipline on paper makes logical sense, but in practice is often messy and disorienting. When a church does not have a plurality of elders, church discipline can be even more tricky, and is hard to accomplish without disrupting the church. If that is true, then the

⁴² Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 136.

⁴³ Leeman, *Church Discipline*, 136.

church shies away from a practice that is biblical and essential.

Conclusion

Churches without elders can function well and be biblically faithful to glorify Christ by preaching the gospel and loving each other. But there are many advantages to having elders that make the mission of the church perhaps easier and more efficient. The next chapter will look at the many benefits a church can have if they choose to have elders lead their congregation.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter offers the details of the implemented project by describing the elders' meetings. The training of incoming elders, which were the very first group of elders at JWBC, took place over the course of six months. The incoming elders and I met twice a month. The first meeting of each month was dedicated to praying for the church and the second meeting each month was focused on training lessons.

The elders in training are the result of JWBC going through a season of prayer and study as it considered going from a church where the pastor was the single authority under Christ with some committees on the side that assisted, along with the staff. After I preached through the book of Acts, I led the church through 1 Timothy and Titus while a group of deacons along with me wanted the church to pray about shifting the leadership structure to include elders. JWBC is a congregational church, so the people had to make the decision. After a year of praying and studying, along with multiple meetings and even two town hall open conversations, the church voted to move to elder-led leadership.

After the church voted to include elders in the church's leadership, a new church constitution was written and approved by the church. Next, the church prayed about who would be the first group of elders. The church was encouraged to look at men who were already acting like elders, men who had the characteristics, gifts, and practices. The church voted four men to come alongside myself to be the first group of elders installed at JWBC. The plan was to affirm these men by a church vote, train them for six months, and then ordain them.

Six-Month Meeting Timeline

Month 1	Meeting 1: Lesson 1 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion
Month 2	Meeting 1: Lesson 2 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion
Month 3	Meeting 1: Lesson 3 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion
Month 4	Meeting 1: Lesson 4: Lesson 4 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion
Month 5	Meeting 1: Lesson 5 & 6 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion
Month 6	Meeting 1: Lesson 7 & 8 & Discussion	Meeting 2: Prayer & Discussion

Elder Training Principles

As discussed previously, there are many benefits and blessings to having elders in the local church. There are also many principles to consider as the church takes on the responsibility to training leaders within the church, especially elders.

Theological Education

It is essential when looking at incoming elder training to shift focus to practical issues that will come up. What good is it to talk about elders in theory and academically when most of the necessary wisdom is a practical understanding of what goes on in the lives and ministry of elders.

The first issue concerns the theological training that goes on before an elder candidate is voted in and any elder training that happens afterwards. Ideally, as elders are nominated by the church, they are given several books to introduce them to the idea and practice of elders. For example, JWBC is new to the elder process, so when the elder candidates first started the process, I had them read *Church Elders* by Jeramie Rinne, a brief introduction to the ministry of elders.¹ This book was essential for them to understand a broad view of how the New Testament sees elders working in the local church and how they were to practically operate the ministry in the local church.

Reading books, however, is not necessarily most important when it comes to educating elders in a theological manner. The most important thing I did with the elders was to have ongoing conversations about the specific books they were reading. For example, we would read the first book *Church Elders*, then meet on a Sunday afternoon for two hours and discuss it, why it was important, and how we would apply it to the ministry of the church. However, I was really looking for each elder to be able to communicate and articulate what the book said. It was not good enough that the elder

¹ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2014), 2014.

candidate could tell me whether they liked the book or not, but if that elder could tell me what the book was suggesting elders do. Also, the more we read about biblical doctrine and issues in the church, it was important that they could articulate specific doctrine, philosophy of a biblical principle, and how it relates to a certain situation or person in the church. For example, I wanted the elder candidates to understand the biblical principle of church discipline. It was not enough for them to understand what church discipline is and agree that it is a good idea; I wanted them to have the conviction that church discipline is a gift to helping the church be holy and represent Christ in a dignified manner to the outside world. Even though it is not easy, elders would be able to talk to a man who wants to divorce his wife for no biblical reason, and the elder could articulate why the church is against it and what actions the church would take if this man continued in sin.

In addition to biblical principles like church discipline, other books were critical to understanding ministry in general. It was important to me that the elders stepping into a ministry role understood that ministry is a marathon and that the heart of the minister needs to be on guard against Satan. Therefore, we had long conversations of how important their personal relationship with the Lord is, how important and crucial the health of their marriage and family is, and it is not selfish to take care of the body, mind, and soul on a regular basis. I was also encouraged to have conversations with the elders about their reading of the topic of shepherding the people at JWBC. For the last twenty years, the church has had the idea that pragmatism leads the way of gospel ministry. The idea that “if you build it they will come” was essential in the minds and hearts of JWBC members. Thus, when millions of dollars were spent on buildings, creativity, and, frankly, trying to look like the world, they realized that not only was it not biblical, but it also did not work. The outside world did not care, nor did they respond to the attempt of “bridge building” that the church thought would work. As the elders began to examine

Care of Souls,² which focused on shepherding people's hearts and minds, this discussion naturally came up. It was a healthy discussion on the idea that the gospel ministry is about glorifying Christ through focusing on how to shepherd people's souls. Therefore, the greatest distraction is all the stuff that takes energy away from actual people. The elders and I began to realize that if we maintained a hyper focus on the people inside the church that God has given, there should be a natural attraction to those that are looking for a healthy church.

However, shepherding people's souls is not always clean, nice, and neat. Practically speaking, it was productive for the elders to have conversations about messy discipleship. If elders are called to shepherd the actual people in the pews, this would mean having difficult conversations about the sin in their life, the sin others brought into their life, walking through death and disease, and all other kinds of sufferings that human beings experience in a fallen world. This kind of discussion brought up a major point of decision or crossroads that I could see on the elder candidates' faces.

After reading a few books and having lengthy discussions on their application, the elder candidates began to see that this ministry was different than anything they had gone through before in the church. This ministry was not like going on a trip or helping in the nursery once a month. This ministry would involve them committing a large part of their life to shepherding, leading, and praying for the people at JWBC, and in my mind that was huge. There is always the practical issue of an elder candidate going through training and thinking that this is just a small portion of their life, like signing up to bring chips to a Sunday school get together. As the candidates were exposed to the biblical meaning of the heart and mind of an elder, they began to be overwhelmed, in a good way. They began to see the seriousness of this ministry and of this calling. This seriousness was filled with joy, depth, and eternal work for the glory of Jesus Christ and the health of

² Harold L. Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls: Cultivating A Pastor's Heart* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham , 2019).

every member of the church.

As the elders in training complete their reading and discussion of their reading, a practical question must be asked: is theological training and education completed at that point? In other words, once the elder completes the initial reading and is officially ordained as an elder of the church, does theological reading and training stop? If the leadership of the church encourages members to never stop growing and learning about God and his holy written Word, then the elders should in turn not stop growing in their theological education. Therefore, elders should be expected to continue learning and growing in theological education.

Elders need to continue educating themselves on how to respond to Christians and non-Christians to better understand how to shepherd people in a post-Christian culture. An example would be annual elder retreats where time is dedicated to covering topics that the church is facing at the time, and having theological discussions concerning where elders stand and how the church should respond to those issues.

Once they are ordained and begin to operate as full functioning elders, practical wisdom suggests that they continue some type of reading. An example of this would be if a church begins to ask how often the Lord's Supper should occur in a calendar year, it would be beneficial for the elders to have convictions about the Lord's Supper through reading, prayer, and conversations so that the right decision can be made. Or, for example at JWBC, while there has been a lot of emphasis on elders, another area that needs attention is the deacon ministry. Therefore, it makes sense that the elders would continue their education by reading about how to improve the deacon ministry.

It should also be stated that education for leadership in the church today is available in many different forms. Practically speaking, an elder could have access to seminary level training on the internet from the comfort of their kitchen table. In addition, some churches provide tools for biblical counseling in video format, or ministries like Simeon Trust have videos to help elders understand the ministry of preaching. The

internet provides invaluable training for those that want to grow and learn. There is not a good excuse for elders to not continue their education because much is available online to learn and grow in different ministries.

Additionally, the church today is blessed to have access to many biblical and theologically sound conferences that can be crucial to elders' encouragement, growth, and learning. While no one should depend on conferences alone, and elders should not attempt to attend every Christian conference, good biblical conferences have their place and encourage many. At the very least, Christian conferences help encourage leaders who need time away to recharge and refocus on their ministry. Conferences like The Gospel Coalition, Sing, and Basics give shepherds an opportunity to retreat while they hear the gospel preached to their own souls. Conference breakout sessions also may encourage elders to think through a variety of issues in today's local church. Many of the overwhelming issues that face the local church today leave elders feeling unsure, unequipped, and fearful. A place where these shepherds can listen to other godly men discuss solutions is instant encouragement and help. Conferences can provide elders with hope. They may realize that they are not alone and in fact other churches are like minded and have been able to solve some of their same issues.

Lastly, elders would do well to educate themselves by looking to other brothers in ministry that have gone before them. Being educated in church history is an encouraging and helpful tool for every pastor. Church history allows leaders to review history and look at how particular church leaders or pastors began and finished their ministry. Elders can read about how men were victorious in their faithful praying and preaching, and what land mines they avoided or set off. Looking to the past shows those in the present what items need to be modeled and what areas need to be avoided. Christians that have gone before are a treasure, and leaders today should show appreciation to them and learn from them. David Powlison notes why people need to learn from others in general:

Because you learn about people. You gain a feel for human experience. You come to understand riches and nuances that you could never understand just from knowing the circle of people you happen to know you come to understand the ways

that people differ from each other, and the ways we are alike an exceedingly valuable component of wisdom. You become a bigger person with a wider scope of perception. All those things you come to know illustrate and amplify the relevance and wisdom of our God.³

Nothing is new under the sun. The kingdom of God shows multiple brothers and sisters who are alive and dead who should be looked to as examples in the faith. This practical education makes better shepherds for God's glory and for God's people.

Preaching

In the first few chapters of Acts there is a major focus on prayer and preaching, which should also be emphasized in today's churches. Elders must understand the role preaching plays in serving God's people. As the early church in Acts needed to hear the Word of God clearly, so does the church today.

The idea that preaching is important to the practical ministry of God's church and to God's people comes from the teachings of Jesus and Paul, who emphasized the preaching of God's Word. Passages like John 6 and 2 Timothy 4 show the importance of the teachings of Jesus and not the teachings of man. Even the Great Commission in Matthew 28 reminds that Jesus commanded the disciples to "teach them all that I have commanded you" (v. 20) Therefore, it is important that elders do not simply validate preaching but practically believe in it to a point where it shapes the entire ministry of the church. Al Mohler observes this thought of preaching:

What a high privilege it is to be a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our Lord has given us the honor, the calling, the stewardship, and the commission of preaching a saving gospel to a world that is in desperate need of salvation and all to the end that Jesus would be worshipped as savior in every tongue, for every trap and people and nation.⁴

However, there is a practical side to preaching that elders must not only agree to but also celebrate and help shepherd people to understand. Many preachers in the Christian church today think they are preaching God's Word when they are not. Even

³ David Powlison, quoted in John Piper, "He Sees with New Eyes: My Love for David Powlison (1949–2019)," June 9, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/he-sees-with-new-eyes>.

⁴ Albert Mohler Jr., *He Is Not Silent* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 37.

worse, many evangelical Christian preachers think they are preaching expository sermons when they are not. Elders must come to a good definition of expository preaching. Many definitions have come and gone, but the general belief among expository preachers is that the main point of the text is the main point of the sermon. Expository preachers believe God's Word is delivered to the people best when the author's intent is clearly developed and communicated. John Piper explains,

The entertainment-oriented preacher gives the impression that he is not tethered to an authoritative book in what he says. What he says doesn't seem to be shaped and constrained by an authority outside himself. He gives the impression that what he says has significance for reasons other than that it manifestly expresses the meaning and significance of the Bible. So he seems untethered to objective authority.⁵

There is a genuine excitement among churches today who are preaching expository sermons from their pulpits. More churches are seeing people respond positively to the exposition of God's Word, because for most people in the late 1990s and early 2000s trying to find these types of churches was difficult with the rise of topical preaching. Too many churches were trying to reach people out of man-centered sermons instead of God-centered, which led to more topical preaching than exposition.

There is a good chance that incoming elders who are going into training already understand the direct benefits of sitting under expository preaching. The elder candidate in training has been the direct beneficiary of God's Word being proclaimed and working in his mind and heart, so his sanctification has been fueled for the glory of God. However, there is a time when the elder candidate comes in for training that the pieces to the puzzle are laid out and put together so he can see not only the benefit of expository preaching but also how it works. Even though every elder may not be a great expository preacher, they are able to proclaim the doctrines of the Bible by letting the text dominate their speech as opposed to their own opinions.

Elders in training should be able to voice and communicate why expository preaching is essential for the church and how it is biblically commanded in Scripture.

⁵ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 121.

This also helps elders' understanding of hermeneutics and homiletics. Tim Keller states, "If, however, you believe that the preaching of the word is one of the main channels for God's action in the world, then with great care and confidence you will uncover the meaning of the text, fully expecting that God's spirit will act in listeners lives."⁶ Thus, elders must be taught how to take a biblical text and communicate the author's intent, what the text means, and how to accurately apply it. God is glorified when the preacher communicates accurately who the text was written for and how the original author intended to apply the meaning.

Lastly, elders must not only celebrate and believe the conviction of expository preaching from the pulpit, but also believe in the powerful work that proclaiming the Word of God does over an entire congregation. God's Word is alive and active not only when it comes out of the pulpit but also in the midst of counseling sessions, Sunday school classes, membership classes, and small groups. Too many individuals live in fear and doubt because one church leader said something inconsistent with the Bible. For example, how many pastors have met with a church member who doubted their salvation because a preacher told them that unless they have perfect faith they are not a Christian. I recently met with a woman in her 80s who was afraid of dying because she wrestled with some doubts about her faith. The bedrock of this doubt was that she always wondered how God could be so loving to a sinner like her, and a former pastor told her she would be no use to the kingdom if she had any doubts at all. It is critical that elders guard the entire teaching and preaching of the church to make sure the sheep are well fed and are healthy at all times.

Honesty

The next practical issue that is essential to discuss among elders is honesty. This biblical principle breaks down in several different ways. First, there is the issue of

⁶ Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 98.

honesty with the elders themselves. Each elder should have a desire to continue in their own holiness and expect the other elders to do the same. If elders fall into sin and compromise themselves morally, the church is not just affected but compromised. Christian church members always have an impact on the rest of the body. Just as Paul encouraged the church in Corinth to see themselves as individual parts of a body, so the church today needs members to see themselves as essential parts of the body. Therefore, when one member falls into sin and is not repentant it will affect the rest of the body, and the church in turn suffers. Thus, this is even more true for leaders of the church, and elders must maintain not perfection but a consistent walk of holiness with Christ. The elders walk in this holiness not just for their own soul but also for the care of each member of the church as members are watching their conduct and following in their example.

Practically, how do elders help keep one another accountable to walking in holiness and staying far from sin that can harm the church? Just as leaders encourage each member of the church to be wise in staying away from not only sin but the temptation that entices them, so should elders be practical about how they plan to fight temptation. Wisdom would say it is a good idea for elders to partner with one another and have a form of questions to ask each other on a regular basis, perhaps even monthly. These questions should cover elders' battle against lust, how they handle finances, what their devotional life looks like, what their prayer life looks like, marriage and family, and much more. These questions may not be the end all be all of the conversation regarding accountability, but it would be a good place to start. Elders must make a practical attempt at being honest with one another about their sanctification because it matters to the Lord and to the church that is watching and following.

The other form of honesty that must happen practically among elders concerns what is happening in the church. In any organization where natural leaders work, there is an automatic desire for forward progress. Natural leaders have the natural passion to see production that happens on a regular basis. An obstacle that can occur in any organization,

especially the church, is not being honest about big issues that are intimidating to talk about because certain people do not want to talk about them. Not addressing these issues could come down to multiple reasons. However, most often it involves a type of lack of courage or laziness. Regardless of the reason why some issues are not addressed, it is the job of shepherds to lead the congregation to the best of their ability for the glory of God. Thus, elders are required to look at the practical issues of the church and take action by praying and following the Lord's guidance and wisdom in how to handle issues. An example would be a church discipline issue; most elders would not get excited about approaching a member of the church about their sin. Church discipline issues require courage and fortitude, but it also means getting involved in a situation with a fellow human. However, the New Testament does not lead elders to believe that church discipline can simply be put off, and holiness not be taken seriously. Practically speaking it is always good to have an elder in the room that leads the charge in honesty and is not afraid to be blunt about difficult issues; however, all elders need to be honest when it comes to issues in the church.

Another form of honesty in dealing with larger issues in the church would simply be the health of the church. It is easy for elders to get wrapped up in the week-to-week details of the church, but one of the main jobs of elders is to oversee the overall spiritual health of the church. This means there needs to be a practical and honest discussion from time to time on the church's general spiritual health. Elders need to be comfortable asking on a regular basis, how healthy are we as a church overall? Elders must ask honest questions about the health of the staff, the health of each ministry within the church, the health of volunteers, the health of the Sunday morning service in regard to the ministry of music and the ministry of the proclaimed Word. Elders need to ask questions about the general health of the deacon ministry, and the overall health of building and finances. Additionally, elders need to be honest about where the church is heading in regard to the future. At times, elders will be required to ask difficult questions about

where the church should be in ten years as far as general health, finances, and vision. However, honest conversations should always arrive back to how healthy the church members are—are the people growing in Christ, and how do we help guide that process.

The next practical and honest conversation that needs to happen among elders is recognizing the idols that are present within the culture. As elders look at culture and see the sins and idols of the world, they must have a good sense of what is happening and how it impacts the church. For example, global conflict, a financial crisis, a global disease such as COVID-19, and even certain political seasons that cause great distress on a nation should all be noticed and prayed about. This does not mean that elders should be cultural experts in all phases of society, but it does mean that they are honest about being good missionaries and understanding the environment in which the sheep live. Wisdom and logic would say that elders need to be forthright and honest when they meet together about what is happening in the world and how they should lead the church in that certain season of difficulty or complexity.

The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a good example of what the church had to do as far as making decisions in a quick amount of time. Most churches did not have much time to think through what it should do as far as meeting or not meeting. Churches had to make the best decisions in real time, while everyone had an opinion on the subject and were not afraid to let the pastors know what they thought. Personally, I will never forget pacing my living room as a pastor without elders trying to take all the information I had about COVID-19 and make a decision on whether we were going to have services. The pressure and stress that I felt at that moment were overwhelming, and fortunately not a lot of other people were able to relate. However, there was no escaping the issue and I had to be honest with myself that this is where we were as a culture, and I as the pastor had to make the best decision that I could. Practical logic needs to happen in every elder room when certain seasons arrive in the church where elders must be honest about a situation and make the best decision that they can.

Lastly, elders need to be honest with each other and how well they work together. In my early days of ministry, I naively thought that once the church had elders everything in the church would operate better just by having them. However, that is never the case for a church that has a plurality of elders. Although the church decides to have a plurality of elders and those elders are voted in, those men are still sinners in the progress of sanctification. Elders must be honest about their personalities and how that can help or hurt a given season in the church. For example, an elder may be too aggressive with his viewpoint and choose to use that aggression to control the conversation and steer his agenda in a particular meeting. Elders need to be honest with each other about their personality traits and shortcomings, and every elder individually needs to be honest with themselves about their personality traits, strengths, and weaknesses.

If a group of elders can be honest about their personality, gifts, strengths, and weaknesses, then they can be confident that they are not trying or attempting to interrupt the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, elders who are not honest about their shortcomings and weaknesses not only hurt the other elders but also the church because they do not lead themselves in an honest way.

Dishonesty of any kind prohibits execution and delays the growth of the people of God that Christ has made for the elders to oversee. Elders hurt themselves and the church when they do not have the courage to face difficult conversations. It is essential that elders have a natural bent toward honesty in such a way that it benefits elder meetings and elder leadership in the church.

Prayer

In 1 Corinthians Paul states, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters in anything, but only God gives the growth” (3:6–7). Practically speaking, what is more important than the elders’ job to consistently pray for the people to whom God has entrusted them. If a person gathered one hundred elders from different churches, there is a good chance all

those elders would agree that prayer is an essential part of their role. However, if asking those same pastors how many times in a given week they actually pray for the church and themselves, the answer may be different. This is not to assume that every elder in every church is not consistently praying, but that prayer should be a priority within the elder body.

JWBC has done its best to schedule prayer as a priority in meetings. For example, there are two elder meetings per month, the first meeting consists of an open dialogue on issues currently happening in the church, and the second meeting is a prayer meeting. The elders try to fight against the distraction of discussing church matters and direct themselves to the work of prayer for the people at JWBC. While there are always church matters to discuss, the elders do a great job of making sure the prayer meeting is reserved to lift up the people of JWBC to the Lord.

JWBC elders are also trying to provide accountability where two elders meet one-on-one each month to discuss accountability for their personal lives, and prayer would be a part of this. If prayer is asking God to do what only he can do in the work of ministry, then not praying reveals a theological problem about their belief or unbelief in God. If elders in a particular church are not committed to the practical practice of praying for God's people, then from God's point of view it must mean that those people think they can do everything on their own and do not need God to intercede. Rinne writes, "Overseers can teach the Bible but they cannot make people obey it from the heart. An elder can exhort fighting members to be reconciled, but he cannot make either party forgive. God has given elders a goal that only God himself can bring to pass."⁷

Practically, elders could consider praying through the church directory. Some churches may not have a pictorial directory, but most churches do have a digital membership record. Elders could view different members in the church's computer system to pray for them. It is impossible for every elder to remember every person, but

⁷ Rinne, *Church Elders*, 17.

every elder should be expected to have some kind of list of people they pray for on a regular basis. Benedicta Ward notes,

The brethren also asked him, amongst all great works, which is the virtue which requires the greatest effort? He answered, forgive me, but I think there is no labor greater than that of prayer to God. For every time a man wants to pray, his enemies, the demons, want to prevent him, for they know that it is only by turning him from prayer that they can hinder his journey. Whatever good work a man undertakes, if he perseveres in it, he will attain rest. But prayer is warfare to the last breath.⁸

Elders need to not only pray for church members, but also themselves. It is not selfish or prideful for elders to ask God to fully equip them, keep them humble, and give them wisdom in leading the people of God. In fact, humility is present when an elder comes before the throne of God asking for help to do the work of the ministry. Elders who know they are still in the process of sanctification should be in the habit of coming before the throne of grace and to ask the father in Jesus's name to guard them from any sin that would dishonor the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In addition to elders praying for themselves, healthy churches require that elders pray for other elders. How encouraging is it when an elder knows that another elder is consistently praying for him as he shepherds the people of God? Elders praying for other elders establishes a stronghold among them that they are united in the name of Jesus Christ to take on any and all evil that creeps into the church.

One could argue that prayer and preaching are the two main things churches must succeed at over anything else according to what is seen in the book of Acts. However, prayer is not usually understood in the church today. At times, prayer is something that is checked off as opposed to pursued with great intensity, not because prayer is the answer, but because God is the answer, and therefore we must pray.

⁸ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1975), 21–22.

Patience

To say that the Christian church is surrounded by the attraction of pragmatism that promises to create numerical growth by man's methods is an understatement. Most evangelical Christian leaders would admit to the authority of God's Word. However, at times evangelical leaders ignore the sufficiency of God's Word and make up what they want the Bible to say to fit their system. This is why it is easy to walk into a Sunday morning service and hear little about the problem of sin and Jesus as the solution because the church leaders are too busy dazzling the mind and heart with audio, video, and emotionalism. This leads to people following Jesus under the false idea of the best life now because in the moment it feels good, which then leads to people not knowing how to handle living in a sinful world.

Churches can trust that the good and perfect Lord Jesus would make sure his people have the instructions for his church to be faithful and even successful in his eyes. The primary question that may need to be asked to the American church is define what success is in our congregations? The hope would be that Christian leaders realize that Jesus did not abandon the future leaders of the church without specific instructions on what a successful church looks like. Therefore, churches must ask themselves what they see in the Scriptures that would communicate what a church faithful to Jesus looks like.

If evangelical Christian leaders look at Jesus's private and public ministry, and the epistles of Paul, Peter, and John, then they should conclude that the real work is the long and hard work of the person's soul as they proclaim the Word of God day in and day out. Jesus himself spoke about agriculture as it relates to following God, where there are no shortcuts and no outside influences to speed up the process. It is the slow hard work of real eternal change. Harold Senkbeil writes,

If we can learn anything from the scriptures and the ancient heritage of the care of souls, it's this: Impatient shepherds are their own worst enemy. We certainly don't want pastors to be slackers. All the same, souls are not won or kept by hectic activity, but by steady, deliberate work and service of Christ Jesus, who is the real bishop and guardian of souls. Whoever wants to provide real help in Christ sheep

pin had better keep one steady eye on the sheep and the other fixed on the Good Shepherd.⁹

So how do Senkeil's thoughts apply to training elders? Practically speaking, new elders must be made aware that real kingdom work that lasts for eternity is a work that is slow, takes time, and is dependent on God. Otherwise, elders may think they are the author and finisher of the people's faith instead of God. For example, if an elder has spent his whole working career as an engineer or an IT specialist, or as a human resource manager, then he might be tempted to believe that everything is built on immediate results. His whole working background is, if there is a problem, there should be an immediate fix that leads to automatic results. In this church, for the elder, this could mean that if a person who has heard the gospel and is attending church does not show fruit, then there is a problem, and the church needs to fix it right away. However, those who have been in the father's field of the ministry know very well it is not that easy.

Ministry takes time because ministry is about shepherding people's souls. Ministry contains some issues of finances and business, but doing actual kingdom work involves people's hearts, souls, minds, and strengths. If the church is to be about the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, then the church must have a hyper focus on the people. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne explain,

Whatever other signs of life and growth we must look for in our congregation's involvement, activities, newcomers, finances, number of staff, buildings, and so on—the only growth that has significance in God's plans is the growth of believers. This is what the growing vine really is: it is individual, born-again believers, grafted into Christ by his word and spirit, and drawn into mutually edifying fellowship with one another.¹⁰

Bi-Monthly Lesson Meetings

Two to 3 times a month, for six months, the four elders in training and myself met at the church in the conference room on Sunday afternoons to discuss the books we

⁹ Senkbeil, *The Care of Souls*, 87.

¹⁰ Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias, 2009), 117.

were reading and to pray together. The main purpose of these meetings was to engage with each other in discussion to flesh out what we were reading as it directly applies to JWBC. I wanted the men to see the principles behind the books on elders and see how they fit into the lives of the people at the church. The aim was not just for elders to know what church discipline is, but for them to be able to explain to JWBC members why it is practiced. These training times were very helpful and also gave the men time to fellowship and pray together.

Lesson 1: What Is an Elder?

The first meeting required that the incoming elders read *Church Elders* by Rinne.¹¹ The elders liked the small but adequate description of what they were being asked to do as new elders. This book, like other required reading, helped them ask questions that they did not think of before, and fostered healthy conversations about elders. The basic goal of the first lesson was to answer the question, what is an elder?

Church Elders also brought up questions about making sure JWBC was a place where the Scriptures were not just believed in but celebrated. The elders were committed to seeing that the church was led by the Bible and that it flowed from the pulpit into every area of ministry within the church. Next, the elders saw in the book the emphasis of having the right heart as an elder—a heart that was not pursuing eldership for personal gain, but that was tender to the Lord and compassionate toward each member of the church. Lastly, the book gave the elders the opportunity to talk about how to pursue the sheep that had scattered from the church that needed to be pursued.

Next, I led the elders through 1 Timothy 3:1–7, looking at the basic qualifications of elders, along with Titus 1:5–16. Reviewing these two texts helped foster healthy conversations about the qualifications of elders. Next, the elders and I looked at 1 Peter 5:1–4, where Peter encourages the elders to shepherd the flock. This was a good

¹¹ Rinne, *Church Elders*.

conversation about remembering the supreme job description for elders. Within this section of the meeting, I also discussed that each person in the group would have an accountability partner within the group of elders. Each pair of elders would meet once a month and ask each other a series of questions that pointed to their own personal holiness. These questions of accountability covered lust, finances, marriage and family, time in the Bible, prayer, and evangelism and discipleship.

After looking at the Pastoral Epistles, I asked the elders to read Acts 20 for the dramatic picture of Paul urging the elders at Ephesus to watch out for false teaching as he was likely seeing them for the last time on earth. The elders at JWBC saw the scene as moving and important as Paul was filled with personal love for the elders and was passionate about their role in the church. Acts 20 may have been the most important Bible passage we looked at as the elders saw the seriousness of what God was asking them to do. Acts 20 also brought up the important emphasis on unity among elders and watching out for false teachers. The meeting ended with an emphasis on praying for each other as the elders felt the weighty responsibility of leading the church.

Lesson 2: The Marks of a Healthy Church and the Sufficiency of Scripture

In the second meeting, the elders were required to read *How to Build Healthy Church* by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander.¹² This book brought up several topics and questions that the elders were interested in discussing. However, the majority of the first half of the meeting was devoted to fleshing out the definitions of the terms “authority of Scripture” and “the sufficiency of Scripture.” I emphasized to the elders that the church of today was, in my opinion, facing the battle of seeing the Bible as sufficient for their everyday lives. The elders saw again how the church needs to display the celebration that God’s Word has real meaning and instruction for every detail of our lives. To further the

¹² Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build Healthy Churches: A Practical Guide for Deliberate Leadership* (Wheaton: IL, Crossway, 2021).

conversation, I asked the elders to look at John 6:63 as Jesus makes the point that his words give spirit and life. This realization should emphasize the Christian's need and longing for the Bible to lead the church.

Next, the elders and I discussed how the belief in the sufficiency of Scripture should have a direct impact on what preaching looks like on Sunday morning, counseling church members, church discipline, Sunday school classes, and small groups. Next, the elders looked at how the sufficiency of Scripture should guide the overall vision of the church and long-term vision planning. I encouraged the elders to think about how adoration for God and his Word should have an obvious impact on the vision of children's and youth ministries in how the church chooses to teach and guide children.

The elder meeting continued by returning to the concern about how the sufficiency of the Bible has a direct effect on Sunday morning services. I then asked the elders the practical question of how our view of the Bible can be evaluated on Sunday morning. The meeting ended by realizing that we had a desire to see the Sunday morning service as successful when the people of JWBC leave a Sunday service praising God and loving Him more as the church sees His attributes from the Scriptures.

The elders and I turned attention to asking, what were some genuine signs or marks of a healthy church? I then gave the elders time to think and evaluate if JWBC at the present time had marks of a healthy church. The elders agreed that there were some healthy marks, however they could be deeper and more profound. The elders also saw some other marks of a healthy church that were in Dever and Alexander's book, that they wanted to see emphasized. One example the elders were led to discuss concerning marks of a healthy church was the idea of membership and member expectations. The elders saw that, first, the church membership roll needed a lot of work, and that the current eight hundred members on the roll do not accurately reflect the actual number of regular and involved members today. This led to the first conviction for action later to be addressed. It was exciting to see the elders agree that this issue should be brought up and addressed.

Next, the elders were kind in their remarks about the preaching ministry at JWBC. They discussed how the preaching ministry was one of expository preaching that honored Christ and encouraged the Christian. Next, I led the elders to consider the idea of church discipline, asking them if the church had a history of being involved in any kind of church discipline. A couple of elders recalled a few times where known sin in some members' lives was publicly addressed and presented. The elders recalled how the church discipline issue was difficult but healthy for the church.

Lastly, I led the elders to observe how a healthy working staff is a mark of a healthy church. I presented them with the point that the leadership of the church needed to model a healthy working relationship that honored Christ and reflected the desires of unity within the church. Thankfully, the JWBC staff is in a good place of health, but as I pointed out to the elders, the staff welcome the encouragement, mentorship, and guidance from the elders themselves.

Lesson 3: Personal Holiness

I began lesson 3 by suggesting that this was probably the most important meeting that would take place in the training process considering an obvious series of moral failures in the last few years among evangelical leaders. I did not suggest that I had all the answers or even close to it, but rather the elders must continue to understand that Satan will attack us and tempt us to morally fall. Before this meeting, the elders read chapter 4 of Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership* which focused on qualified leadership.¹³ Within this chapter, Strauch addresses the biblical qualifications of what is expected of an elder from God's perspective. I asked the elders to give a general response to what they read and the thoughts it produced as they considered their own life in being an elder. The conversation was weighty, as each man faced the reality of their own personal holiness and how it had an immediate impact on their role as an elder within the church.

¹³ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1991), 67–83.

Next, I reminded the elders how they will need to meet with their accountability partner/fellow elder, to ensure that they are holding each other accountable to living a life that is fitting for a leader in the church. The questions they would ask their accountability partners range from what they look at on the internet, to finances, and how they are personally involved in discipleship and evangelism. The elders would also be required to talk to their elder partners about their marriage and family. I then asked the elders to respond to what Christians are seeing in the nation as church leaders are failing due to immorality. We explored through discussion how the sin of one leader can have a traumatic impact on the leader's future life, family, and other believers.

The elders also read Romans 8:1–11 before arriving at the meeting. I led them through the passage concentrating on a godly life focused on the things of God and not the things of the flesh. I also pointed out the idea that Christians, even though imperfect, have been given a new heart that longs for and prefers the things of the Spirit as opposed to the flesh. We then discussed what helps our minds stay on the things of the Spirit, and what things might distract our minds and lead us into temptation.

Lesson 4: A Gospel Community on Mission

After an opening time of prayer, I reminded the incoming elders of JWBC's vision—to be a gospel community on mission. We then went through the words in the vision statement describing why each word was appropriate as something the church valued.

Concerning the gospel, I led the elders to consider how it has a lifelong depth and value to their personal lives and to the life of the church. I encouraged them to remember how Paul spoke to the church of Corinth: “Now, I would remind you brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word that I preached to you—unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor 15:1–2). The elders and I discussed how the gospel effects

every inch of our lives, not just our salvation. I taught how the gospel is not just important for our own lives, but also for the overall vision of the church. The church needs to be a place that is filled with the love and grace of Christ that has a direct impact on marriages and families, staff relations, finances, and worship. The main idea of this gospel truth being that because the Christian's faith is in Christ, the Christian is loved and forgiven, which releases the Christian to love in freedom so that they can love and serve others.

Concerning community, I reminded the elders that the strong culture of the gospel within JWBC should automatically lead to sincere and dynamic community. A group of forgiven sinners before the Father God should love each other in a way that fuels sincere Christian community—a sincere community that loves, encourages, lovingly rebukes, and enjoys spending time with one another. I also reminded the elders that this was one of the main reasons why JWBC was experiencing growth—because guests can see a group of Christians operating like a family when they visit. I then encouraged the elders to have a lengthy discussion on how the value of a gospel community has an impact on Sunday school and small groups.

Lastly, I talked to the elders about how a gospel community should naturally fuel missions. A church filled with believers who know that they are only secure in their salvation because of the blood of Jesus should naturally fuel a culture of reaching the lost. I then reminded the elders that as church leaders build a culture of gospel community, they also make sure that the church is not committed to too many mission projects and locations. In the spirit of being a gospel community that wants to have a real impact, the desire is to help a few mission places and have a greater impact. We do not want to be a mile wide and an inch deep when it comes to JWBC having an impact in the world. Therefore, JWBC can commit to growing relationships with a few missionaries and help them the best way we can by sending teams to them every year.

As we concluded the evening, I reminded the elders how important it was to not try to do everything for everyone, but to be true to the core values as a church. God

continues to be faithful and good to JWBC as we make him the main focus at all times, and I urged the elders, as leaders of the church, that they needed to continue to do that.

Lesson 5: Shepherding

One of my favorite lessons to teach the incoming elders happened on the night we discussed real and true shepherding. The elders were required to read *The Shepherd Leader* by Timothy Witmer.¹⁴ I gave time for them to respond to the main points of the book and mention what stood out to them. I also wanted to hear them apply what they read to the future of the church and their role in it. It was encouraging to hear that the elders were seeing a theme take place about what success looks like in a church from a biblical perspective. Some talked about how they grew up in churches where they appeared to have a vision of success, such as the biggest building or the most dynamic youth ministry, but this book seemed to suggest something very different. The discussion with the elders then turned to Jesus's conversation with Peter in John 21 and how Jesus explained that the vision for Peter's life was to feed the sheep.

I then explained to the elders what I was seeing throughout the nation from a pastor's perspective. I talked with them about what most of church history would consider pastoring, especially when it came to Puritans like Richard Baxter. For the most part, the church and its leaders have given up on seeing church success as lovingly shepherding each individual member. I went on to talk to the elders about how we need to define success as making sure each member at JWBC is loved, cared for, and ministered to, and no member was being forgotten about. I then posed the question to the elders: what would happen if that was the focus of the ministry?

The elders agreed that, in the last few years, JWBC has been looking for an identity but did not know where to turn. They also saw that lovingly shepherding each member was not just biblical but also logical. There was also an admission from the elders

¹⁴ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010).

concerning how many members did not feel adequately cared for because the church was focused on so many things that the very church itself was being forgotten about.

Lesson 6: Preaching

Before meeting with the elders to discuss the topic of preaching, I asked them to check out a resource that I have used in the past. A few years ago, I was a part of a preaching group that was born out of the ministry Simeon Trust. Simeon Trust is an online resource led by David Helm¹⁵ that helps preachers with their preaching. One of the greatest encouragements to me within this online resource was the principle of what expository preaching is, and how it impacts the local church. I asked the elders to watch online all eight of the sessions discussing expository preaching and to come prepared to discuss their thoughts.

This meeting on preaching was what I would call a defining moment in the church. Not only did the elders come to the meeting understanding their assignment, but they also knew, maybe for the first time, what preaching God's Word looked like on Sunday mornings. I invited the elders to consider asking themselves how they know that the church is truly preaching the Word of God. I led the elders to consider the thought that if the main preacher is not getting across the main point of the text, then is he truly preaching God's Word. Obviously, the impact of this question was encouraging because for the first time in a long time the elders were convicted and convinced that preaching God's Word by taking a text out of the Bible and letting God's Word speak to God's people was not just right but also meaningful.

Not only was this a helpful discussion and lesson on defining preaching, but it also served as a line in the sand for the pulpit at JWBC for years to come. The men in the room understood the vision behind preaching book-by-book and verse-by-verse and saw the obvious value in giving people God each Sunday by giving them his Word. The other

¹⁵ Simeon Trust, www.simeontrust.org.

point that was helpful in talking to the elders about preaching was that it released them to hold me accountable for continuing to preach the Bible and encouraging me when they thought I was straying. Additionally, this lesson helped to create a group of men that were giving me, or anyone other preacher in the pulpit at JWBC, honest feedback. Before JWBC installed elders into their constitution, the pastor really did not have much feedback other than a few comments here and there on Sunday mornings. I certainly tried to encourage the staff to give me some response, other than “good message pastor.” I encouraged the elders to break down the sermon and to provide real and honest feedback and not just about how it sounded. I told the elders I wanted them to evaluate the sermon how Helm would want—to look at the handling of the author’s intent within the text, the application of the text, and how the gospel of Christ fit into the text. I wanted the elders to know that night in the meeting that the pulpit does not belong to me but to the church as we all want the pulpit to glorify Christ and feed his sheep.

Lesson 7: Applied Theology

In lesson 7, I requested that the elders read *Christian Beliefs: 20 Basics Every Christian Should Know* by Wayne Grudem.¹⁶ I also recommended that each elder purchase Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* and have on hand to read it when they could.¹⁷ The focus of this lesson was to first talk about what theology was and was not. I wanted to make sure the elders new that theology was nothing to fear or be intimidated by. I wanted them to understand that theology was the science of God, one of the ways we get to know God, and does not just fill our heads with robotic information.

I also discussed the need to focus on certain topics within theology. First, I addressed the idea that biblical theology was seeing the themes and principles within

¹⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022).

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology. An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

Scripture that are important to the Christian's growth. I pointed out the general theme of all of Scripture, the centrality of Christ the creator, redeemer, and Lord, and how the model of the church is seen in Scripture. There are many other topics to discuss in biblical theology, but for the first lesson I limited it just to these. Second, I brought up apologetics and the attributes of God, with the end goal of glorifying Christ. Third, I brought up the topic of conversion because I wanted them to have a wholistic understanding of what it looked like for people, especially children, to be saved. JWBC can easily struggle with rushing to assumptions when it comes to children and youth events and be too quick to assure salvation when no conversations have taken place with the child and their parents. The conversation then turned to addressing whether to have altar calls during the Sunday morning service. Thankfully, the different opinions that the elders communicated about Sunday morning invitations were done with grace and humility. I was quick to encourage them that there will be times in the future that we may not agree on everything, but how we disagree with each other is important, with grace and respect for one another. Lastly, I pointed out that studying theology for the goal of loving God with all our minds and hearts is a lifelong journey. I wanted the elders to know it is never good to let theology make us arrogant and rude, but humble and committed to learning more about God every year as we continue to grow closer to heaven.

Lesson 8: Honesty and Prayer

The last lesson with the elders was important because I communicated what made such a difference in my past churches that had elders. I told them how the church I was in that had elders was so amazing because the men in that group were brutally honest with each other and were committed to praying for each other and for the church. I also spoke to the elders about how frustrating it can be as a staff member when church leaders ignore obvious issues. I wanted them to understand the importance of elders having the courage to address the things in the church that need to be addressed even when it is uncomfortable or unpopular. Elders who commit to being honest with each other about

what is happening in the church help the church to stay on track with what God has called them to as opposed to cowardly avoiding conflicts or issues that arise.

I also told the elders about the importance of being honest with each other, in that there will be times when it is appropriate to ask a fellow brother to be honest with his concerns or his life as it pertains to their personal walk and holiness before the Lord. I encouraged them to embrace being honest with one another and to model before the church an elder ministry that is united and honest before God and with each other.

Lastly, I brought before the elders the primary task of prayer. The elders were already convicted that they were needy before the Lord, as they were venturing out on unfamiliar waters and learning more about being an elder. I encouraged them to maintain that humility and urgency and to constantly call out to the Lord for his guidance and help. I closed the meeting with prayer and with the conviction that if we are not committed to asking the Lord through prayer to lead and guide us, then we were sure to fail the church and our Lord.

Post-Lesson Discussion and Prayer

After the last lesson, the elders and I had a time of discussion about the importance of learning that needed to continue. I emphasized the importance of maintaining a teachable attitude. As elders in the church, I wanted to remind them that circumstances would come up that may lead them to learn, study, and consider how to address issues that could be presented. The last thing the elders needed to do was to think that their reading and learning was complete.

Conclusion

The lessons for training elders were meant to help them not just understand information about being an elder, but how to communicate important truths and engage with church members about biblical principles. My hope is that these lessons are

meaningful and practical to the elders. The evaluation of the project in the next chapter will help answer that question.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This chapter consists of an evaluation of the project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. The chapter will also look at how the project could have been accomplished differently. Lastly, the chapter will note theological and personal reflections.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The purpose of this project was to train new elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. The fact that the church voted to move in the direction of having elders marks a special season in the life of the JWBC. Therefore, this project was accomplished in light of the elders serving the people of JWBC to the best of their ability for the glory of Christ. JWBC is encouraged and blessed for its pastor to be associated with The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which encourages the DMin project to have direct application to what is occurring inside the local church. This project has real importance to the present and future of the elder ministry, which I am sure the Lord will use for many years to come. The purpose of this project was practical and beneficial in that it will be a tool to train current and future elders of JWBC to love, care, teach, and lead the people of the church. The church's hope is that this project proves itself to encourage the lives of the congregation.

As stated previously, not every church must install elders into their church. However, JWBC is committed to seeing elders trained and used to help lead the congregation with love and care for the glory of Christ. The purpose of this project did just that.

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

Three goals were pursued to ensure that this project was fruitful for the incoming elders at JWBC.

Goal 1

The first goal was to determine and list the core objectives for training incoming and future elders. This goal intended to ensure that JWBC had a clear and compelling understanding of the overall design of the training itself. The incoming elders' training needed to communicate a robust design to ensure that the church was committed to train elders and ensure that they were well equipped to shepherd the Lord's people.

What helped the most was to first see how confident the elders felt about their role. The survey gathered honest feedback on how competent the incoming elders felt in different areas of shepherding the flock.¹ After seeing the results² of the survey, it was possible to put in place the objectives that needed to be addressed in the training program. It would be a mistake to say that the survey results drove the entire format of the training, however it was a good tool to guide the training. Some of the elders communicated a concern of knowledge in theology as well as a concern that they would have to preach. We discussed the difference between preaching and teaching and how every elder did not have to preach. Thankfully two of our elders could preach if asked to. This goal was met when the surveys were returned and reviewed to discover the elders' competence before the training.

Goal 2

The second goal was to create a six-month training program that includes the core objectives to give the incoming elders the foundations they need to lead, care for, and shepherd members. The first step was to interview well-seasoned pastors from

¹ See appendix 1.

² See appendix 5.

around the nation who had designed their own program that was successful in training elders. I then used their wisdom to apply some of the key traits to training elders at JWBC. This goal was met when the six-month training program was provided to five pastors who evaluated the program and then filled out a survey to communicate their approval or disapproval.³

Goal 3

The third goal was to implement the six-month training program for incoming elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church. This group of new elders was the first to try out the training program. After going through the six-month training, they were given a post-training survey that touched on how the elders felt the training went and if it was successful in helping them feel competent in their shepherding.

There was some doubt by people outside the church who wondered if six months was too long of a training period. However, as I spoke with other pastors who had also committed to a six-month long training program, they had seen a lot of success. For example, six months of training provided time for the elders to fully understand what they were getting into. Obviously, they know what the Bible teaches and what they had read in the introductory book on elders, but they could not fully articulate the material until they were a part of the discussions when it was explained in the meetings. As incoming elders began to read the assigned books and ponder the implications of the material, the reality of the ministry began to take shape in their minds and hearts.

Second, the incoming elders were able to use the full six months to not only discuss certain issues of the ministry of elders that they were reading about in the books, but they were also able to apply it to JWBC. They had time within the six months to first understand the reality of the different topics being discussed, but also flesh out the implications and the application within the church. These discussions were critical to

³ See appendix 2.

trusting that the men fully understood what was being asked of them as they completed their training.

Third, the lengthy training process automatically created a sincere time of fellowship and community. Community among elders is something that is hoped for but cannot be guaranteed. However, the six months of prayer and discussions naturally led the elders in training to know each other more on a personal level. They began to see each other not just as co-workers in a church building, but brothers who were learning to carry the weight of shepherding together and not alone. Naturally, all the men in training were a little apprehensive about being an elder, which I preferred. I did not want a man in the room that felt like he “deserved” the elder title. Rather, I experienced a room of men who were a little terrified about the idea of their new role, but knew that they were in the training together with others who felt the same.

Lastly, the training program built trust among the men. As the elders began to learn more about each other, they saw how they were already being used in the church and what gifts God had given them to be recommended by the church to be elders. They began to see how God was using them to use their gifts to make the elder group better as a unit working together.

This goal was met when the incoming elders completed the six-month training program and completed the post-training survey.

Strengths of the Project

This project had many strengths. The first strength was its immediate and direct application with the current situation of the people of JWBC. For the last few years, JWBC has made a major change in its leadership structure by installing elders to lead the church. Therefore, this project is not just academic at its heart, but a goal for helping shepherd people’s lives.

The second strength of this project was the books required for the elders to read and the time allowed to discuss them. It does not do anyone good to just say they

read a book. I wanted to make sure the elders could understand the information and be able to explain it in a real ministry setting. For example, as the elders discussed the importance of expository preaching, I wanted them to be able to explain it to people who are thinking about joining the church, or why the pastor does not address every current issue that happens in a difficult political season in our country.

The third strength of this project was the training length. Six months for some churches is too long to train elders. However, training for six months helped me flesh out the understanding of what is being asked of the incoming elders. The lengthy training also helps a man see if this is something that is really going to fit with his schedule and life. Most people who walk into a ministry in the church hardly know what they are getting into, but after the six months of training the elders have a pretty good idea what this new calling will look like in their lives, and so will their families when it comes to time away from home.

The training times for the elders matched the schedule of how they would meet as elders in the future. For example, the elders in training meet twice a month, as they will continue to after their training. The first meeting of the month consisted of just prayer. The elders prayed for the church, each other, the training sessions, and most of all, themselves. In these prayer times there was a heavy sense of the weight of the responsibility to what the Lord was calling them to do as they continued to pursue being an elder. The second meeting of the month was to discuss their required reading. Before the elders in training showed up for their first meeting, and even while they were praying about pursuing eldership, they were asked to read *Church Elders* by Jeramie Rinne. This book gave them and their wives a brief overview and example of what being an elder was all about, and how they could be praying going into the first few months of training. Once in the training, the elders were also asked to read *How to Build a Healthy Church* by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Shepherd Leader* by Timothy Witmer, and *10 Beliefs Every Christian Should know* by Wayne Grudem, and watch eight online video lessons by

David Helm on preaching that are taught within the ministry of Simeon Trust.

Weaknesses of the Project

While this project had many strengths, there were also a few weaknesses. First, a few other books could have been included in the training for the elders to have a full grasp on certain topics that apply to church ministry. The books included in the training were sufficient, but a few more could help address other topics that need to be discussed among the elders. Therefore, including books in the training that concerned biblical counseling, church membership, and overall leadership would be profitable. That is not to say the training program could not add additional books in the future (post training), but looking back I wish a few books were added to the initial project.

Second, the project did not touch on continuing training after the elders are ordained. When I interviewed the five pastors who had elders in their churches, I heard about the value in making sure the training and learning did not stop once the elders were finished with the original training. I always thought that once our church had established elders, everything would be fine. Obviously, the benefits and blessings of having elders are great, and transitioning a church to elders is not easy, but it does not mean the work is over and the church is fine. Actually, for our church, the work was just beginning once we installed elders. The elders were trained, but training needed to continue as they still need to read, share, and discuss issues in the church that are both theological and practical.

What I Would Do Differently

If completing this training again, there are some things I would do differently. Other than adding more required books for the elders to read, I would have liked to have brought in elders from other churches to meet with the elders in training. Especially for the first round of elders, it would have been valuable to go to a like minded church in our area that had many years of experience come in and talk to the elders on what they can

expect, and remind them what to focus on in their ministry. The elders would also be able to ask questions to the visiting elders and hear their responses. In addition, the elders could reach out to the elders from another church if they had questions or concerns.

In regard to the writing process itself, I would have written differently. Too many nights I spent writing in large chunks which made certain seasons very difficult. It would have been better for me to write a few pages here and there every day or every other day to make the process more manageable.

Theological Reflections

Through this writing process I have struggled with the idea of how to communicate my theological convictions about elders. I have always liked the fact that, while having theological convictions, I am easy going and not pressing my convictions on other brothers and sisters within the kingdom of Christ. In the trenches of real day-to-day ministry I have personally seen the benefit of elders and am also convicted of the model of elders in the New Testament. JWBC will continue to see the benefits and blessings of these trained elders leading the congregation.

Personal Reflections

The older I grow, the more I desire to learn. Just a few months ago I thought about another subject that if I could go back and write about for my doctorate I would. Although, for the Christian, loving God with all of our minds never ends on this side of heaven, and I will continue to read, learn, and maybe pick up writing again to better help the people in the pews of my church.

As I write this paragraph on a Tuesday night in my church office, my wife and children are at home knowing dad is working hard on this project after a long day of meetings at the church. I am grateful that my family supported me in pursuing this doctorate, and will be forever grateful. I also am thankful that my church family is paying for this education as they fully support my time invested. The church's financial

commitment shows me how much they care for and support my learning and growing as their pastor.

Conclusion

At age 42, I want to serve Jackson Way Baptist Church to the best of my ability for as long as God has me here. In the five years I have been the pastor of JWBC, there have been a lot of changes, some I expected and led, and some happened by God's providential hand. The church believed that installing elders into the leadership structure of the church was the best for them, and this project is a tool that can be used to train men to lead God's people at JWBC for many years to come. Feeding and loving the sheep of Christ is bigger than just one man. It is truly not about anyone, but Christ alone, and it is my prayer that this project pushed that agenda in a real and practical way.

APPENDIX 1

PRE-ELDER TRAINING EVALUATION

This evaluation asked the elders to share their thoughts about being elders before going into training. When the elders in training received this evaluation, the church felt good about their heart, humility, and honesty. However, the church needed to know before these men went into training on their ability to know and apply matters of doctrine and other factors that would be asked of them. All four elders communicated their level of preparation and readiness when it came to certain areas of theology and practice. This evaluation helped me to sharpen the focus of the training the elders needed moving forward.

Results

The average result for this evaluation was positive. The men felt good about their own walk with the Lord and their preparedness to be an elder. They were encouraged that the training was serious and that it would require enough time to discuss certain questions they had about being an elder. On average the men also felt good about leadership and teaching. However, the idea of preaching did make all of them nervous. They also communicated that theology in general needed attention in the training.

Pre-Elder Training Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
How prepared do you feel in the area of Biblical Theology?					
How prepared do you feel in the area of general leadership?					
How prepared do you feel in the area of teaching and / or preaching?					
How prepared do you feel in the area of shepherding God's people?					
How is your overall character at this point in your walk with Christ?					
How is your prayer life?					
Do you feel like your wife is prepared for you to be an elder?					

APPENDIX 2

PASTORAL APPROVAL RUBRIC

This rubric was given to five pastors who evaluated the elder training program. The pastors had master's degrees, served a substantial amount of time as pastors, and had elders in their churches. The aim was for four out of five pastors to approve of the training program and voice their thoughts by completing the rubric.

Results

The results of this evaluation were positive. The training was very influenced by these questions. The pastors were encouraged by the material and content but communicated that what really makes the training valuable is the open and honest discussions the elders have when debriefing a book. The pastors emphasized how much profit can come out of healthy discussions about applying certain principles into the church. The pastors stated that the elders in training needed to make sure that they had confidence in being an elder in real life ministry at the end of the training.

Approval Rubric From 5 Experienced Pastors					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
How adequate is the required reading for the elders in training?					
Is the length of training long enough?					
Do the session discussions meet the standard of training?					
Would you use this training plan for your church?					
Does the training cover a majority of real-life issues in the church?					
Does the training cover enough doctrine that is required for an elder?					
Any other comments that would be helpful?					

APPENDIX 3

POST-ELDER TRAINING EVALUATION

This evaluation asked the elders to provide feedback for the training so that I could continue to make improvements. Their feedback also helped me understand how ongoing training could be formed in the future for these men.

Results

The overall results of this evaluation were very positive. There were some jokes about the reading and how it was a little much, but the men did see the value of it, especially in the discussion and application time. This survey also helped the elders to realize how important this training was moving forward for the future of our church.

Post Elder Training Evaluation					
1= insufficient 2=requires attention 3= sufficient 4=exemplary					
Criteria	1	2	3	4	Comments
The pre-training evaluation tests Christian character well.					
The pre-training evaluation tests Bible knowledge well.					
The training is biblically sound.					
The training covers all necessary pastoral issues.					
The training is both practical and spiritual.					
The training is appropriate for various educational levels.					
The training is doable for someone with a job and family.					
The reading involved in the training supports the topics well.					
The assignments required support the training well.					

APPENDIX 4
PASTORAL INTERVIEWS

I interviewed four pastors around the country whose churches already had elders in their church government. These experienced pastors gave feedback on the process and formation of incoming elders. Jay Ridenour was helpful in explaining how he made sure incoming elders grasped the reading, as they would be applying the information in a real-life ministry setting. Eugene Brandt was helpful on the issue of allowing time for new elders to have open discussion on their training, and making sure that elder training and education continued after they were ordained. The interviews of Blair Waddell and Jonathan Owen were beneficial to this project as they discussed the importance of elders being honest with each other concerning what they were seeing and issues regarding the overall health of the church and certain individual sheep. Lastly, J. D. Thorne was helpful as he discussed the importance of elders praying together.

Theological Education

Interview with Jay Ridenour, Senior Pastor of Frist Baptist Sudbury, Sudbury, Massachusetts.

Why is theological education among incoming lay elders so important?

Right theology leads to right practice. According to our biblical convictions, Elders are expected to know how to lead the congregation, oversee the church, oversee the church budget, shepherd their own hearts, teach the congregation, and understand other Biblical matters that relate to church leadership, discipline, membership, evangelism, and discipleship. Everything we do is based off our devotion to the Scriptures, so the elders need to understand how to apply the Bible in every area that is needed within the church.

How do you make sure that the elders are theologically educated at your church?

At our church a potential elder is nominated by the congregation, trained for six months, and then voted on by the congregation once the elders approve the candidate at the end of the training. The six months of training helps educate the candidate as they read several books, attend elder meetings where they participate in everything but voting. By the end of those sixth months the candidate is not only theologically trained, but also vetted, and understands from first-hand experience the seriousness of the office of Elder.

What kind of books are the elder candidates reading during their training?

The book that we have the elders read covers a wide variety of subjects like doctrine, evangelism & discipleship, overall church health, what a healthy church budget looks like, and a book on how a healthy church cares for each other. We even have each elder read a children's overview Bible that helps them understand the overall theme of scripture. This is not meant to challenge their intelligence, but to encourage their

understanding of Scripture in a way that can be communicated to any age member of the church. The goal is not just doctrine awareness, but also being capable of communicating the doctrine or Biblical principle to people and situations within the local church. We also have the elders read every verse within the Bible that has to do with elders.

Is there any continual education or reading that takes place once they become official elders?

At the present time, we do not read any books as a group, however I would like to change in the future. We do read certain articles and position papers that are helpful as are discussing certain issues in the church. For example, we are currently discussing how old a child needs to be to get baptized, or what does a child need to be able to show or communicate to be baptized. To help this discussion we took a position paper from an elder at Sojourn Church in Louisville, Kentucky for each elder to read and to come ready to discuss. We did the same thing as we walked through the idea of doing the Lord's Supper every Sunday. So, I guess you could say that ongoing discussion of a particular issue leads to awareness and education.

We are fully aware that when an elder comes on board they do not know some of the vocabulary and application of certain theological doctrines. For example, they may understand the purpose and need of church discipline, but they might not be able to sit down with someone and walk them through Matthew 18, and all its implications. Or they may be able to comprehend the importance of the Lord's Supper, but they might now yet be able to have deep dialogue on all its application to a Sunday morning with God's people.

Within the 6 months of reading, do the candidates simply read the books, or is there also discussion built in as well?

During the 6 months of reading the candidates meet with me the pastor on Sunday mornings during Sunday School to discuss the book they are reading. I will ask pointed questions to make sure they understand the paramount matters that the author is pointing out. For example, I will ask the candidates how they think this issue plays out in our church, or why these matters to our church and let them answer. If they do not answer, I will deliberately let the room sit in awkward silence to demonstrate a real-life conversation with a member, or a moment of questions and answers within a membership meeting. It is vitally important that the candidates not only read these books, but also are able to have meaningful dialogue with members of the church.

Are there any other elements of theological education that takes place that you would like to share?

I am really excited about the fact that we have taken steps to train potential elders within our church. I have on my board in my office right now 10 men who I believe have the potential to be elders one day. One day I emailed all 10 of those guys and asked them if they wanted to be a part of a weekly small group where I would teach on deeper theological matters, and they all agreed to be a part of it. So, in my mind, we are taken steps to help educate men in the church who may be elders one day, but at the very least they will continue to be some type of leaders within the church.

Interview with Eugene Brandt, Pastor at Fellowship Bible Church, Jackson, Tennessee.

How important is theological training for incoming Elders?

I think for any Elder the training is needed, and it also needs to be broken down to pre and post training. In the early days of our church, we just put together various forms of discipleship education for our leaders. These days however, we have been able to develop an online program called “Fellowship U” which is a program that uses the free online study, “Biblical Training”, that is taught by various seminary professors. However, the leaders also get into class once a week for discussion to flesh out what they are learning. This training takes about three years to complete. We have had around 170 of our members go through the training and normally our Elders are pulled out of that arena, so a lot of training has already taken place. So, before they are ever invited into being a candidate for an Elder, there is already an assumption that there is a theological cohesion that has taken place. Post education is taking their theological training and discussing their learning in a way that they can articulate doctrine in life and in ministry. For example, when it comes to issues like divorce and remarriage, eschatology, worship principles, we have compiled a booklet over the years, and so those elder candidates are going to work through those with us.

Another document that they are going to work through is our belief statement, and our affirmation statements about what we believe in and what we deny.

Once and Elder comes on board and has been an elder for a few years, is there continued education? Books that you all read as a group?

Yes, but only as the need arises, that's what will drive the reading. There will be times when there is a lot of it, and there will be times when there is none of it. So, on the front end it is a lot of theological training online using the "Biblical Training" site, and then we are going to use the back end to read together when we are discussing the issue of race, church discipline, or certain new issues that we previously did not have before.

What exactly does discussions look like between the elders in training and the Pastor or other elders? Are the elder candidates having discussions with current elders as they are learning?

We already have many elders, so at any given time there are only 1-2 elders in training, so this makes it very manageable and easy for us. Once they have read all the position papers, our beliefs, affirmation, and denials, I will then sit down with them and discuss it and talk through all those things. Once that happens the candidates then attend elder meetings for a good long while until we all get a good feel of comfort with each other. Also, in all this time elders are grabbing breakfast and or coffee and talking through these things to make sure the new elders are knowledgeable and have a chance to ask any questions that they would like. Most of these questions are either theological or personal. After that time there is a formal interview that takes place, where we will hammer down on those final matters, just to make sure that there are no problems. It is actually a very slow process, from the beginning of the candidacy all the way up to the church affirming them into ordination, it can take up to 8 months.

Are there any other forms of theological education that happens among the elders?

There have been times where I see a helpful article or blog that I think is worth circulating to the other elders that I will pass along. Sometimes, other elders who are very well educated will do the same and pass along a helpful article. Some elders may also choose to attend a conference on their own.

Honesty Among Elders

Interview with Blair Waddell, Pastor at Providence Baptist Church, Madison,

Alabama

Is honesty with other elders important regarding personal holiness?

Yes, we see that the elders are the most important assets to the church. Therefore, we expect Satan to target our elders with a lot of temptation to sin and fail the church. This is not to suggest that the other offices or even members are not important or will not face spiritual warfare but that there seems to be a heightened focus on elders in the church these days.

To help fight these attacks, we begin all of our elder meetings with a window of time that allows fellow elders to confess any sin or hardship in their life that they need any encouragement for. I have always witnessed that this time is a time of encouragement and grace that men are loved on and motivated to keep fighting the good fight and to not fight alone. We also have each elder meet with another elder once a month for accountability. These elders meet up for lunch or coffee off church campus, and each elder will answer several personal questions that pertain to holiness. These questions range from how they are doing with their devotional and prayer life to what they are looking at on the internet. We also want to encourage financial dealings, hospitality, and family

relationships. In addition to the elders asking each other honest questions, they also commit to pray for each other at the end of their meeting.

As elders meet in the elder room, what does honesty look like with each other in terms of disagreement? Are elders encouraged to be honest even if they disagree with something?

Once a year as elders, we have two extended meetings outside the normal elder meetings. First, there is an overnight elders retreat and then secondly, there is an all-day Saturday meeting. Both meetings are like a home base meeting that reminds us of our core values. Without fail, in these 2 meetings we always bring up the trait of being honest with each other, even if it means disagreement. Obviously, we want these disagreements to be done respectfully, but each Elder is encouraged to see their honesty as an obligation, even if it means that they do not agree with an issue. They are not just encouraged to voice their disagreement, but we want them to feel obligated. However, for us this has a natural feel to it because our Elders are already open and honest with each other.

Do your Elders have trouble being honest about awkward situations or the “elephants in the room” that nobody else wants to talk about, but issues that are important within the church?

While there is a comfort level within the Elders to talk about those major issues that we are faced with in the church, they often require a separate meeting or an all-day meeting. In any given week, there are so many things going on that the elders need to discuss and prayer about that while those big conversations do happen, they do not always make the agenda list for that particular meeting.

How can a group of Elders create the importance of honesty among themselves?

In all honesty, I believe it comes down to the lead pastor modeling this for everyone. Most lay elders come on board not knowing what to expect. Even once a year of training with us, they still are unsure of the practical dynamics of the group. So, it is important as elders come on board, that they see that honesty modeled by the pastor and fellow elders.

Also, during the elder's training and interviews, that candidate's wife is required to come in a meet with the elders with her husband. At this meeting we also have some other elder wives, at least one attends the meeting, and the elder wife gets the opportunity to share with the candidate's wife the reality of what the elder life looks like for the wife. Within this meeting a lot of healthy honesty and transparency occurs to help the elder in training along with his wife.

Lastly, I would say that honesty is important among elders as regards to education and competency. A few years ago, an elder candidate approached me and confessed that he was embarrassed because he felt like he was lost when it came to a lot of the theological conversations that the elders were having. Even though he had read the required books, he still felt lost and had lots of questions about theology ecclesiology. Of course, this was not his fault, but was our fault in that we did not train him well enough to know some of these things. This made us even more encourage our oncoming Elders to be honest with us from the start.

**Interview with Jonathan Owen, elder, Shades Mountain Community Church,
Birmingham, Alabama.**

What does training look like as elders come on board?

Most of our Elders in training were picked out because they had already been in some kind of ministry or small group where they were leading like an elder and had the opportunity to experience hands on ministry. For example, our pastor meets with young men who the elders see as potential elders in the future. In these groups the elders experience the importance of honesty in ministry and in leadership. These young men also meet with Pastors and elders on a weekly basis outside of the small group for one-on-one discipleship happens. It is in these environments where honesty is encouraged so the men can be encouraged in their personal holiness.

How important is honesty among elders in the elder room?

Personally, I think I have witnessed more honesty in trial rather than in temptation. To see a fellow elder walk-through personal trials or suffering is very humbling and encouraging. Our senior Pastor just lost his wife to a disease that has been affecting her for a few years now. To see how he is transparent with us and shows us a front row seat as he suffers the loss of his wife is very real and raw. That humanness of that fellow elder and us walking beside him, builds a lot of trust with one another because we are being very real and honest about how hard life can be.

How can elders be honest in their disagreements?

Once a quarter we have a dinner together with all the elders where we discuss a certain theological topic that has some relevance to our church. For example, the last couple have been on women and ministry and at what age do we baptize children. Obviously, within these discussions there are disagreements as people have their own

views. However, there has always been an openness to conveying your thoughts that might disagree with others and there is always grace with that. The point of these discussions is to not only educate ourselves, but also to articulate how this applies to our church, and then prayerfully considering which path to take. Point being is that it is essential for everyone to contribute their own ideas without fear of rejection.

Most of the time in my experience, if the head pastor made his opinion known then that was all the conversation that there was. However, in our current context, the environment is very open and easier. The senior Pastor / elder wants others to contribute and share their thoughts. Leaders at our church, especially in the elder room do not shy away from each other, but instead press in to encourage each other and to sharpen their brother. To have a space that is open and free where we can argue as brothers in a respectful way with intentionality to rightly divide the word of truth is very welcoming. Having said that, there is also a lot of love between the elders and respect for one another as well as a closeness that happens in the church and outside the church between elders. Also, there are a lot of guys on the elder board that have stronger convictions theologically, and they are not shy to share their views. I however, do not lean that far, but they let me be honest and I feel like I still have a seat at the table as we are respectful of each other's honesty. Our youth pastor who is much younger, I think at times feels timid to speak up, however when he does his opinions matter and are respected.

How do you create that environment of honesty?

I think for us, having a new pastor come in and start fresh was a great thing for us. Not that the last pastor did not offer that, but starting over with a new pastor has created the opportunity for us as elders to hit the reset button and that has helped create a sense of honesty around the table. Also, our new pastor is great at leading and modeling

in front of us a sense of honesty and transparency that really speaks to the rest of the group. Rick, our pastor, is willing to listen to others and be patient with what we are thinking and saying. As well as being unified as elders. I think there is a real safe space that is created when you truly care for one another and love each other outside the elder room that has a real impact inside the elder room. This is where Philippians 2, putting others before yourself has had a real impact on us as we continue to be united.

I will also say that there might be elders in other churches that I have heard stories about, that the younger elders might feel like they are putting their necks on the line if they choose to speak up. That every time they open their mouths they are putting their future on the line, and that is not a kind of leadership that is filled with much grace. However, if we are loving each other than mistakes can be made and it is ok. There have even been a number of times when after a meeting has taken place, a few hours later or days later an elder has sent an email apologizing that he overstepped or made his point with too much emotion. So, there is certainly a healthy level of honesty and humility involved with all the elders that models right behavior for everyone else.

Is there a danger in being too honest?

There can be times where oversharing may occur. As we talk about being transparent and honest with one another, it is possible to share to a fault that maybe some information was not needed. For example, we had an elder that felt led to share a situation in his family that occurred years ago that he wanted to get off his chest. However, the event had zero impact on how the elders felt about him, his or his family. The elders even commented that they wished they had not have heard the information to begin with, because the event was so minor in nature. Also, as we are trying to shepherd

people's souls, there can be situations where an Elder is sharing too much about a member. For example, it may at times be unnecessary to for an elder to share all the dirt on a member's marriage that could be more gossip than help.

Prayer Among Elders

Interview with J.D. Thorne, Pastor at Mallard Point Baptist Church, Decatur, Alabama.

What does the whole training process look like for an elder candidate?

First, the elders prayerfully consider who might be a good candidate to be an elder, it is a small list, but once we know what we think the Lord is leading us to, one of us approaches the individual to see if there is any interest. In that conversation we encourage the person to spend at least two weeks praying and reading “*Church Elders*” by Jeramie Rinne. If the man comes back to us in two weeks having read the book and after much prayer is interested, then we go into six months of training. Within those six months, the elder candidate is reading six more books that cover the church, shepherding, theology, and overall ministry. Also, in this training time, nobody knows from the congregation that this man is being trained, that comes later. The candidate is also allowed to attend elder meetings but does not have the opportunity to vote. After the six months of training if all goes well, we present the candidate to the congregation. We then give the church two months to prayerfully consider the candidate for eldership and ask anyone to come forward if they have concerns. If the candidate is voted in by the congregation, then the elder joins the team of elders. As elders, we also continue to be intentional about education. We read many books as elders and try to continue to be elders who desire to stay humble and be eager to learn.

Why is prayer so important among elders?

I believe more than anything, we see it commanded and modeled in the Bible. Prayer is not only our fuel as elders but also the conviction that we have not because we ask not. As elders, we believe that we can ask for wisdom and God will give it to us, if

we ask for miracles, we are hopeful that He will give it to us. Basically, we never want the reason for God not to move was because we as elders never asked Him.

What does prayer practically look like for the elders?

Our elders meet once a month to pray and discuss certain issues in the church, and to talk about certain matters. At these meetings, we intentionally pray for the first twenty minutes. These prayer times are crucial in not only opening a meeting but praying for God's wisdom and leadership within the church. This prayer time also is beneficial as we pray for each other ask the Lord to help us walk in holiness and faithfulness. We also have found it helpful for the elders to have a membership directory with them each day as they pray for each person in the church. We do not have a family list for each elders to work with like some other churches do, instead we believe it is best for all our elders to shepherd the entire church together. Therefore, prayer is a major focus for all of us as we pray and lead. There is plenty to like about these interviews as it pertains to the formation of elders in the local church. All of these men are a apart of churches that I greatly respect and it was a joy to see how their elder room has progressed over the years. It is also important to note that these men and churches are not perfect. From their own admission, they are certain disciplines that they wish they were further along in, but they all have a great foundation to build on.

Interview Analysis

First, I really was encouraged to hear how serious these Pastors took training incoming elders. No Pastor that I spoke with mentioned an incoming elder training for a month or so. All of these churches represented made sure that a potential elder or elder candidate took their time in the training, which usually meant the Elder was reading for up to 6 months.

I was also encouraged in that not only were the elder candidates reading, but the books they were reading and what they did with that reading. These churches were very focused on making sure that the elder candidates had a wide variety of books to read that covered everything from the overall elder ministry, church budgets, shepherding, and church discipline. Also, I was impressed to see that in Jay's church in Boston, he wanted each candidate to read a book, then meet with him on a Sunday morning to discuss what they read. In addition, these meetings were not ten minutes of hearing how they liked the book, but that Jay was asking specific questions to see if they understood the book. Jay also made sure that the candidates were not just comprehending the information but also able to vocalize and talk about the material. This is crucial because you want Elders to be able to apply their understanding in a real-life church situation within the local church.

I also appreciated the idea of continued education with the elders. There were some Pastors who lamented the fact that they do not continue educating their elders or learning through reading. However, there were a couple of churches that did. Specifically, Jonathan Owen talks about how at his church the Elders attend a dinner a few times a year to discuss theological issues that relate to the church. This requires their elders to read and come prepared to discuss the theological matters among brothers in

Christ and to discuss how it affects their church. I believe this to be crucial as the culture continues to pressure the church and demands explanations on what they believe, elders need to know not only what the church believes, but how they would communicate that to the culture around them.

In addition, it was also interesting to hear how Fellowship Bible Church in Jackson, Tennessee uses their educational program, “Fellowship University” as a place of finding potential elders. Eugene Brandt was helpful in explaining how their leadership program encourages lay people to learn more about God, the Scriptures, and the Church on a seminary level. This creates an expectation for any man aspiring to the office of an overseer to have already gone through “Fellowship University.” It was also helpful to learn that Fellowship Bible Church uses a website called, “Biblical Training.” Biblical Training is a resource that offers free online training that is taught by respected pastors and theologians like, John Piper, Bruce Ware, and Tom Schreiner.

Honesty is obvious but can be overlooked when it comes to the practical side of the ministry of elders. To be useful and effective, elders must be honest before God, before each other, and before the church. It was encouraging to hear how Blair Waddell emphasized honesty between the elders. Blair’s Church, *Providence Baptist*, was the only church that had a standing and organized meeting between the elders for the main purpose of personal holiness. To have the elder’s meet one on one once a month for personal accountability cannot be minimized. It is essential to the health of the elders and church that holiness matters and must be pursued. I was not encouraged that the other churches did not take any steps like this. They may have some conversations here and there, but there is a danger of assumption when organized accountability is not present. So we might argue that men can lie and sidestep questions that are asked about personal holiness, or not go into specifics. That may be true; however, it is one more barrier that they must deliberately step over and I would rather have that than nothing.

Jonathan Owen at Shades Mountain Community Church added an interesting

fact when he talked about the ability to be honest in actual elder meetings. I have been in some elder meetings before where it is good conversation, prayer, and leadership. However, it is not great. Great leadership and shepherding does not avoid that hard conversations or elephants in the room. While it is up to elders to come forth with honesty and boldness, the elder room needs to be previously determined to have a transparency of talking about difficult matters that people do not naturally want to have. This becomes especially difficult when the elders or elder may be the focus for the problem itself. Either way self-inspection of the elder ministry, the church, or a discipline issue of a church member is a healthy sign of humility before the Lord Jesus.

One could argue that prayer and preaching are the two main things that churches must succeed at over anything else according to what is seen in the book of Acts. However, this is usually not something that is not understood in the church today. At times prayer is something that is checked off as opposed to pursued with great intensity, not because prayer is the answer, but because God is the answer, and therefore we must pray. I was not encouraged by the interviews when it came to the practical ministry of prayer. I was encouraged to hear the mindset of it; however, when it comes to practice, I wanted to hear more. It was great to hear J.D. Thorne talk about how elders at his church work through a membership directory to pray for each member, however I do appreciate churches where the elders have a designated time for prayer that takes up the whole meeting. For example, our current model for our elders at Jackson Way Baptist church is for the Elders to meet twice a month. The first meeting is always discussion about certain issues, and the second meeting is strictly reserved for just prayer. We often spend the first few minutes if there is a desperate situation that needs to be addressed; otherwise we move right into prayer. The thought among the elders is that we always want to think and feel humble and desperate before the Lord, knowing that nothing happens without His power and will.

APPENDIX 5
BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Church Elders by Jeramie Rinne

1. Being the first book you may have read on elders, what were your overall thoughts?
2. Did the book change any thoughts you may have had about elders, or the idea of churches who have elders?
3. How did this book affect the way you think about preaching at our church?
4. How did this book affect the way you think about the importance of shepherding?
5. What thoughts about our church did you have when reading this book?

The Care of Souls by Harold Senkbeil

1. How did this book affect the way you think about overall ministry?
2. How do we at our church make sure that we have a heavy focus on people and not get distracted by other things that may be good but are not essential to shepherding?
3. How do you apply this to your ministry with the people of our church?
4. Do you see this kind of compassionate ministry in Jesus, what examples?

The Shepherd Leader by Timothy Witmer

1. Read John 21:15-19, what is Jesus emphasizing to Peter?
2. How does the church manage its membership rolls to make sure we know who we are shepherding?
3. Is the ultimate vision of elders to make sure that every member is loved and cared for? What does this look like on a weekly basis?
4. What is the difference between “Marco Shepherding” and “Micro Shepherding” according to Witmer? Should we practice this?
5. How do we as elders make sure our integrity and holiness continues to be above reproach?

How To Build A Healthy Church by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander

1. What are some marks of a healthy church?
2. How do we make sure the Bible stays at the forefront of what we do?
3. What are the 4 P’s and why do they matter?
4. What are the 4 G’s? and why do they matter?
5. How do we apply this advice to our church?
6. How do we make sure preaching continues to be a focus at our church?

Biblical Leadership by Alexander Strauch

1. How would you explain or defend the use of elders to prospective member in a member’s class? Why has our church decided to do this?
2. What are the differences between an elder and a deacon?
3. What are the main functions of elders?
4. What are the qualifications of elders in Scripture? Are there others that we need to think about?

Simeon Trust Workshop (Online)

1. What did you learn from “first principles” and why does it matter?
2. Why is the author’s intent important in preaching?
3. What is expository preaching and is that who we want to be as a church?
4. Is topical preaching wrong? How often to we do it?

Christian Beliefs by Wayne Grudem

1. Why do we need to understand not only knowing the Gospel but explaining it to others? What does this look like in a new member’s class?
2. How does our view of the Bible affect our ministry?
3. How should the attributes of God affect the church? Sunday morning worship?
4. What is justification by faith? How would you explain it to a child? How does it differ from Sanctification?
5. How would you lead a person who wants to get Baptized at our church?
6. How should we think about the end times? Do we take certain views as a church? What is your view, based on Scripture, about predestination and election?

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ABSTRACT

TRAINING NEW ELDERS AT JACKSON WAY BAPTIST CHURCH IN HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2024
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The purpose of this project was to develop and implement a training program for incoming elders at Jackson Way Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Chapter 1 explains the ministerial context of Jackson Way Baptist Church and the need for an elder training plan. Chapter 2 demonstrates the biblical and theological basis for training men for ministry. Chapter 3 considers the benefits of having elders. Chapter 4 provides training principles for elders, and an overview of the process and methodology used in this project. Chapter 5 is an evaluation of the project, determining its effectiveness.

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