

OpenTheo

Who Will Lead Us?



Some Assembly Required - Steve Gregg

Steve Gregg discusses the concept of leadership in the context of the Christian church. He argues that the terms "elder," "bishop," and "overseer" are interchangeable and do not comprise separate offices within the church. Furthermore, he emphasizes the importance of studying the Word of God for oneself and not being overly reliant on human teachers. Gregg suggests that elders in the church should lead by example and be individuals who live as Christians are supposed to live, rather than being appointed as part of a political or institutional structure.

Transcript

Philippians chapter 1 and verse 1. I once, speaking in another church, once used this as the text for a message, partly because the leader of the church there had asked me to speak on this subject, and this is the text I chose, Philippians 1.1. Paul and Timothy bond servants of Jesus Christ to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi with bishops and deacons. Now, this is perhaps a mystery text. Perhaps the greatest mystery is why a person would choose a verse like this to be the text of a message, because it doesn't really seem to say much.

It seems like it's just starting to introduce Paul to his listeners and so forth, but there is something very important about this text for us to observe, and we'll see it in many other texts as well, and that is that Paul, the mystery is this, why did Paul not greet the pastor? He was writing to the church in Philippi. He greeted all the saints in Christ Jesus there, including the bishops and the deacons, but he did not mention the pastor. I would like to suggest to you the reason he did not greet the pastor is because the church in Philippi did not have a pastor, nor, as far as we know, did any church in the first century have a pastor.

Now, this is very hard for us to grasp because it's almost unthinkable for most of us in the traditions we were raised in, at least the way I was raised, to think of a church not having a pastor. Now, if you were raised Plymouth Brethren, there would be no problem with that, because the Plymouth Brethren do not believe in ordained clergy, and they don't have pastors in their church, but most denominations do have pastors, and that is

true whether they have a Presbyterian form of government or an Episcopalian form of government or a congregational form of government. You might remember some weeks ago I said those are the three basic alternative types of church government that exist among churches today.

You've got the Presbyterian form of government, where the local church is governed by a body of elders. You've got the congregational form of government, where the local church is governed by the congregation in a democratic fashion. And you've got the Episcopalian form of government, or Episcopal form of government, where the local church is governed by a bishop of the region who also governs other churches in the region, in the diocese.

And so, in one case, you have a group of men resident in the church, the elders, ruling the church. That's the Presbyterian form of government. Or you've got the congregation self-ruling democratically.

That's a congregational form of government. Or you've got an outside official, a bishop in the Episcopal form of government, who oversees a group of local churches. But in all of those churches, generally speaking, there is also a pastor.

A congregationally governed church usually has a pastor. The Episcopal church, or one that has a bishop over the area, will either have a priest or a pastor, or whatever the chief local leader of a local assembly is called in their denomination. I suppose in the Roman Catholic Church, of course, the local official would be called a priest.

I think that's probably true in the Episcopalian or the Anglican form of government, too. But many Pentecostal churches and Charismatic churches have bishops that they answer to, regional bishops, but they have a pastor also. In other words, no matter which form of government a particular denomination has opted for, almost all of them include a man in the local church called the pastor, along with whatever other definitions there are of the government, of the church.

And then the role of this pastor is often disputed. I remember hearing some years ago a preacher, and I didn't know any better, what he said sounded right to me. He didn't have a line of scripture in his favor, but it just sounded right.

A guy on the radio said, he said, you know, the elders of the church shouldn't tell the pastor what he can do and what he can preach. That's, you know, he's the one who's got the anointing from God. They're there to support his ministry and so forth.

I thought, well, I guess that must be true. Though I didn't know at the time there wasn't anything in scripture to suggest the pastor is above the other leaders of the church. In most of the churches that I've been in, including two churches where I've been an elder, the pastor was considered one of the elders.

However, the way they usually said it was that he was first among equals. I don't know if you've heard that expression before, but in many churches that are governed by a group of elders, they still have a man who is the pastor. And it is often the official statement of his role that he is the first among equals.

I must confess, I've never thought that phrase made sense. First in what respect? The first one to come in the door? Is he the first one who was born? Is he the oldest one? In what sense is he the first? It seems to me that if we're talking about his relationship with a group of leaders, that he's first in command or first in authority. I mean, what other word would first mean in a phrase like that? He's first among equals.

And if indeed he's first in any sense that speaks of his function or authority, it doesn't seem like they're really equals at all. So I will say this, if the Bible spoke of such an arrangement where the pastor of the church was the first among equals with a group of elders, then it would be incumbent on us to figure out what that phrase means. We don't have to bother with that since that phrase is not in the Bible, nor is that arrangement with a man being pastor as part of a group of elders.

Now, I've been, as I said, an elder in two different churches. They were independent churches and they did have a pastor each. In all of these, or most of the churches I've been in in my adult life, the elders all do pastoral work.

But as I said, the two groups I was in as an elder had an additional fellow who was a pastor who was considered one of the elders as well. Well, what does the Bible indicate as far as who were the leaders, apart from the apostles themselves, in the churches in the New Testament? It's quite clear that over the church universal, the apostles had an influence and an authority that Christ had given to them. No one questioned this who was actually orthodox.

I mean, there were heretics who questioned the apostles' authority, but no one who really was a true Christian ever thought for a moment to question the authority of the apostles because Christ had given them a special authority over the churches or the church itself. The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. The heavenly city in Revelation has 12 foundation stones and on each one is the name of one of the 12 apostles of the Lamb.

The apostles have a distinctive authority for all time in the church of God. But apart from themselves, even in their lifetime, they recognized other leaders in the churches because, well, there just weren't enough apostles to go around, to tell you the truth. Most of them stayed in Jerusalem until they scattered to foreign countries.

And Paul probably was the first to do much traveling and he established so many churches he couldn't stay around in all of them. There just weren't enough apostles to go around for every local church to be governed by an apostle. And I'd say I personally

would have difficulty acknowledging any living apostles today.

Now, I realize there are some people who would define apostle maybe differently than I would and would say, well, we, you know, so-and-so founder of this denomination or whatever is an apostle. I really don't care to argue about that. Maybe so.

I just say I have difficulty recognizing anyone living today who really warrants the title apostle if we're using that term in any sense as it was used of the apostles in the New Testament. I believe the apostles were the foundation. Well, Christ is the foundation, but under him, the apostles were the foundation of the church.

The church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. And the church has been under construction for 2,000 years, but you don't have to relay the foundation every generation. The foundation is laid one time and then you build the superstructure above it.

But every generation of Christians needs some kind of leadership. And I would place a lot of emphasis on that some kind, because there is an assumption that I think is a default premise that we all fall back on if we don't think otherwise carefully and on purpose, that we all need some kind of institutional leadership or some kind of appointed political kind of leadership in the church. Now, I realize the use of the word political probably would not seem well advised because there's very few people who would like to use the word political in describing the leadership structure of their church for the simple reason that the word political seems dirty or something.

Political is a kind of a secular and maybe not very likable word when it comes to sacred matters. And yet the fact is that it is one of the distinctives of whatever might be called an institutional church that the leadership in the church there is political in nature. I don't mean in the worst sense of that word.

I just mean maybe in the best sense of that word. But even in the best sense of that word, I don't think it's appropriately applied to the leadership of the church. And I intend to go into detail on what I mean by that.

I have a lot of things I want to share here. But just so we could start by saying, well, okay, what provision did the apostles make for the leadership of the local churches in their own lifetime before the apostles were dead? When they couldn't be there, who was the leader of a local church? As I said, you'll never find an example in scripture of a church possessing a pastor. Nor will you find any recommendation that a church should have a pastor.

In fact, it would seem to me that the idea of the church having a pastor not only is absent from scripture, but is very possibly contrary to the whole assumption and spirit of what the scripture teaches about local church leadership. You will find the word pastor

used one time in the New Testament of persons who are not either literal shepherds watching sheep or Christ. The handout I've given you has three columns.

You'll see that the first column is headed with the word shepherd or pastor. I wanted to give you some idea of how that term is used in the New Testament. The next column has the word elder or elders.

And the third column, overseer or bishop, which are synonyms. The first column, shepherd or pastor, is a translation in English of the Greek word poimen. And the number I've put next to the word is the number you'll find it in the Strong's Concordance if you want to do any looking up.

There's a large number of Greek reference works that use the Strong's numbering system. And if you do any of that kind of thing, that number will be useful to you. But the word poimen in the Greek is the ordinary word for a shepherd, a man who tends ordinary sheep.

It's not a religious word. It's just a word about somebody's occupation who happens to tend sheep as a living. And that is how the word is used more often than any other way in the New Testament.

The shepherds were watching their flocks by night when Jesus was born. And Jesus tells about a parable of a shepherd. He's got 100 sheep and one goes astray and the shepherd goes after the sheep.

This is the way the word poimen is usually used, just of a man who is a caretaker of sheep. It is used second most frequently in the New Testament as a metaphor of Christ himself, the good shepherd. And there are scriptures I've given you there.

In Matthew 26, 31, Jesus said, smite the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. He's referring to himself. In John 10, verses 11 and 12, Jesus said, I'm the good shepherd of the sheep.

Also in verses 14 and 16. Then in Hebrews 13, 20, Jesus is referred to as that great shepherd of the sheep. Also in 1 Peter 2, 25, Jesus is referred to as the shepherd and overseer or the shepherd and bishop of our souls.

So we find this word is used more often than not of just men who tend sheep. And then next most frequently, of Christ himself. Only one time in the New Testament is this word used of persons other than Christ and other than literal shepherds.

In that one case, it is used of people who are some kind of church leaders. And it is there found only in the plural, in Ephesians 4, 11. And there Paul said that Christ, when he ascended, gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers.

Now, that's the only time you'll find in the New Testament a reference to church leaders called pastors. And the word pastor is just an older English word for a shepherd. It's the word *poymen* in the Greek.

And therefore, of course, whoever it is that's being referred to as the pastors are simply being called shepherds, those who shepherd the flock. Under Christ himself, of course, who's always referred to as the good shepherd and so forth. Now, the idea that a church leader might, that his task might be likened to that of a shepherd who shepherds sheep has a tremendous Old Testament background.

We know that when God called men to be leaders of his people, he often called men who had experience in tending actual sheep. Moses didn't have any such experience when he was 40 years old, when he applied for the job of deliverer and killed an Egyptian. And that didn't work out.

It wasn't God's time. So he had to go out for another 40 years and learn how to tend sheep. And at the end of that time, God called him to actually go and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt.

After he'd learned for 40 years how to tend actual sheep. David, the greatest king Israel ever had, likewise had his early training as a shepherd. Amos the prophet was a shepherd before he was called to be a prophet.

He was called away from the sheep to prophesy to the nation of Israel. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were shepherds by trade. They never, well, I guess we could say they led the nation, although the nation was just comprised of their own children at that point.

But the fact is, in the Old Testament, people who led the people of God in any formal sense are likened to shepherds. And are actually, in many cases, men who did tend sheep before they got into the business, if we could call it that, of being leaders of God's people. In some of the books of the prophets, particularly Ezekiel, chapters 34 and 37, God speaks of the rulers of Israel, the kings, the princes, the prophets, the priests, the whole leadership structure as shepherds.

And he's talking about as bad shepherds. And God says he's angry with the shepherds of Israel. And God's going to turn things around for them.

In Jeremiah, however, in a prophecy about the new covenant. And we know it is about the new covenant because it predicts a time when the ark of the covenant will be irrelevant. In other words, when the old covenant will be defunct.

And thus illustrated by the fact that the ark of the covenant is remembered no more. There will be a new covenant. And under the terms of that covenant, which is the covenant under which we now live, Jeremiah said this in Jeremiah 3.15. God said, I will give you pastors or shepherds according to mine heart, which shall feed you with

knowledge and understanding.

Now, he's referring to the New Testament era. Jeremiah says that God will give his people shepherds after his heart to feed them with knowledge and understanding. And we find, of course, Paul saying in Ephesians 4.11 that God has given some shepherds, some pastors and teachers.

However, in saying that, he has not really told us anything very specific about the local church leadership structure. Because what Paul mentions in that context is God has given apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers. Well, it's clear that not every local church has apostles and prophets in it.

Or if they do, I mean, a lot of the local churches did have prophets. But we don't know how many. And we certainly don't know how many from this passage, how many pastors or teachers there were in a given church either.

All we are told is that among the gifts that Christ has given to the church for the sake of its oversight and leadership, there are some leaders who are likened here to shepherds. But who were they? Well, the next word that is used very frequently in the New Testament of church leaders is in the second column I've handed out to you. And that's the word elder, or usually in the plural elders.

It is the Greek word presbuteros. The plural is presbuteroi. And presbuteros is the ordinary word in Greek for an old man.

It just means an elder, an older man or an older brother. The older brother in the parable of the prodigal son is called the presbuteros brother. The older, the elder brother.

The word presbuteros speaks of age, of priority in terms of age and probably experience and dignity. As was typically assumed of an older man, he'd have more wisdom and more dignity than a younger man. This term presbuteroi or presbuteros, elders, is used in the Old Testament, that is in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, quite a bit.

It is used of Israel's leaders. Probably the elders of Israel were the heads of the clans, probably the firstborn of each clan. But there were many times that Moses assembled the elders of the people of Israel in order to consult with them or for something, you know, for some decision to be made.

It's quite clear that those who led Israel, apart from kings and prophets and priests, were the elder men of the clan and they were called the elders of Israel. The New Testament has several times in which this word is used simply to refer to an old man. It's the typical word for an older man.

But for our purposes, our interest is drawn to those passages where the word presbuteros or presbuteroi is a word that is used of leaders in the church. We find in

Jerusalem, which was the first church there was, there were elders along with the apostles. We see this, we can actually turn to some of these passages.

I don't want to turn to all the passages to which I'll allude because there's so many. I don't think we'll get through them all. But in Acts 11, when the prophet Agabus came to the church of Antioch and prophesied that there would be a famine that would leave the church in Jerusalem affected negatively in terms of their economics, the church in Antioch decided to take up a financial collection and to send it to the church in Jerusalem to help relieve them.

And they sent, well it says in verse 30, the last verse of Acts 11, this they also did. That is, they took up a collection and they sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. That is, Barnabas and Saul took the money from the church of Antioch to the elders of the church in Jerusalem.

How these men in Jerusalem came to be elders, we are not told. Prior to this, we don't read of the elders there, but they were there then. And they're just mentioned without any introduction or explanation of who they were, but it's quite clear that they had some kind of leadership function because the money that was to be distributed was brought to them for their management.

Likewise, in Acts 15, when the Jerusalem council met to deliberate on certain things, principally circumcision, we find that the gathering was a convention of the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem. And there are other examples in the Bible that talk of the elders of that church. Now, in the other churches, the Gentile churches, there were often elders also.

I say often only because I don't know whether there always were. We're not told of every church that there were elders in them. One might reasonably assume as much because we're not told everything there is to be told about all these churches.

But we do find in general that it was the policy of the apostles to identify elders in each church. In Acts 14, 23, we're told that when Paul and Barnabas were on their way home from their first missionary journey, they had on their way out, they had established congregations in every city that they had visited. And on their way back, they revisited these same congregations in reverse order as they worked their way back.

And among the things that they did on their return, it says in verse 23 of Acts 14, when they had appointed elders in every church, they prayed with fasting and commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. In Acts 20, Paul was on his way to Jerusalem. He wanted to speak to the leaders of the church in Ephesus.

But he didn't want to go to Ephesus because he felt he'd be detained and wouldn't make it to Jerusalem in time on his schedule. So he went to Meletus and sent a messenger to

the elders of the church in Ephesus, asked them to come down and meet with him in Meletus, which they did. And he gave a little speech to them there.

But it says in Acts 20 in verse 17, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church. Now, we see in these examples that an individual church had elders, plural. In the passage in Acts 14, it says they ordained them elders, plural, in every church.

And when he sent to the church of Ephesus, he called for the elders, plural, of the church of Ephesus. We don't read that any church had an individual who was called the elder of the church in those days. But each church apparently had elders, plural.

In Titus chapter 1 in verse 5, Paul said to Titus, For this purpose I left thee in Crete, that thou might set in order the things that are lacking, and ordain elders, plural, in every city. Now, each city had one church. We never read of any other arrangement than that in the New Testament.

In the New Testament, each city had a church. The church in Corinth, the church in Philippi, the church in Ephesus. And so, in every church, Titus was to ordain elders, plural.

So, we have again a plurality showing up here. In James 5.14, Paul says, Is any sick among you? Let him call... Did I say Paul? James. James 5.14, obviously it's not Paul.

James said, Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders, plural, of the church. Again, elders, plural. Church, singular.

Each church had elders. At least, let me put it this way. We don't know that every church had elders, but we know of no other kind of leaders in any church except elders.

The churches that had leaders, what they had were elders. And they didn't have just one, as far as we can tell. We never learned of a church that had one man leadership, but they were led by elders.

Now, who were these elders and what was their function? Well, let's look over at the next column, because we find another Greek word. And that is the word episkopos, which literally means overseer. Epi, the first part of that word, epi means over or upon in Greek.

And skopos is the root of some of our English words that have the word scope in them. And of course, it means to see. A telescope means to see far.

A microscope means to see small. A skopos means to see. A piskopos means oversee.

So, an episkopos is an overseer. Episkopos is a noun. There is a cognate, episkopos, I think it is, which is the verb, to see over, to oversee something.

Now, there are individuals in the scripture who are called overseers. This is unfortunately obscured by a traditional translation of this word, as it appears at least in the King James Version and some of the other versions, older ones. The word episkopos is sometimes usually translated in the King James Version as bishop.

Now, I find that singularly unfortunate that the word bishop is in the King James Version. Not that I have real complaints about the King James Version. I like the King James Version.

It is probably my favorite Bible version. But it is an English version that is translated by men. And they, in many cases, show evidence of being influenced by the ecclesiology of their own day.

The Greek word that they translate as bishop is not a word that has an ecclesiastical office kind of a flavor to it. It is a word that speaks of an activity, overseeing something, supervising something. I guess, episkopos could be called a supervisor, an overseer.

West called him a guardian. That is what an episkopos does. He oversees.

He makes sure everything is going well and no doubt has some intervention when things are not going well. Now, to take that word overseer and translate it as bishop, unfortunately, at least in our day, the word bishop has the connotation of an ecclesiastical officer. And it has more to do with his costume and his ritual that he is involved in than it has anything to do with his actual function.

Now, I mean, what we call a bishop today in the more hierarchical churches or whatever, of course they have a function. And people in those churches probably know what that function is. If you and I do not come from such a church where we have pointy-headed bishops and so forth, we probably do not have a clue what a bishop does, but we know what he looks like.

Because we have them on our chest sets, see? We have bishops on those and they look like, their heads are a different shape than other people's. But, you know, what a bishop looks like, you know, that is more of what sticks in our minds if we are not from a liturgical kind of a church. But the word bishop, I think, is unfortunate only because we do associate certain kinds of more modern developments with that term.

As I mentioned in an earlier lecture in this series, the word bishop or overseer, episkopos, eventually, as early as the early 2nd century, came to denote what church historians now call the monarchical bishop. And the word monarchical, just like it sounds, comes from the word monarch. There were no monarchical bishops as far as we know in the New Testament times, but as early as 110 A.D., when Ignatius wrote his letters to the seven churches, he was talking like each church had a monarchical bishop.

Whatever the apostle had established had given way already to something where there

was a one man in the church who was like a monarch, he was like a king, and he was called a bishop. That early, this word episkopos came to have these kinds of political ramifications, but there is no reason to impose them back on the apostles' own writings. The word they use simply means a man who oversees, a man who supervises, a man who watches over something.

Now, concerning the use of this word, we find that when Paul called the elders of the church in Ephesus, which I mentioned a moment ago in Acts 20, in verse 28 he said this to them, Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost has made you episkopoi, overseers or bishops, to feed the flock, feed the church of God. We read at the beginning of this talk, Philippians 1.1, To all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons, it says in the King James, or with the overseers and deacons, the episkopoi. In 1 Timothy 3.2, Paul says, A bishop or an overseer, then episkopos, then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, and then he goes on.

Likewise in Titus 1.7, he says, For a bishop, that is for an overseer, episkopos, must be blameless as the steward of God. Now, when we see these different verses using these different words, poimen, which means shepherd or pastor, presbuteros, which means elder, and episkopos, which means overseer or bishop, it can get very confusing if we let it. We can say, okay, so each church has to have some pastors, then they've got to get some bishops, and somewhere they've got to get some elders, and what is the relationship of all these offices to each other? Who's on top and who's on the bottom, and what's the hierarchy here? And, of course, the liturgical churches have answered that with their own human traditions by placing some kind of a hierarchy.

You've got the pastor or the priest, or you've got the bishop, and then you've got the pope, or the cardinals, you've got this hierarchy. But what I want you to see is that these three terms do not comprise three offices in the church, but actually are simply interchangeable terms for the same people. This can be demonstrated without question.

At the bottom of this page I gave you, it shows how these terms are used interchangeably frequently in the New Testament. Even of Christ, in 1 Peter 2.25, it says, He is the shepherd and bishop of your souls. That is, the poimen and episkopos.

The word shepherd or pastor is joined with that of overseer in one person, in this case, Christ. But that is not only true of Christ, but also of other men who have these offices. I've already drawn attention twice to Acts 20.28. There we read, actually in verse 17, that Paul had called for the elders, the presbuteroi of the church, to gather.

And in speaking to the elders of the church, he said, Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost has made you episkopoi, overseers, to shepherd the church of God. The word shepherd there is the verb form of poimen, of the noun shepherd. That is, the elders are identified as the bishops or the

overseers, and their job is to shepherd.

So they are the shepherds and the overseers and the elders. All these three words are joined in one office. I don't even like the word office.

The Bible doesn't really use that term in the Greek, but with this one identification. Likewise, in 1 Peter 5, verses 1 and 2, it says, The elders which are among you I exhort. He goes on to say, which I am also an elder and a fellow witness of the sufferings of Christ and a participant in the glory that shall be revealed.

Then he says, Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight of it. Now, he says he's addressing the presbytero, the elders. He tells them to shepherd.

Again, it's the same Greek verb form of the word pastor. He says, Elders, pastor the flock. Shepherd the flock.

Paul told the elders of Ephesus to do it in Acts 20. Peter now tells the elders of the churches in Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, Galatia, and wherever else he was writing to in that epistle to do the same. The elders are told to pastor or shepherd the church.

And it says, taking the oversight. This is the verb form of the word bishop or overseer. Episkopos, it's episkopos I believe in the Greek, but it's the verb form of the noun overseer.

So, the elders in both these places, by Paul and Peter, are exhorted to be the shepherds or the pastors and they're said to be the overseers. They have to take the oversight of it. And then, of course, in Titus 1, verses 5 and 7, Paul says to Titus, ordain elders in every city for a bishop must be blameless.

That is, ordain presbytero in every city because an episkopos must be blameless. And he's talking about the same people he called the elders. Now, you will never find a case where any distinction is made in the Bible between a presbyteros or an episkopos or appointment.

That is, a pastor is not ever distinguished from an elder or from a bishop or overseer. But in these four places, at the bottom of the page, they are identified as the same persons. So, the weight of scriptural testimony would certainly incline us to believe that if the churches were pastored by anybody, they were pastored by the elders.

And each church had several, some. We don't know if they had a lot or a few, but they didn't just have one. There were elders in every church and those elders were appointed to shepherd the flock and to oversee it, to be the overseers, the bishops.

So, bishop and elder are simply interchangeable terms in the Scripture and so is the word pastor. Therefore, in that one place in the New Testament that speaks of the

church leaders as pastors, where it says God gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers, if Paul had in mind what he and the other apostles seemed to have in mind when they addressed this subject in the rest of the Scripture, when he said some pastors, he was talking about the elders. Those who are the elders of the church are the pastors, the shepherds that God has given to the flock.

Now, you will not find anywhere in Scripture a different form of church government than that which I've just mentioned. You will find, of course, churches that do not yet have elders. There are churches in the New Testament that exist as churches prior to the appointment of elders.

But you never find a church that the apostles or someone else comes in and appoints leadership in, and it's not elders. You never find them appointing a pastor. You never find the church electing a pastor or the church electing anything else.

You do not find a congregational form of government in the Bible because the apostles were the ones who ordained, unilaterally ordained these people to be the leaders. So, we now need to talk about how to draw conclusions about that for today because there are some things different, like the apostles aren't here, and maybe the elders aren't. Who knows? That's what we have to look into.

Who are the elders today, or what are elders today? I dare say that elders today can be essentially the same thing as elders were in biblical times, but there are some variables that are at least worth considering that differ from then in the modern church. But we better make sure we don't really change anything from the way the early church did it unless there's some compelling circumstance that requires that, I think. Now, there's several questions I want to ask and answer about elders in this talk.

One of them is, what did the shepherding functions of the elders involve? I mean, what did these guys do? What do you need them for? We could put it this way, what does a pastor do? But if we understand biblically, a pastor is just one of these elders. There's lots of pastors in the church, and they're also called elders and overseers. But there is a biblical answer to the question, what did they do? And insofar as they do these things, they serve the church well.

Sometimes in the later development of the ecclesiastical structure of the church, leaders in the church, especially pastors, began to operate more like CEOs or seemed to have some sort of like a boss, organizational boss or something in the church. But not only was there no individual pastor in the early church, there were no pastors that were bosses, as near as we can tell. And the ones who acted like bosses were rebuked for having done so and were forbidden to do so.

There are three things I find in Scripture that the elders are commanded to do, and

therefore I would say it makes their job description. They're either commanded to do it or they're said to do it. The first of those is to teach the Word of God.

That's apparently the primary activity of the elders. Now remember this, when the New Testament was being written, the church didn't have a New Testament, not yet. In fact, most Christians didn't have an Old Testament.

It was in existence, but you couldn't afford to get one. They didn't have pre-presses, they couldn't mass-produce them. Every Bible had to be hand-written, word for word, and most people would take their life savings to get one if they could find one for sale.

We've got to remember we're in a very different situation in one respect, one very important respect today than they were then, and that is that we do have Bibles. We can read the Bible at home. We can read the Bible in church.

We can study the Word of God for ourselves. The average Christian of those days didn't have access to a printed copy of the Scriptures. But those who did, whether it was because they had the leisure to go down, maybe they're retired old men or whatever, they had leisure to go down to the synagogue where there was probably a copy of the Scriptures chained to the pulpit, and they could just pour over it and learn the Scriptures, or maybe they had the opportunity to sit under the apostles and learn a great deal.

They were able to teach what the Scriptures said to a church where most people wouldn't have any other way of knowing what the Scriptures said, because they don't have access to it. Now, I'm not saying that the fact that we have the Bible means we don't need any teachers anymore, but I would say it is a different circumstance, and there are different needs in a sense. But they were certainly to teach the Word of God, and obviously I'm a Bible teacher.

I believe in that. I believe that even though we have Bibles, we can be benefited by a ministry of Bible teaching. So I'm not trying to rule that out.

I'm just saying the fact that you have a Bible, and everyone in this congregation has a Bible, does change the level of need. Because, I mean, John even said to people who didn't have Bibles, he says, you have no need that anyone teach you, but the anointing which you've received of God abides in you and teaches you of all things. So our dependence on human teachers is not absolute.

That's very important. As a person who's made a... I mean, my vocation for 30 years has been that of a Bible teacher. I don't do anything else.

It might seem strange for a Bible teacher to go and say, listen, you don't need me. It may not seem very good for job security for a person to teach that. But, so I don't make any money at this, it doesn't matter to me at all.

If you decide you don't need me, more power to you. The fact is, you don't need me. At least not absolutely.

There may be a sense in which Bible teachers, myself and many others, can contribute something, can stir up your godly minds to look at the Scriptures a new way, or to do some research on something you wouldn't have thought to research, or to bring some light somewhere. I mean, the Bible does not say that God has no use for teachers. But it does say that you don't really... you're not dependent on any man to teach you, because you have a relation with God, and He's your teacher.

He's your shepherd. And that is, I think, even more so now that you have a Bible to read too. That was said to people back before they even had Bibles.

But there is obviously benefit that can be derived from Bible teaching, if it's legitimate and good. And that is one thing elders did. The qualifications for an elder and the qualifications for deacons, something we won't be talking about in detail tonight, are given in 1 Timothy chapter 3. And the qualifications for both, elder and deacons, are almost identical, with one difference.

It is said of the elder at the end of verse 2, 1 Timothy 3.2, he has to be able to teach. The deacon does not have to be able to teach. It's not part of his function.

All the other things that qualify a man to be an elder also are things that are in the list pretty much to qualify a man as a deacon. Character and good reputation, a family that's in order. These are the issues of qualification.

But the one thing different about an elder than a deacon is the elder has to be able to teach. Obviously, teaching then is part of his job description. And it surely is.

In Titus chapter 1, where Paul also gives the qualifications for an elder, he says this about the man who would be such. In verse 9, Titus 1.9, he says, Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince those who contradict. So an elder has to be one who is capable.

Well, he's been taught the word of God, probably by the apostles in this particular time. In a later generation, maybe someone was taught by elders before him. But the fact is, this man has received teaching and he is now able to communicate the truth, the faithful word as he's been taught, so he can by sound teaching refute heretics, those who contradict sound teaching.

So the elder must teach, must be at least capable of teaching. It may not be the primary function of every elder to teach, because if a church has multiple elders, some may be more into teaching than others. It talks in 1 Timothy 5.17, it says, The elders who rule well should be esteemed worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in doctrine.

That is, labor in the word and teaching. So some of the elders, more than others, would labor in the word and in teaching. Others have other leadership functions.

Ruler is a bad word. It's not a good translation. But a leadership function.

Now, over in Hebrews chapter 13, the word elder is not used, but it's quite clear that they are the ones being alluded to here. In Hebrews 13.7, the writer says, Remember those who rule over you. Now, we'll have something to say a little later about the meaning of the Greek word rule over you.

It's a very bad translation. The Greek word has nothing to do with ruling over. And I'll comment on that separately a little later.

But it is talking about the leaders of the church here. Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you. Okay, so that's basically what the leaders did.

They speak the word of God. They teach the faithful word, the doctrine and so forth. That's the main function of the elders is to teach the word of God.

Another thing they do can, I think, be discerned in 1 Thessalonians. You need to have a sharp eye to see it here. 1 Thessalonians 5, verses 12 through 15.

Verse 12 begins with the words, We urge you, brethren. And verse 14 begins with the words, Now we exhort you, brethren. I'm going to suggest a paradigm for you and you see if it works.

If you don't see it there, then don't see it there. But I would suggest that the brethren addressed in verse 12 are the congregation. And the brethren addressed in verse 14 are the elders or the leaders of the congregation.

Now, just try that paradigm on this passage. To the congregation he says, And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you and who are over you in the Lord and admonish you. And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake and be at peace among yourselves.

Now he says to the leaders, Now we exhort you, brethren. Warn those who are unruly. Comfort the fainthearted.

Uphold the weak. Be patient with all. See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone.

But always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all. Now, it's quite clear that verses 12 and 13 are addressing persons in the church about how to view those who are the leaders in the church. I think it likely that the second group of brethren in verse 14 are the leaders themselves.

And what is it there to do? He says, well, what are they supposed to do? They're supposed to warn those who are unruly. Misbehaving church members have to be warned by somebody. Comfort the fainthearted.

Okay, there's some church members that are really going through struggles and really weak and fainthearted at the moment. They need to be encouraged. They have to be comforted.

And uphold the weak and be patient to all. And of course, see that no one renders evil for evil. There has to be a certain degree of oversight there to make sure that people don't get vindictive toward each other and don't retaliate against wrongs done and so forth.

But I believe we have here something of the leadership's role. And that is to deal not only in teaching the Word to the congregation in general, but dealing with specific individuals. This would be something like a counseling type situation.

Someone's going the wrong way, you take them aside and you warn them about what they're doing wrong. Warn the unruly. There's someone who's fainthearted about ready to collapse spiritually.

You go and you comfort them. The high maintenance ones, by the way. And I may have said this in an earlier lecture, I don't know, but I'll say it again because it bears repeating I think.

And that is that the shepherd's principal activity is directed toward the high maintenance sheep. Jesus Himself said that. He said if the shepherd has a hundred sheep and ninety-nine are doing just fine, but one wanders off, what does he do? He leaves the ninety-nine.

They're doing okay. They don't need micromanagement. They're doing just fine.

He goes after the high maintenance sheep that doesn't know where it's supposed to be. Now, Jesus is saying that's what He's like. That's His style of shepherding.

And it makes sense for those who might emulate Him in any kind of leadership to observe the same principle. You don't have to, if you're in a church leadership position, micromanage everybody's business. If they're walking with Jesus just fine, they don't need you.

Thank you. And I've had to say that to certain pastors. Thank you.

I don't need your help in this matter. I mean, when we started the school six... Well, we ran the school six years in one location. We moved the school to another town and started going to a church in that town after six years.

And we were ten years in this town. The first few years, we were associated with this church. And every time our school made a decision about how to spend some money or something, the elders of the church, or the pastor really, speaking on behalf of the elders, said, you know, don't you think you should have checked that with the elders before you did that? I said, what? What's the deal? I mean, our school has a board of directors of godly spiritual men.

They're not bossy, but they keep me and the organization accountable. I said, why? I mean, we bought some property with some money we had. The church didn't give us any money.

Someone donated the money for buying some property. So we bought some property. And the pastor said to me later, he says, don't you think you should have checked with the elders about that? I thought, never crossed my mind.

Why should I have done that? He said, well, you know, it's kind of a big decision, isn't it? Yeah, if we have trouble making decisions, we'll let you know. You know, I mean, we've been making decisions like this for six years before we met you. We've done just fine.

I mean, I'm not trying to sound arrogant or anything like that, but I don't need your help when I don't need your help. If I really am having trouble and I can't make a decision, I know it, and I'll come to you if you're the guys I respect. But you don't have to impose your involvement when it's not needed.

I was never, in my opinion, of course, I don't know if anyone recognizes themselves as such, but I don't think I was ever a high-maintenance sheep. I was a bit of a troublemaker in some cases, but the fact is, I never needed the pastors to keep me following Jesus. And that's what the sheep are supposed to be doing, is following Jesus.

So many pastors view their job as keeping people with the agenda of the church. Now, they don't use the word agenda because that's like the word politics. People like that.

So they say, the vision. The word agenda is not as spiritual as the word vision. And so the leadership has a vision.

And what that means is they have an idea to grow the church this big by this year and have this wing added on and this extra gymnasium built on and have this much bucks in the bank and support one or two more missionaries by then. And that's the vision of the leadership. And have several daughter churches around that they're overseeing.

That was at least the vision of this particular pastor. And his problem with me was that I didn't share his vision. Now, I never opposed it.

I never got up and spoke against it. I tried to flow with what his church was doing because I never have desired to be a troublemaker. But his problem with me was, he

says... See, I had a school I was running.

And I was on the radio. And he says, you know, it's kind of hard for us here in the leadership to have you in the church as a fairly highly visible, you know, teacher and so forth. And you're not following our vision.

Well, I'm not... I didn't know I was supposed to follow your vision. I thought I was following Jesus. You know, aren't you following Jesus? Let's all follow Jesus.

Let's forget about your vision. You know, I mean, these guys thought they were supposed to be the boss. And everybody has to do what they do.

And I'll tell you what, that was a church where they decided we're going to break this church up into small groups because that was the fad in the movement at that time. They went with every fad that came through in the years I knew them. And there have been many fads come through in recent church growth and charismatic things going on.

And so the fad came through of having small groups. So the pastor said, I want everyone in the church to join one of the small groups. And so my wife and I, and our children were the ones we had at the time, we tried to oblige them.

We went to one of the small groups and it fell apart. Nope, we didn't do it. I was not the leader.

I was not the leader. I hardly even spoke at all there. But it was a project that was doomed to fail.

There was nothing really to go there for. It was just kind of a nothing that was being done because the elders said there should be a small group. So one fell apart.

So we joined another one. And the leaders went off to Japan as missionaries. So that fell apart.

And then we tried to join another one. Eventually my wife and I realized, you know, we have so few nights free. Going to these small groups is just not really profitable for our family.

It's not contributing anything to our spiritual benefit. And I'm not really sure we're contributing anything there. And our kids need us at home more.

And I went to the pastor and I said, do you mind? I know you want everyone in the church to be in a small group. But, you know, we've tried that. We tried it in three different ones.

And it just really isn't right for our family. Do you mind? Would you be offended if we didn't join a small group? I thought the guy would be reasonable and say, well, obviously

if it's not ministering to your needs, why should you need to go to a small group? But he says, well, how are we going to keep things uniform around here if people aren't all going to small groups? I didn't know we're supposed to be uniform. I thought Paul said there's a lot of different kinds of gifts and not all are an eye and not all are a nose and not all are ears.

I didn't know that uniformity was one of the goals of the church. Unity, yes. But unity and uniformity are not the same thing.

And this is the problem with many leaders. They think that because they are the leaders and they know no paradigm of leadership except political leadership, that that means they're the guys who set the agenda and everyone else is supposed to walk lockstep behind them. And if not, you've got an independent spirit, a Jezebel spirit, or you've got some other kind of problem with you.

And they're the ones with the wrong spirit because they are the ones who are interpreting their task as the micromanagement of everybody's spiritual life. And there never is anyone in the Bible, including the apostles, who attempted to do that because they didn't figure it was their business. Paul said, not that we have dominion over your faith, but we're helpers of your joy, for by faith ye stand.

Now, a shepherd, simply, he looks out for the ones who need help. You see, leadership is a gift. It's one of many gifts.

There's lots of gifts of the Spirit in the Bible. One of them is the gift of leading. You'll find it mentioned in Romans 12, 8. And it's called ruling in the King James.

A bad translation again. I hope you get around to saying something about that. But what is a leader? He's someone who has something to contribute to the body of Christ, just like the person who is a giver, or has the gift of helps, or is a teacher, or an exhorter, or a prophet, or whatever.

What are these gifts for? They're for serving the body. So, a person has the gift of leadership. That's something for him to serve the body with.

It's a service he performs. Sheep need leadership. Okay? But, if it is a service, it is not something that is imposed against the will of the recipient.

If you have the gift of giving and you come to me and say, Steve, you know, I just felt led to write you out this check for \$10,000. I say, well, you know what? I'll tell you what. We're doing just fine right now.

We're financially flush. We've got no debt. We're just good.

I can't even imagine what I would need \$10,000 for, but I happen to know that family

over there really has a lot more need than we do. Why don't you give it to them? And you say, no. I have the gift of giving.

Whether you like it or not, you've got to take my money. Well, I'll take it, but I don't really see that as reasonable. If I don't need it, maybe your gift should be administered to somebody who has a need for your gift.

If I say my gift is teaching, and therefore, I don't understand why everyone in the whole town isn't here, you know, because, I mean, every Christian needs Bible teaching, and I'm a teacher. Come on! I'm going to go knock on some doors at our church and say, you played hooky from my class because don't you know I've got a gift of teaching and you need teaching? Well, what if they say, well, Steve, you know what? I get so much teaching from radio, from books I read, from tapes I listen to. I don't need to come to your Tuesday night meeting.

Thanks. Well, that might hurt my pride, but it may be a very legitimate answer for them to give. If they don't need my teaching, who am I to insist that they must have it? I'm not to cram it down their throat.

If I'm offering teaching as a service to the body of Christ, then those who have a sense need for that service are welcome to it. Those who don't are welcome to not have it. And if my gift were leadership, well, what's that for? That's for people who need to be led.

Do all you people need leading by me? No, of course not. Probably none of you do. We all need to be led, but we have a leader.

His name is Jesus, and He's our shepherd. Now, some people have a real hard time following Him because they can't see Him and don't understand Him very well. And so, there are some people who really need more intensive or more helpful leadership from actual brothers, you know, more than others.

We all need the brothers. But in terms of needing to be led, needing someone to tell me, I don't know what to do next. I don't know how to get over my sin problem.

I don't know how to live for God. Can you give me some help here? Well, those people need leadership. That's a service that some people can provide.

They can provide leadership. But to impose it on someone who says, well, you know, I have no complaints about the way I've been following Jesus. Do you? You've got to complain about the way I'm following Jesus? I mean, maybe I've got a blind spot.

But if there's nothing wrong with the way I'm following Jesus right now, why do I need you to tell me what I ought to do next? The head of every man is Christ. I'm a man. He's my head.

Now, that doesn't mean that I shouldn't be teachable and humble and receptive to any kind of correction, any kind of teaching, any kind of exhortation, any kind of suggestion that someone feels led to make to me. I mean, believe me, there have been very few times in the past 20 years of my life that I've felt the desperate need for someone to tell me what to do next. I mean, someone said to me once over 20 years ago, they said, well, Steve, where do you go when you need counseling? It never occurred to me to even wonder.

Every time I have problems, I go to the Word of God, and it's always been absolutely adequate. The Word of God is, these are my counselors, but there are people who don't know the Word of God enough to go to the Word of God and know where to look. They could help, you know, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, warn the unruly.

This is what the leaders are supposed to be doing. Look out for the ones who have particular needs. And I'll tell you what, I know when I have needs too.

Now, obviously, a man, I could be so arrogant that even though I need help and leadership, I might not admit it. Well, that would not be good. In which case, you ought to come and exhort me about my arrogance.

But the fact of the matter is, mature Christians don't need as much leadership from people as young Christians or struggling Christians do. And so the job description of an elder includes encouraging and warning and upholding and comforting the ones who are weak, who are unruly, the ones who are fainthearted. That's what Paul directs them to focus on.

And there's one other thing that the elders are to do that's mentioned in Scripture in 1 Peter 5, 3. Peter writes several verses to the elders of the church or churches. In 1 Peter 5, verses 1 through 5. Verse 1, he says, The elders who are among you I exhort. And then he gives some exhortations.

And among the things he says is verse 2, Shepherd the flock of God. Again, they're the poymen, the shepherds. And it says in verse 3, Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you.

Or the King James says, over God's heritage. I'm not sure why the difference there in the New King James. But being examples to the flock.

Now, the elders are not there to be lords. Which means they're not there to be bosses. If I were an elder in a church, you would not be my servant having to do my bidding.

There's a lot of pastors who think that's the way it is. And if people don't want to follow their vision, then that person's a troublemaker in the church and ought to go somewhere else to where he can find a pastor whose agenda, vision, he can follow. Because the assumption is the pastor's the big boss.

And you ought to submit to him. Now, there are some verses about submission we're going to get to. But notice this.

Pastors told not to be, or elders told not to be lords. That means they're not the boss. What are they then? What do they do? Well, they're supposed to set an example.

That is the third duty of the elder. Is to set an example. It might really be the first.

I don't know. I didn't put these in order of importance. But he's got to be a person who not only can teach the church what they're supposed to do, but can show them how it's done.

And they should be able to look at a man who's an elder and say, there's a person who knows how to follow Jesus and that's what I'm trying to do better. And that person just may be able to either tell me or show me how to do it better myself. Now, the elder, in my opinion, the elder is not some kind of a spiritual giant.

He's just a spiritual man. When you read the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1, you'll find that there's not one thing there except the able to teach part. There's not one thing in the qualifications for elders that aren't qualifications for all Christians.

He's supposed to be not given to wine, not a striker, not given to wrath, got his family in order, he's training his kids to be godly. Heard anything yet that doesn't apply to all Christians? You read the list. You'll find that every qualification for the elders is simply something that every Christian ought to do and ought to be.

The difference is, not all Christians are what they ought to be or do what they ought to do, but some do. And the ones that do, the position of leadership should be reserved for those who actually do what Christians are supposed to do. Why? So they can be an example to the ones who are having a hard time doing that.

So when people look at the leaders of the church, they can say, okay, I've known what I'm supposed to do, but that person's really doing it. And I need to follow that example more. You see, the elders are simply, I mean, in terms of their qualifications, they are simply people, Christians, who are living the way Christians are supposed to.

It shouldn't be so extraordinary to run into them, you know. It shouldn't be so hard to find them. They shouldn't be so few in number.

But however few they are, or numerous, the people in the leadership of the church should not be taken from any other ranks than that. You should not find, for example, a church that has made an elder out of a man whose children are not Christian. Or who tends to have a short fuse.

Or who has other problems in his character, and he's only made an elder because he's maybe the owner of one of the bigger businesses in town, or something like that. Big contributor to the church. You don't want to see him go somewhere else and give his money elsewhere so you make him an elder.

That kind of thing happens. Handing out titles to people to keep them in the church. I mean, there's some pretty ugly stuff.

We might not think it's ugly, because we're so used to the politics of church. But it's a fact. No man should ever be in leadership in the church unless his life is the life that every Christian should be pleased to imitate.

Paul said, Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. I've heard many pastors, when they read that scripture, say, boy, I wouldn't say that. I think, well, then get out of the pulpit.

If you can't say to people, imitate me as I imitate Christ, then you shouldn't be up in front of them at all. Now, it's okay. I realize some Christians aren't good Christians enough that they could tell someone to imitate them.

If they're struggling, if they're young, if they've got a lot of learning to do, whatever, then I don't condemn Christians who aren't able to say that. But they shouldn't be the leaders of the church. They shouldn't be put on display for the world and the church to look at if they're not able to say, imitate my life the way that I'm endeavoring to imitate Christ.

They have to be examples to the flock. So, the elder's job is to teach the word of God, to exhort and encourage and warn the high maintenance sheep, and to be an example for all, according to these scriptures. Now, something I want to get into, and boy, I just run out of time so quickly here.

When we talk about, we read about ordaining elders. Okay, when you ordain someone, you put them in some kind of an office or something, and suddenly the images of corporate, of a corporation, of organizational leadership or something come to mind. How could it not? I mean, the very words of the scripture as they're translated traditionally convey the idea that we're putting someone, when we ordain an elder, you're putting someone into something like a political role.

Now, if the word political bothers you, let me tell you what I mean by political. I'm using the word political as a modifier for the word authority, political authority. A little bit synonymous with how I might speak of the word as institutional authority.

To me, authority is in God alone and in His word. Anyone can speak the word of God to me and I have to submit to what they say, because that's the word of God and I have to submit to God. On the other hand, a guy who's the pastor of the biggest church in town, he can get up and say something that's contrary to the word of God and he carries no

weight with me.

I don't care what office he holds, I don't care how many people lick his shoes, I don't care how many people feel like they should give their tithes to him. If he speaks contrary to the word of God, he's not speaking authoritatively as far as I'm concerned. The authority does not rest in him.

The authority is in the word of God and what the elders are called to do is to faithfully hold out the word of God and when they do, submit to that. Submit to what they say. But what political or institutional authority is, is you submit to him because he's in this position.

Even when he's wrong, even if his character is bad, he holds an office and the office is where the authority is. That's what political or institutional authority means. I don't believe the elders in the church had it, but I believe the elders in almost every church I've ever seen since then do and shouldn't.

But let me give you three things that I think would identify what I mean when I'm talking about institutional or political authority, which I don't believe is what the elders are to have. First of all, as I said, institutional authority in here is in the office, not in the character or the correctness of the office holder. That is, I've heard it said that you should submit to your elders even when you suspect they're wrong.

In fact, even if your own conscience tells you that they're speaking against the word of God, you should do it anyway because it'll be their responsibility, not yours. That's not true. That speaks as if an elder is a political office.

It doesn't matter who's in there. The guy could be following the Koran instead of the Bible, as far as anyone knows, but he's in authority. You salute the uniform.

Well, they don't have a uniform. I'm going to suggest to you the elders don't wear a uniform. They don't have an office like that.

That is not where their authority is. Institutional authority in here is in the office itself regardless of who's in that office. Hence, we honor the president.

It's a political kind of authority. Why? Is he an honorable person? Not in the least. If he were not the president, we would not want our children to look at the man.

But he's the president, so we give him some kind of deference of some kind. Very limited. But the fact of the matter is we recognize he's the president.

And when he does bad things, we talk about how he's ruined the dignity of the office of the presidency, which he has done. But see, what he's got is a political institutional authority. It doesn't inhere in his character.

It doesn't inhere in his doing the right thing. He holds the office. What he does becomes official because he's got the authority to do it.

Now, if we don't like what he does, we put someone else in there who we hope will do it better. But the fact is, as long as he's in office, he can write those executive orders. We may think it's an abuse of power, but that's what he's all about.

That's what a lot of political leaders are all about. It's about abuse of power. It's like power is privilege, and once you've got it, you abuse it.

And there are very few people of whom that is not the case, including religious leaders. There are some exceptions, but few, in my judgment. And I have met some of those few, and some of them may be leaders of churches that you go to, and that's fine.

I congratulate you if you found such a church, and that's good. But the fact is, spiritual authority does not inhere in an office. It inheres in the Word of God, and in the faithfulness of a Christian to the Word of God.

If a six-year-old boy came to me and spoke the Word of God faithfully to me, that person is speaking with authority that I have to submit to, if it's truly the Word of God. If the man who's the most highly esteemed Christian leader on the continent comes and speaks to me against the Word of God, the Bible says, they speak not according to this Word, because there's no light in them, and I dare say no authority either, at least not in what they've just said. And the authority is in the Word, it's in God, it's not in the office.

Another aspect of institutional authority is that it requires submission to the will of the office holder. That is, political authority assumes that if you're in that authority, then the others must submit to your will. Now, both of these things are not true of Christian leadership.

First of all, the leadership does not inhere in the office, but it inheres in the character of the individual. Look at 3 John, if you would. Interestingly, John's writing to a church that apparently doesn't have appointed elders or any other appointed leadership, which is an interesting exception, but there are such exceptions in the Scripture.

There's no mention of elders, there's no mention of pastors, there's no mention of official appointed men in any form of leadership, but there are certainly men who are taken charge. Some of them not too good. In 3 John, verses 9-12, John says, I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us.

Well, who is this Diotrephes? Is he an elder? He doesn't say so. Is he a pastor? He doesn't say so. What is he? He's a guy who likes to have the preeminence.

He's a take-charge kind of a guy. And he doesn't like what John has to say, so he doesn't

receive John's letters. What else do we know about him? Well, it says, Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds, which he does, prating against us with malicious words, and not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.

This guy actually kicks people out of the church. Now, does he hold political office or is he just intimidating? John doesn't say. John doesn't say that this guy is an office holder at all.

He's just a guy who loves to have the preeminence. Then he says, Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God.

He who does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has a good testimony from all. Not Diocrates, but Demetrius.

And from the truth itself. And we also bear witness. And you know that our testimony is true.

It seems like John, if he was thinking like modern people, he would just say to Gaius, to whom he wrote this letter, Listen, that guy at Diocrates, he's a bad egg. We need to remove him from the eldership. And this guy, Demetrius, he's a good guy.

Let's make him the pastor. Then he can clean house here. But John doesn't say anything like that.

He just says there's this guy in the church who loves to take charge. There's another guy who's really much more commendable. Demetrius, he's a good guy.

And what does he say to Gaius? Imitate the good guys, not the bad guys. Isn't that amazing? He doesn't say, Submit to the office held by... For one thing, we don't know that any of these men had any office in the church. But that's irrelevant.

John could have appointed someone to office if he wanted to. All he says to you is, You're a Christian. I expect you to have a little discernment.

Here's a guy over here who thinks he's a leader. Here's a guy over here who's not claiming to be a leader. But I'd say he's a real leader.

He's got a good rapport with everybody. And I'll tell you what to do, Gaius. You imitate the good guy.

And don't imitate the bad guy. I mean, what is it? What was the authority of Demetrius? Just that of a good testimony. Just that of a godly character.

And the idea is, follow him. Follow his character. Look over at 1 Corinthians chapter 16.

This is a very interesting thing, I think, because it indicates that there may not have been appointed elders in the church of Corinth. There's no evidence in Scripture that elders had ever been appointed there yet. And these epistles... Yet there were people to look to as leaders.

It says this. In 1 Corinthians 16, beginning of verse 17. Paul said, I'm glad about the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus... Actually, that's not where I want to start.

I want to start earlier than that. Verse 15. I urge you, brethren, you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia.

There's the first Christians there. They're the most mature Christians in town. They're the firstfruits of Achaia.

And that they have devoted themselves to the ministry. That means the service of the saints. That you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us.

Now notice, he says, there's a family there. They're the oldest Christians in town. They were the first ones saved.

The firstfruits of the region. They are people who are clearly addicted to serving people. They're addicted to the serving of the saints.

Submit to people like that. Notice he didn't say submit to the elders, the office holders. He said, when you see people like that, submit to that kind of person.

It wasn't that they held an office that you salute to. It's that you recognize there's character there. There's faithfulness there.

There's an example worth following. That's the kind of person he says to submit to. Submit to such as that.

It's really tell-tale when he says that. He's saying, such as that just means that kind of person. There were no elders apparently to be told to submit to.

But there's some good Christian testimonies. Submit to that kind of person. Isn't that interesting? I find that fascinating.

Now, as far as the idea that the authority means that everyone else has to do my will, that's what institutional authority means. The guy gives the orders and you do it. The military is a very good example of that.

Every corporation, every government is like that, except that of the church when it's functioning like Jesus said to do. In Matthew 20, we've seen this before, but I'm afraid we can't see this too many times because the church hasn't heard it yet. Ours might have.

I don't know, but many churches have not. Matthew 20, verse 25-28, Jesus said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Now, have you ever seen a church where the leadership did not exercise authority over the church? That's exactly what the rulers of the Gentiles do.

But Jesus said, Yet it shall not be so among you. The leaders do not exercise authority over the church. This turns the whole thing on its head.

What do they do then if they don't exercise authority over the church? It shall not be so among you, but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your slave, your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. Now, hang on here.

Authority in any institutional political sense means the guy in authority is the one people are supposed to submit to. He exercises authority over the underlings. He is the one whose will, when expressed, is the command to the followers.

Now, whether it's him or an eldership or whatever, the authority structure is viewed in every secular organization, and sadly in most Christian organizations, as a top-down kind of thing. The leaders, they're the guys who got the smarts. They're the guys who see what God wants.

The rest of the pawns down there can't hear from God. So, they tell you what to do, and you do what they say. Jesus said, No, the guy who's the leader is the one who serves the others.

He's the slave. He's the slave of everybody. He's not walking in authority over people.

He's walking under people. What he does is a service performed just as it's his slave duty. You need help? Maybe I can help.

You need some counsel? Maybe I can help you. You need to be taught? I'll do what I can. You know, I mean, that's what I'm here for.

I'm here to serve. You don't want to do what I say you should do? That's between you and God. I'm not exercising authority over anyone.

That's what Jesus said it has to be like. The rulers of the Gentiles exercise authority top down. He says, Not you.

Not you. Not among you. And yet, where is the church where you find it not among them? I'm not trying to be hard on the churches, but I mean, it's a sad thing.

I cannot think of any church I've ever been in, except the home church I was in in Oregon that we refused to have a pastor or a leader. And this church I'm currently in, I can't think of any other church I've been in that didn't have top down assumptions about

authority. The man in authority makes the rules.

He basically sets the vision. People, if they're good sheep, follow what he says. Now, that's institutional political kind of authority, the opposite of spiritual authority.

So, institutional authority in here is in the office, not in the character or the rightness of the person. Institutional authority requires submission to the will of the office holder, but not Christian authority doesn't. And another thing, institutional authority involves some mechanism of succession to office.

Now, this is a very important thing to consider. Political authority has to make provision for how this office holder is replaced if he dies or is kicked out or his term ends or whatever. There's got to be succession.

That's institutional. It's self-perpetuating. It doesn't require God.

Once it's rolling, you just wind it up and it'll go forever. It's just like the deist world view. You know, God wound up the whole universe and went somewhere else and said, gee, it works just fine without him.

And that's how many churches assume leadership of the church is to be. Okay, we wound it up. God wound it up.

God appointed leaders. Now, when that leader dies, we've got the political structure together to put another guy in his place. And when he's gone, we can put someone else in.

We've got the mechanisms all worked out. It's in our bylaws. Well, was there any such mechanism of succession in the New Testament? And would it even have been considered to be right to have one? I'm not sure.

And I'll tell you quite honestly, I don't have a clear word from the New Testament on this. I will say this. With something that would be as important to an institution as that, it seems strange that the Scripture makes no mention whatsoever about how an elder, once he's gone, is replaced by additional elders.

And we do have this. The only thing we have that looks like some provision for succession in the church is that which Paul says in 2 Timothy 2.2, where he says to Timothy, The things that you've heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men. He doesn't say they're officeholders.

They're just faithful men. They're characters, what matters. You commit those things you've learned from me, commit them to faithful men, and they will in turn teach others.

And presumably, those will teach others and teach others and so forth. In other words, the authority of Christ will be perpetuated generation after generation, not by the

succession of men to an office, but by the perpetuation of the teaching of the apostles faithfully by faithful men, generation after generation. Whether these men hold office or not is not important.

The question is whether they're faithfully passing on what the Word of God says. That's what Paul seemed to say. Now, I think, and I've long thought, that we have an interesting example of this issue in the contrast between the judges in the Old Testament and the kings in the Old Testament.

And Mark, the other day, read in church something from 1 Samuel 8 I'd like to look at again, but not quite yet. It was very, very important. But, you know, God did not establish a monarchy initially in Israel.

He conceded to the people when they wanted a monarchy. But he said later in Hosea chapter 13, he says, in wrath I gave you the king that you required. God did not set up Israel to be a monarchy.

You know why? Because they were a theocracy. They were to be ruled by God, not by a man. And so for 300 years, after Moses died and then Joshua died, the two prophetic leaders, there wasn't another prophetic leader come up.

I mean, Moses provided for succession of himself and Joshua. Joshua made no provisions for succession. When Joshua was dead, there were no more prophets for a while there.

How was Israel run? Well, they ran without official leadership until they got in trouble. And when they got in trouble, God raised up somebody, a Gideon or a Barak or a Deborah or a Samson or something. And these men, we call them judges.

But I don't recall that they are called judges. We are told that they judged Israel. That's why we call them judges.

We're told more about their activity than an office. Whenever Israel got into big trouble and called out on God, God raised up a leader. They didn't have or need leaders at other times because God was their leader.

But there were times when God as leader sent them a deliverer to what? Teach them the word of God. That's what the judges did. They basically, I mean, read of what Deborah did or others, and say people would come to them with their complaints and they would appeal to the law of God.

Say, well, here's how you solve that. That's what a judge does. They didn't make laws because they weren't kings, they weren't rulers.

They were just spokesmen for God to help people understand what God's word said that they should do. That's what a judge did. But the interesting thing here is there was no

provision for succession from one judge to the next.

And this is an amazing thing because it seems to be such bad planning on God's part. Because every time a judge died, there was a vacuum, right? It's not like they had some kind of, okay, we better have someone take over for Gideon when he's gone because otherwise we're going to have a vacuum here, power vacuum. Well, there was a power vacuum.

You know why? Because God didn't immediately raise up anyone to replace him. And we often generally read that after a while, the people went the wrong way again. And what does it say about the people in the period of judges in general? There was no king in Israel in those days and people did what was right in their own eyes.

Well, what's wrong with doing what's right in your own eyes? Well, if your own eyes are informed by the word of God, then there won't be much of a problem. You don't need a king. It's when you're not following the word of God, then what's right in your own eyes is not really what's right.

And eventually you get into trouble. But it's interesting that God let them get in trouble again and again and again and again. And he would send a leader to help them.

He'd judge them for his life and then he'd die. And God didn't say, I better quickly fill this gap so they don't get in trouble again. Instead, he left them to their own devices again to be tested, to see how faithful they'd be.

And eventually, you know, another judge would have to come. But what's amazing to me is that there was no suggestion of succession except one time. And that was in Judges chapter 8. And that was when Gideon had delivered the people from the bondage to the Midianites.

And this is, to my mind, fascinating. Of course, I'm fascinated by things some people aren't. But I think this is fascinating.

In Judges chapter 8, when Gideon had delivered the people, it says in verse 22, Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, who was one of the judges, Rule over us, both you and your son and your grandson also, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian. What are they saying? Let's set up a dynasty here. We can have succession here.

You can be our king. Then when you're gone, your son can. And when he's gone, your grandson can.

Then we won't have this power vacuum that we always have whenever the judges are gone. And Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you, nor my son's son. Or he didn't actually say it, but he could have said that.

It says, the Lord shall rule over you. Now, this is an interesting thing. Gideon says, you don't need me.

You don't need my son. You need God. God is your ruler.

And as long as you're following him, you don't need me. If the Lord is ruling over you, you don't need me or my son or my son's son. And it's interesting that God never set up an ongoing self-perpetuating government in Israel for 300 years until the people demanded it and God then reluctantly gave it to them with misgivings.

And there's a difference between the judges and the kings later. Because what did the king set up? An institution with a succession. One king dies, his son takes over.

He dies, never any power vacuum. But then no place for God either. Because God never could be the king when there's already another king there.

But God wants to be the king over his people. And he wants each of his people to follow him. Now, he can raise up leaders for ad hoc purposes when there's a special need.

Leaders for this, you know, in Crete there were these false teachers come in. So Paul said, okay, you're going to have to raise up some men who can defend the word of God here. Ordain some elders.

And, you know, there are times when God will raise up leaders. But he's not interested in setting up an institution that will perpetuate itself with or without the need, with or without God's blessing, with or without the Holy Spirit. He raised up leaders.

And that's a few weeks ago I said to you, and I said I was very cautious about saying this because I wasn't sure I was right. But I said, I think when leaders, when a church group gets organized, I think they ought to plan their own obsolescence. I think the organization itself ought to plan its own obsolescence in about a generation.

I didn't think about it at the time, but that's very scriptural. That's what God did in the period of the judges. The only government God ever set up on his own without being requested in Israel was that of the judges.

Every judge ruled for his lifetime, but that was a system that planned its own obsolescence. So it didn't become institutionalized. So the people couldn't say, we have a king like all the nations.

They'd have to say, well, we have a king unlike all the nations. We have God as our king. And occasionally God sends a deliverer and a judge to teach us what the law of God is.

But we answer to God. He's our ruler. And yet the people, as we know from 1 Samuel chapter 8, decided they wanted a king.

And the thing just pleased Samuel very much. This was the actual end of the period of the judges here, when they said, we don't want this judges situation anymore. It's too perilous.

It's too dangerous having God in charge. We need to get something that we can control, that we can predict what's going to happen here, that we know that this will perpetuate itself and we don't have to depend on God like that, like we had to in the time of the judges. And so they come, and God is quite upset, of course.

And God, Samuel's upset. And it says in verse 6 of 1 Samuel 8, 6, The thing just pleased Samuel when they said, Give us a king to judge us. So Samuel prayed to the Lord, and the Lord said to Samuel, Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.

When a church decides we can't get along with just Jesus as our head, we have to have a political structure. We have to have a ruler. We have to have some way.

We have to have a constitution and bylaws. We have to have some way of knowing who's in charge. And then we have to know how to put someone in his place, so we don't have this ever in a situation where we just have to really follow God.

You see, there is an assumption widely held that only preachers are smart enough to keep you out of trouble. To my mind, it's very insulting. It's a very, I mean, and I'm a preacher.

But frankly, I'd be insulted if I was not. And I'm kind of insulted on your behalf when I hear people act like that. I mean, it's this elitist mentality that's so common of liberals.

I'm not saying every pastor has as few as a liberal. That's not often the case. But the idea that the average scum person, he can't figure out how to spend his money.

Let the government distribute it for him. He can't figure out how to educate his kids. Let the government educate his kids for him.

I mean, this elitist mentality, the average person just can't manage his own life. He needs a king. He needs a ruler.

Well, you know what, that may be true of a lot of people, but it's not true of the people of God. They're sheep of one shepherd. And he's a good shepherd.

And he knows how to lead his sheep. And it's the rare case where a true Christian doesn't know how to follow Jesus. And when that's there, there are people that God sends as a gift in leading, that will help those people out.

But God says, they have not rejected you, Samuel. They rejected me, that I should not reign over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I

brought them out of Egypt, even to this day.

Now what's interesting here is, he goes on to say, you go ahead and give them what they want. But tell them what they're going to get. If they're going to get something that's going to take their money, it's going to take 10%.

Isn't that interesting? He's going to take 10% of your money. It's interesting for two reasons. One is that was considered to be oppressive taxation.

And most of us would love it if our government would only take 10% of our money. But the other thing is, it so resembles church government, where once you've got it institutionalized, you've got a machine that needs to keep the gears oiled. You've got to have income.

You've got to, well, I hate to use words that aren't gentle, but you have to extort it. Now, why is that word justified? Because most churches will tell you, if you don't pay your 10% to the local church that you attend, God will curse you. You'll be cursed by God.

Because you're robbing God, and he cannot help but curse those who rob God, according to Malachi. And therefore, by extortion. You set up a political structure church, eventually there's salaries to pay, there's a building to maintain, there's, you know, the machinery has to keep grease.

You've got to raise the money somehow. You've got to put the pressure on. Now, before this happened, what did they do with the church money? They helped the poor.

They did support the teachers, I'm sure. Each person was a steward of his own money before God. And it was his responsibility.

It wasn't his responsibility just to hand over to some... someone let them do all the thinking for him. It's true that there was this, as far as the distribution to the people who were poor, initially in Jerusalem, the apostles initially were given that charge until they found they couldn't do it well, and they appointed someone to do that. There's nothing wrong with having a group of deacons or something like that who have their finger on the pulse of what the needs of the church are, more than I do.

And I don't mind giving money to them to distribute. But the idea is, once you get the institution, it's going to take your sons and your daughters, it's going to take your money, it's going to do things that God never really would have done. I mean, God would take your money, but he's entitled to it.

The thing is, Israel wanted an institutional form of leadership that God didn't originally want them to have. And I think the church has followed the same course. I don't find anywhere that the elders that Paul appointed in the church were supposed to replace themselves with successors when they died.

God could raise up new ones. But the only reason that we think of it that way is because we can't think of any other political authority than that kind. How do you maintain the political structure of the institution if you don't have constant persons in the office? Well, what if we said there was no office that was political in nature in the church? Now, if political authority means the authority in here is in the office, not in the character, the authority in here is... The office holder is the one that you're supposed to do his will.

The office holder, you know, there always has to be a person at office to keep the machine going. I personally think that's political. That's institutional.

And I don't see from the scriptures that that's how the early church ran. Now, it's obvious that I have problems with churches that do that. But I want to make something clear before I go any further, and that is I don't have as great a problem as it might seem.

Every church I've ever been in, and I would dare say probably this one too, is sub-perfect. You know, people say, what do you think about a church that has a woman pastor? Well, I don't approve of woman pastors. But I don't make it my goal to go out and, you know, bomb churches that have woman pastors, or picket in front of them.

That's between them and God. I believe that every church I've ever been to has something that's not perfect about it. A woman pastor is, I think, something that's very imperfect about a church, but maybe the churches I've been to have other things that are just as imperfect.

I don't know. I don't make it my business, and I want to make this clear, because it might seem different than this. I don't make it my business to go around and picket churches or complain about what they are doing.

The reason I'm going into this is because I'm currently part of a church that's trying to decide what direction to go. And I would like to say that we can avoid some of the mistakes that have been made in church history by recognizing that there's been some assumptions that have prevailed since the days of Ignatius, if not before, that are not, to my mind, desirable or biblical assumptions. Now, I'm not a leader, and the fellowship I attend does not have to do what I recommend.

But I'm just here trying to say what I think the Scriptures say, and if it goes in another direction, I'll stay with the church. But I think it's important for us to look at some of these things that we take for granted that I don't think are scriptural. I don't believe the word elder in the New Testament is so much a reference to a political office as it is a description of a certain class of individuals in church who are older men in general.

I believe that's why the word elder was used. I think the elders were mostly older men, maybe at least older Christians than most. And because of that, they knew the word of God better, hopefully.

They were better examples. They had more time to get it down, to get it right. And their families were in order.

And because of that, they were good men to point to and say, these are the guys who are going to teach you. These are the guys who are going to be an example to you. I don't think it was political.

Now, let me just say this. The church I attend right now, and not all of you attend it, so that's why I say it that way, the church I currently attend does not have any appointed leadership. I don't know if the church will have any appointed leadership.

It might. At some time in the future, it might not. I hope it will not need to.

But if it does, I'm not saying there's never any place for it. But I would say this. The church I attend does not lack leadership.

There's plenty of leadership. There's no shortage of men who go up into that pulpit and they speak the word of God faithfully. And their lives, in general, as far as I know them, their lives are pretty good examples to flock.

And as near as I can tell, the church is not poor in leadership. And there's a lot of people who are never in the pulpit at our church, but are truly leaders, spiritual leaders, men I would imitate. And I don't think by adding a label to them, this is now Elder Smith, this is now Elder Jones, that's what the Mormons do.

And they do it with 19-year-old kids, because you'd never guess they were an elder unless you read it on their label, because they don't look very old. But they have to put the label, Elder Smith. Well, why are you Elder Smith? Well, every 19-year-old Mormon who didn't apostatize from the church is an elder.

Well, that's not really a biblical concept of an elder. But there are men in the fellowship that I'm in and elsewhere who are truly elders. I could name certain men in our fellowship, and everyone who knows them would say, well, of course.

Yeah, I mean, if there's any elders, that's an elder. But what would it add to give them a label, to give them an office? I don't think it would add anything. Now, maybe there's some things come to your mind that it would add.

I don't think it would add much good. Now, I realize I've gone over time. Tom, I'm sorry about that.

But I'm going to take the liberty to go just a little further here if I could. It is important to note that the Bible does have some passages that say submit to and obey persons. And those people are said to have the rule over you and be over you in the Lord.

That sounds very political to me. If someone is over me in the Lord, someone is a ruler

over me in the Lord, and I'm to submit and obey them, that strikes me as sounding very political. And it sounds very political because the words that were traditionally used to translate the Greek words were translated in the context of the Anglican church.

That's where the King James Bible came from, from the Anglican church, which is a very political organization. And I'm not saying the translators did... I'm not saying they were dishonest. I'm just saying that they saw through the grid of their time.

And they interpreted certain words that way. When they saw the word overseer, they translated bishop. I'm not sure why.

What does bishop mean? No one knows except that it's an office in the church. Overseer is quite descriptive, and that's the right word from the Greek. But let me show you some of the scriptures that might catch in your craw when I suggest I don't think the elders had political authority.

Well, what about these places where it seems like they did? What about 1 Peter 5.5? We're told to submit to elders. 1 Peter actually addresses the elders in chapter 5 in the first four verses, and then it turns to the rest of us who are not the elders. And in 1 Peter 5.5 it says, likewise you younger people submit yourselves to your elders.

Okay. Now, if you have to submit to these elders, doesn't that mean they're kind of the boss? Well, read on. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another and be clothed with humility.

Now, I'm supposed to submit to the elders, and I'm also supposed to submit to everyone else. And who am I who has to submit to the elders? I'm the younger. You younger people submit to the older people.

Actually, the fact that it says you younger people suggests that when it says elders, it doesn't even necessarily mean political elders at all, because they may not have had such in the church. The older men. You younger men, submit to the older men.

In fact, be submissive to everybody. That's the Christian spirit. Now, that doesn't sound like the elders had some particular political authority that submitting to them, you know, was a deference to an office they held, necessarily.

It might well be deference to their age or deference to their character, but deference to an office, I don't see it there. However, in Hebrews, this is probably the most important one that people will think of. Hebrews chapter 13 and verse 17.

Hebrews 13, 17 says, Obey those who rule over you and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls. Now, obey them and be submissive. To who? Those who have the rule over you.

Well, okay. Obey them and be submissive. What? In everything? If they tell me to come over on my weekend and wash their car, do I have to do that? I mean, do these guys have absolute authority? I mean, what am I supposed to obey about them or submit to about them? Well, he's already told us, ten verses earlier.

He mentions the same people in verse 7. Remember those who rule over you who have spoken the word of God to you. That's the ones who rule over me. It's the ones who speak the word of God to me.

Should I obey them? Absolutely. If they're doing what they're doing. If they're speaking the word of God to me, of course I have to obey them.

Jesus said to his disciples, the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. That was actually a seat in the synagogue on the platform where they expounded the law, the word of God. He says, therefore, everything they tell you to do, do that.

But don't follow their example. In other words, if they're teaching the word of God, then obey them. I mean, they may be worthless as examples.

They may not even know God. But if they're teaching the word of God faithfully, then obey what they say. Do what they say.

Same thing in the church. Those who rule over you are those who speak the word of God to you. Obey that.

Obey them when they're doing that. If they're not speaking the word of God to you, there's nothing really that they carry in terms of absolute authority that extends beyond their role as teaching the word of God. I submit to the word of God.

Now, if you feel that you need to submit to an office holder because he holds an office, that's fine. You can do that if you haven't come to see it the way I have. I just don't see biblically that that is how it is meant.

I believe that the leaders faithfully teach the word, and as they do, you do what they say. That is, you do what the word says. What they say.

You don't have to follow their interpretation if you're not very good at interpreting. And you certainly don't have to follow their own opinions if they go beyond the scripture. But you do have to obey the word that they teach, and that's what they're principally there for.

Now, the word rule, who have the rule over you in this verse, it actually occurs three times in Hebrews 13. In verse 7, we saw it. In verse 17, it's also there.

In verse 24, greet all those who rule over you. Who are these people who rule over you? Well, I dare say it must be a reference to the elders since we know of no other kind of

church leadership. But what about this word rule? Doesn't that sound political? It sounds very political.

But the Greek word doesn't. The Greek word that is found here is the word hegeomai. And if you look that up in Vine's dictionary, a very common source, or lexicons, or drawings from Corinth, you'll find that hegeomai means to lead.

Now, to my mind, the word to lead is different in connotation than the word to rule. I can lead somebody without being their ruler. It's an unfortunate translation that these verses say those who rule over you.

That's not right. In the Greek it says remember those who lead you. Your leaders.

Obey them. Okay, why? Because they speak the word of God to you. There are people who are leaders.

They can be leaders with or without a political office to tell us they're leaders. I know who my leaders are and none of them hold any office in the church, in any church. But I certainly have people I follow.

There are people who speak the word of God to me and I revere it and I obey it. And their example is an example to me. They are my leaders.

And they don't have to be part of an ecclesiastical institution to be a leader. In fact, most of the churches I've been in that have that kind of leaders have not been very faithful in teaching the word of God or being examples. If I had made them my leaders, I'd be a very different kind of Christian than I am today.

Maybe some think I'd be better, but I don't think I'd be better. Frankly, leading is not the same thing as ruling. Now, likewise, there's a gift that in the King James is called the gift of ruling.

Those who rule with diligence. In Romans 12.8, the same word that is used there is found in 1 Timothy 3.4. It says, an elder must be one who rules his family well. And it is also the same word in 1 Timothy 5.17 which says, the elders who rule well should be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.

It is also the same Greek word that is found in the passage in 1 Thessalonians 5.12 where it says, remember those who are over you in the Lord. Remember that one? We read that earlier. Those who are over you in the Lord.

Same Greek word in all these passages. It's the word proistemi. Very, very strange that it would ever be translated over you in the Lord.

Pro means before and stemi is the Greek word for stand. Literally, proistemi means the one who stands before you. That's the literal meaning.

You can look it up in any Greek source you want. When it says, who have the gift of ruling, actually *proistemi*, the gift of standing before or of presiding is another translation that is given. Honor those who stand before you.

He is talking of course about those who stand up and teach the word of God. He is talking about the elders. But the important thing is that Paul and these other writers don't use words that sound like rule.

They use words that sound like lead. They lead you. They stand before you.

It doesn't say anything about politics or authority, top-down kind of stuff at all. It's just talking about those who come before you as God's messengers who teach the word of God to you, who provide an example to you. Honor that, he says.

Honor that. Appreciate that. Submit to them.

All of that is very good. I certainly agree with that. Well, what does it mean to ordain elders then? The Bible does say ordain, but again, maybe not a good translation.

The word ordain is *kathistome*, which means to appoint a person to a position. Okay, fair enough. There are people that Paul appointed to the position of elder.

Position, yes. Office has different connotations. I think.

Maybe you don't, but I do. Vine, who may have been influenced by the fact that he was Plymouth Brethren, but still his work is considered authoritative. When he talked about the ordaining of elders, see, Plymouth Brethren don't do that.

But he said this word *kathistome* means to appoint a person to a position. And he says, quote, not a formal ecclesiastical ordination, but appointment for the recognition of the churches of those who had already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit. I can't disagree with that.

I don't know Greek better than W.E. Vine. In fact, I know it far less than almost anyone. But basically, to appoint elders did happen sometimes.

It didn't happen all the time. We read in Acts 14 that Paul ordained elders in every city. And he told Titus to ordain elders in every city in Crete.

Apart from that, we don't read of any blanket command that elders must be appointed first thing everywhere. Those churches in which elders were appointed in those passages existed as churches for some period of time before elders came to be appointed there. Obviously, it was not the presence of appointed elders that made them legitimate churches.

They were legitimate churches already. A time came in those cases where it was right to

appoint elders. Why? I don't know.

Maybe it was done in all churches. We don't know that it was. But we do know this.

In Corinth, as I said, it wasn't so much that they had appointed elders there. They just said, there's a household of people who are addicted to serving people. Just submit to people like that.

Or in 3 John, where he says, now this guy Diotrephes, he tries to take over everything. But this guy Demetrius, he's good. Follow his example, not his.

There's no indication that these men were elders or office holders. There does seem to be evidence that some churches had leaders who didn't hold any appointed office necessarily. Even when Paul said in Thessalonians, remember those who stand before you and appreciate them for their works.

He didn't say whether or not they were elders. He doesn't mention whether the church in Thessalonica had appointed elders. They might have.

The point is this. Churches do not lack for leadership whether they have it appointed or not. There are times, however, when appointing leaders was done.

Whether this is always a good idea or not is not stated in Scripture. We will say this. If we would ask the question, when should elders be appointed? That would be very relevant to the church I'm attending right now.

When should elders be appointed? Now one thing Paul says, in the negative, he says, not too hastily. He says that in 1 Timothy 5.22. He says, do not lay hands hastily on anyone. He means don't ordain elders in the context hastily.

What's hastily? How do we know what's being done too soon? How do we know when it's time? Well I would give you a very common sense rule and if you can find a biblical reason to find a better rule, that's fine with me. But let me suggest this. It seems to me biblical enough to say elders should be appointed when they're needed and when they're available.

Now these are two very important conditions. The first time any leaders of any kind were appointed in the church of Jerusalem was when they were discovered to be needed in Acts chapter 6. When the apostles found they had too much work on their hands, things were getting neglected, there were complaints about the distribution. They said, hey, hey, hey, we better appoint some guys to oversee this.

Now until then it wasn't a problem so they didn't think about it. But when a problem arose and they said, okay the solution to this problem is to appoint these seven men here. Well then that was the time to do it.

They didn't think of doing it before that. And it's very probable that the appointment of elders in the churches in Crete, in Titus, was for the very reason that Paul said it was. He said, you've got to appoint men who can do this because there are many who have come in teaching false doctrines.

Okay, well that could be a serious problem. Nobody in the church has their own Bible. There are several guys in the church who are pretty charismatic and outspoken and some of them are teaching false doctrines.

Some of them aren't but some are. And the average sheep says, what am I supposed to do here? How am I supposed to know? And Paul says, Titus, you go in there for me and you point out the guys who are good. You appoint these guys to be the ones who do the teaching of the church.

These guys shouldn't be doing it. There was a need for it. Now, maybe there's a need now.

Maybe there is a need. Maybe there's not. I mean, that has to be determined.

But, I believe that the policy of the early church about this was, if it's not broken, don't fix it. If you need it, appoint it. If things go well enough without it, what argument can be made for appointing it? The other thing is, if they're available.

Not every church I've been in has people who qualify according to biblical qualifications but most churches don't have people appoint elders anyway just because, what's a church without elders? What's an institutional church without appointed elders, in other words? But the church is the body of Jesus Christ. The flock of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd. That's what the church is with or without appointed elders.

Appointed elders can serve a good purpose. But I would suggest to you, and you don't have to follow me on this, that even when an elder is appointed, it should not be assumed that when he's out, we need to replace him with another one because it may be that it's an ad hoc committee, as it were. There's a problem in the church.

We need to appoint someone to clear this up. That can be a good thing to do. That can be the right thing to do.

But once the problem is gone, do we have to perpetuate the machine the same way? Or can we say, let's go back to the way it was, like in the book of Judges? OK, we got the thing fixed. The judge did his job. He's gone.

Next time we need one, God will send another one. You know? I mean, I know this sounds very iconoclastic and very radical, but frankly, I think the church needs radical surgery. I think there's some serious problems with the church the way it's been done, and I think going back to biblical ways is better.

I've gone way over time, but let me very quickly run through reasons not to lay hands hastily on anyone. That is not to appoint elders too soon. And I'm thinking in particular reasons not to move toward an ordained eldership prematurely or unnecessarily.

There may be times when it's the right thing to do, and when it's not premature, and it has to be done. But I think instead of doing it routinely, automatically, I think we need to make sure that it's really the right time, that it's really needed, and the right men are in place. Let me give you several reasons I can think of biblically why not to ordain elders just automatically, just because they're lacking or because they're not there.

One, appointment of elders doesn't create leaders. It only gives them formal recognition. That is, there may be leaders who are already doing just fine without any appointment.

And if you appoint some, that doesn't mean you now have leaders where you didn't before. It just means you now have recognized which ones are there. But many times they're not hard to recognize with or without an appointment.

I mean, it's easy enough to tell in many cases who's to be followed. When it's not clear because there's heresy or there's problems or some bad leaders, then you have to make some appointments who's good. You know, these are the guys we're going to listen to, not those ones.

But until that problem arises, appointing elders doesn't create leadership where there wasn't leadership. If it does, then you've got artificial leadership. If God provides real leadership, it'll be there before any are appointed, and it may well function just fine without appointment for a long time or maybe forever in some cases.

Another thing, real leaders will do the work of leading and the real sheep will recognize them with or without a label. That is, if a guy won't take the lead until he's made an elder, given an office, then he's no leader. Real leaders that God raises up will already be leading, and the real sheep will know who they're supposed to follow in most cases.

There might be some confusion in some cases, but in most cases, I've been outside of institutional churches quite a bit. I've never had any trouble finding who is a good example for me to follow, who I should listen to, who's a good leader, who's a bad leader. I don't need a label on them to tell me that.

God can tell me that. Sometimes I might not know, and then I'll need someone else to tell me that. Third point, the apostles seem to have a policy of appointing leaders when required by circumstances.

I already made that point. If those circumstances don't demand it now, there's not a very good argument for appointing them yet. Another point, although the apostles appointed elders, perhaps because the sheep had no Bibles, or there was confusion over who was really qualified to lead, valid assemblies had functioning leaders even without formal

appointment.

That is, eldership is the only form of church government that we ever find appointed, but it's not the only form of church government in the Bible. It's just the only kind that was ever appointed. Before the appointment, there was already church, and there was already leadership in the church.

They just weren't appointed leaders. So you've got the Household of Stephanus and people like that in Corinth. You've got people like Demetrius over in Gaius' town.

And you've got other examples, the people in Thessalonica who were overseen, but we're not told that they were elders. They may have been. All I'm saying is, before elders were appointed, there were still leaders.

They just weren't appointed leaders, and the time came in many cases where they had to be appointed. Other times, we don't know whether they were or not. Leaders' attitudes often change when given political offices.

That's the way That's another reason not to be hasty about it. There are people who are quite humble servant leaders until you give them an office. And it's not so much that it goes to their head, as that as soon as you give someone something that looks like an office, they interpret their duty and their responsibility more in political terms.

They say, OK, now I'm officially a leader. Now I've got to make these people follow me. You know? I mean, I'm a failure as a leader if no one's following me.

Well, I mean, you know, people get, not always, but many times, people who were doing just fine leading, you know, humbly and without any prestige attached, without any label attached, you give them a label and many times they're a different person. And you've got a different thing than you had before in that person. You've got somebody who thinks it's his duty to rule.

And it's hard for many people to get that out of their head. It's much nicer when they don't have that confusion. And that confusion is caused, in my opinion, by appointing leaders in many cases.

Even if the leader doesn't change, people's view of him often will. In other words, there are brothers in this congregation here who don't have any office because no one in this congregation has an office. And everyone relates quite freely and everyone, you know, takes advice from everybody about equally well.

I mean, imagine, you make a few of these guys the leaders, suddenly, you know, the sheep will look to this person as something different. His opinions will somehow be more ex-cathedra than that of the Joe Schmoe who wasn't appointed as the leader. I mean, it's just ingrained in people's fallen nature to politicize what is spiritual.

And when it's only, when it's not appointed, it's got to be just spiritual. You make appointments, suddenly you've got the potential for politics and either the leader's attitude is going to change or the people's attitude toward him is going to change or both in many cases. Maybe there's some exceptions where that doesn't happen.

Another thing. Appointment of elders typically centralizes the work of ministry to a few. Before you have elders, everybody's doing the ministry.

No one in particular's job It's everybody's job. It's the whole body of Christ's job to minister to everybody else. You appoint elders, suddenly you've got the elite class of professionals.

I mean, they may not be very professional, but the idea is it's their job now. I mean, the church hasn't even said that's what we pay them for. If we don't pay them, that's what they're supposed to do.

They're appointed to be volunteers. But the fact is, suddenly the work of the church falls on the shoulders of an elite group instead of on the whole body of Christ as it was before. Another argument.

When there is an office of leadership, it gives the ambitious something for which to aspire without possessing authentic spiritual leadership from God. Now, hear me on this. In a church where there's no official eldership, suppose some kind of an ambitious, power-hungry heretic comes in and wants to take over the church.

What is there to take over? What can he do? Suppose I was a heretic. Some might think that may not be far from the truth, but suppose I was an ambitious heretic who wanted to take over this church. What could I do? Well, the most I could do in a non-political entity like this would maybe influence from the pulpit.

But suppose the brothers who invite me to speak discern, I don't think he's really speaking true anymore. What can they do? They just say, well, we're not going to ask him to preach anymore. Well, I can't force my way into the pulpit if Chris Graves is already standing there, or Steve Bob Roberts, or someone else.

I mean, there's nothing I can do to take over, because there's nothing political for me to grab on to. The only way I can have any real influence in a non-political church structure is by really being spiritual. I mean, by being a real spiritual leader.

In which case, I don't need a political office. If I am a spiritual leader, then I can be a spiritual leader without the office. But you make an office, and then those people who aren't real spiritual leaders but are just power hungry, they have something to aim at.

That's where I want to get. There's some offices there. That guy's going to be retiring sooner.

He's old. He's going to be gone. I'm going to get there.

Now, I've known many, many people in churches who, they're not spiritual minded, but they're power hungry, and there's an eldership, and that's what they aim at. I'm going to get on that board. I'm going to get on that eldership, and I'm going to have my way.

If there's no eldership, what can they aim at? They have to actually just be spiritual to have any influence. It seems to me, a political structure is something that can be corrupted. If it doesn't start out corrupt, it can be corrupted.

Because the corruptest type of people want those offices. You don't find very many spiritual people who really want to be in charge. It's an aspect of being spiritual that you don't want to be in charge.

And when there's a place for those who are in charge, then the people who want to get there are the ones who want to be in charge. It's that simple. And that's what you usually end up with.

After a few turnovers in that eldership, suddenly what started out as a spiritual body of men is now a bunch of guys who are playing politics in the church. One last point. Very important.

The presence of elders in the church, that is the presence of appointed elders, does not guarantee the safety of the flock from wolves. Now I understand that this is a concern many people have about a group that doesn't have a leader. What about heresy? What about wolves? What about church discipline? What are you going to do? Who's protecting the flock? Well, I'm pleased to say Jesus is protecting his flock.

And if we're concerned that the wolves are going to come, I'll tell you what the solution is not. Appointing guys to political office. You know why? Because sometimes they're the wolves.

Jesus was talking, and Paul was talking to the elders in Ephesus in Acts 20. And he said, well, look at this, and it will make the point eloquently more than I could. Paul is speaking to the elders of the church.

He's not talking to anyone else. It's a group of elders from Ephesus who have come down to confer with him. And notice this, that he says to them in Acts 20, verses 29 through 30.

Paul says, For I know this, that after my departure, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves. In the eldership.

From among yourselves, men will rise up speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after themselves. I'll tell you what. You ever seen the Roman Catholic Church?

They have bishops.

They have eldership. And you know how they became what they became? The church moved from what Jesus left behind when he ascended into heaven into what the Roman Catholic Church became and what most Protestant churches are still a little bit like by becoming institutionalized and politicizing the leadership. Once you do that, then the people who want to be in charge know where to go.

That's what I'm going to offer. I'm going to campaign for that office. I'm going to be in that position.

And the wolves congregate in elderships. Now, I'm not saying if you look at any eldership you're going to see a thing full of wolves. I'm just telling you the truth.

Look at church history. Look at the Roman Catholic Church in the medieval times. Where are most the wolves? But in the bishop's office.

Some of them are the popes. The worst thing is, though, once the wolves are the bishops, how do you get them out then? If a wolf comes into the flock and there's no bishops, what's the protection of the church? Jesus Christ is the protection of the church. And there are good leaders in the church who can stand up and do Christ.

That's heresy. That's false. That way of life is not ordained by Christ.

It's unbiblical. And the people who are listening, Christ's sheep know His voice and follow Him. They won't follow a hireling.

But there are many... Yes, sometimes the church gets pruned by the presence of a heretic. Because the people who aren't His sheep and don't know His voice and do follow the hireling, they weren't in the flock in the first place. They just looked like it.

I'm not saying it's a pleasing thing when people leave the church after some heresy. But Paul did say to the Corinthians, there sometimes have to be divisions among you. Actually, in the King James, there have to be heresies among you so that those who are proved may be manifested.

I would say this. True Christians are going to hear the voice of their true shepherd. And if they start appointing political officers unnecessarily, they now have a carnal structure which can be taken over by carnality.

And the most carnal members of the congregations are the ones who are going to most want to get into that structure. Because that's the positions of privilege and power in any institution, is the leadership structure. When Christ simply gives the church leaders and the church doesn't feel the need to politicize the office, then wolves can be taken care of a little easier, it seems to me, than when those wolves are the bishops and the elders, as

is the case in many religious organizations.

And once that's the case, what can you do for the organization? Not much, just abandonment, start all over again. And frankly, I think that's what a lot of people I know feel that they've had to do. And they weren't necessarily abandoning the Roman Catholic Church.

Sometimes it's churches that are a lot better in many respects than the Roman Catholic Church. But a lot of people just felt like they're abandoning a monster. What made it a monster? It started out as a group of Christians who loved Jesus.

It got institutionalized, politicized, the leaders became political leaders, and it turned into something really scary in many cases. Now, that obviously, I'm closing with this disclaimer, obviously, my comments probably, some of you probably think, boy, that guy is mighty jaded, mighty cynical. I'm afraid I can't deny that.

I wish I could. And if by being jaded and cynical, if that has blurred my vision of the Scripture, if that has given me reasons to want to twist the Scriptures or do something that's not right and direct something, the same thing is, I don't hold any office in any church. And if what I'm saying isn't biblical, no one has any obligation to follow one word that I said.

Praise God. But I do believe that many would agree, whether they agree with everything I said or not, that the general teaching of Scripture is more along the lines of the kinds of things that I've been trying to point out than really what exists more commonly in the institutional churches. If you don't agree, that's okay.

You have my blessing. I've never insisted that people have to agree with me. I don't care.

But I do feel that this is something Christians need to look at afresh the idea of church leadership. It is spiritual leadership that Christ gives. It is not political leadership.

Once it's politicized, you've got a carnal institution. It may have a lot of godly people in it, but as an institution, it's man-made now. And as a man-made thing, it usually goes the way of all man-made things.