

THE BRIDE: ELDERS AND DEACONS

ACTS 6:1-7 | 1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13

You can go ahead and open your Bibles to Acts 6, 1 Tim. 3. We are in a series called the Bride and we're taking a look at how God has designed his church and how it's supposed to function. We're studying ecclesiology (Say, "Ecclesiology). Some people think it doesn't matter—just figure something out that works—but if you look in the NT, you'll see that God has some very definite ideas about how he wants His churches set up. And because we want to honor God and enjoy his blessing on our church what we're doing here, lines up with the way God tells us to do it here (Bible). And I know I have my work cut out for me this morning. Had Chris and Amy over yesterday and Amy asked, "What are you preaching on?" "Elders and deacons" She said, "Oh..." And I know that this sermon title may cause you to reach for your coffee and I confess that there was a sinful selfish part of that was shrinking away from this out of a fear that it might not be as popular, but I was quickly rebuked by Paul as he talks to the Ephesian elders Acts 20:26-27 "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." It is incumbent on me as your pastor not to only teach to motivational material that meets immediate felt needs but to preach the whole counsel of God—including books like 1st and 2nd Timothy which are written to do precisely what we're doing in this series—ensure that the church of God is ordered properly. The reality is that the vast majority of people in this room, even if you've been in church for 50 years, have never heard a sermon on elders and deacons. Which is a shame not only because they're clearly in the pages on the NT but also because they provide the foundational leadership structure for God's church.

Much of this is going to be new material for you. At the same time I want to assure you that what I'm going to present isn't just a particular style or preference for how to do ministry. It's not a fad. It's not new at all. It's as old as the New Testament. And I'm excited to present this to you today—material that the elders and I have been working very hard behind the scenes to bring to fruition. You're going to see it in the text, it's going to make sense and you're going to see the wisdom and beauty of it right off the bat. **Picture of dog drinking from fire hydrant.** So let me pray and then we'll get started...

Deacons: Servants of the Church

Anyone grow up in a church that had folks called deacons? It's one of two church offices given to the church today. ~~If you grew up in a Baptist church there's a strong probability that they functioned in one of two ways. They either told the pastor what to do. Or the pastor ran the show and told the deacons what to do. Neither one is the biblical ideal so let's read about it and then chat.~~ **Read Acts 6:1-7.**

- From the Greek word *διάκονος* (*diakonos*) meaning—but not limited to—server of tables. It's often translated servant or minister—Paul says he was a deacon of God (That's why I've always thought that Wake Forest's mascot was a little weird, "Demon Deacons" like that's just weird for what started out as a Baptist university) Anyways it means servant, waiter, minister...

- Must meet the qualifications for a deacon (1 Tim. 3:8-13)

- May be a woman (1 Tim. 3:11; Rom. 16:1)

And what is going on here is the Greek speaking Jews are being left out of the food distribution and some folks come to the apostles and tell them, and what do the apostles do? Do they personally get up and address the issue? Do they choose to ignore the issue? Vs 3 "Pick from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty." They choose to address the issue by appointing a certain group of people to take care of it. And this is where the office of deacon really makes its debut in the NT. Notice that they don't just pick anyone who's willing to help. And we see some of the qualifications here, but Paul gives us a longer list in 1 Tim. 3, where he describes them in vss. 8-13. And you might [naturally] think the requirements to be a deacon are extraordinary, but you'll notice

that in this description there's nothing required of a deacon that isn't required of every Christian, "Dignified, not double-tongued, not a drunkard, not greedy" He mentions qualification for women—they're able to be a participate in this office. All of this means that there are a ton of men and women sitting before me who qualify to hold of the office of deacon in the church—maybe you've never thought of yourself like that. In fact, there are many who are already doing deacon work in the church, but without the benefit of the office...the God-designed publicly recognized platform from which God has designed to help you exercise your gifts and carry out your responsibilities...Well what are their responsibilities?

Three Primary Responsibilities...

- Meeting physical needs (Acts 6:1-7)

Obviously, these people appointed here are helping with food distribution—they are addressing physical needs. This is what the Apostles came up with—we're going to attend to the ministry of the word and prayer and we're going to gather some qualified folks to serve physical needs—this could include for the sick, it almost certainly by extension includes caring for the poor. These women didn't have the money or resources to buy food for themselves. In short, the deacons are designed to personally do a lot of the hands on application stuff that makes ministry of the Word—which is the elders job—possible. Facilities, audio, visual, finances, security, children's ministries—all of these things potentially fall under the umbrella of deacon work...

- Preserving unity in the body (Acts 6:1-7)

So the dispute here in Acts 6 was about food, but it wasn't just food related. Remember that the people getting left out weren't just random, they were the Greek speaking Jews. There was cultural friction here and it was causing division. And so when they bring this to the apostles, the apostles are concerned yes because some folks are going hungry, but also because of the bigger picture—the division—it represents. That there is division in the body, and so they deliberate, and appoint deacons to implement a solution that will help to keep the peace. Again notice the cooperation here between the elders and the deacons...

- Freeing up elders to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:1-7)

Read with me the apostles' response to this problem, 6:2 "And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you...vs 4 but as for us, we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." vs 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering! Now if you're being honest, maybe there's something about their response that doesn't sit right with us...like are they too good to go do the hands-on stuff? You might even think they're being lazy, like they just want to sit around and teach the word and pray and let other people do the crowd control. But of course, both of these assumptions miss the mark. Suffice to say that if the apostles' decision here rubs us the wrong way, the problem is with us and not them. After all their decision pleased the whole assembly! Why? Because they realized that God had not called their leaders to personally go around meeting all the physical needs, but rather to make sure those needs are ultimately met—in this case through delegating the specifics to a group of wise Spirit-filled folks. But as for them, they were going to devote themselves to the ministry of the word and prayer. And this pleased the congregation. And this distinction is so critical.

On average, seminary trained pastors last 5 year in ministry 80% won't be in ministry 10 years from now. 75% of pastors feel extremely stressed. 70% constantly fight depression. And I can tell you from my experience in a variety of churches that one of the reasons so many pastors feel crushed and suffocated with the demands of ministry because unlike the apostles here, they're trying to personally address every need in the congregation themselves "So many needs. Constant failure. I can't do it!" That's one of the reasons deacons are so important. Deacons help prevent pastoral burnout by allowing the elders to focus on their specific calling. And like I said earlier I am so thankful for the folks who are already serving in

these capacities and Lord willing by next year, we will have deacons, per the NT prescription. When deacons are serving it frees up elders to do what God has called them to do.

Now when I say the word elders, your mind may go to a bunch of old wrinkly guys with walkers. Like that grandpa who always kept butterscotch candies in his pockets and gave it to the kids! That's not what the Bible means when it talks about elders. Elder is an office in the church—Spirit installed publicly recognized platform for ministry. And whereas deacons are formal servants *in* the church, the elders are the formal leaders *of* the church.

Elders: Leaders of the Church

If you look at the vocabulary in the NT, you'll see that there are two primary labels for this office and....

- The words elder (*presbuteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*), refer to the same church office. (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2)

“Pastor” is in this too but it's only used once in Eph 4:11. This is important because some folks (Anglican Methodist) believe that overseer and elder are two different offices. **READ!!!** Just to be clear—elder, overseer, pastor—are all references to the same office—no senior elder or junior elder. And like deacons, elders also have some specific qualifications listed in 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1 And rather than combing through them all, let me mention how these qualifications are different from the qualifications of deacons.

- Must meet the qualifications for an elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9)
 - Reserved for men (1 Tim. 3:2, 2:12)
 - Able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9)

Tit. 1:9 This is the primary difference between the qualifications for elders and deacons. Elders have to be able to teach and competent in doctrine—theologically sound. “Think of theologians as the church's sewage specialists. Their role is to detect and eliminate intellectual pollution, and to ensure, so far as man can, that God's life-giving truth flows pure and unpoisoned into Christian hearts.” (J.I. Packer) Again this is the primary difference between the qualifications of elders and deacons. Let me pause for a second and talk about something very important.

You've heard me using the word pastors, elders, overseers in the plural and that is very important. And this where we're going to venture into what is, for most of us, new territory. It's not new in the Bible, it's not new in church history, it's not new in Baptist history, but it's probably new territory for us and it's simply this...

- God has designed his churches to be led by a plurality of elders. (1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 14:23, Phil. 1:1; Js. 5:14)

Just as the church is served by a plurality of deacons it is lead by a plurality of pastors or elders. If you grew up in church, it probably had one person that everyone referred to as “The Pastor”. He was THE guy. He did all the ministry. And the church was centered around the ministry, gifts, and abilities of an individual called “The Pastor”. This is what some would refer to a single-pastor or single-elder model. And my question this morning is not do we like that, or is that what we want, or even does it work—that's not what I'm asking. What I'm asking—and what I think we need to ask is this—“Is a single elder-model, God's design?” And gently like to offer that the answer to that question is “No”. Rather a plurality of elders represents God's design over and over again in the pages of the NT. Eccesiologian at Southern Seminary Gregg Allison, “Without exception, every time the New Testament mentions the government of a particular church, the leadership structure is a plurality of elders.” (Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 293). **1 Tim. 5:17, Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, Phil. 1:1, Tit. 1:5, Js. 5:14.** Ben Merkle one of our foremost thinkers on elders and deacons says this...

- “There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader.” — Benjamin Merkle

This is God’s design—not a senior pastor with a group advisors, not a main pastor with a board of deacons, not a senior pastor with junior pastors under him—but simply elders—who are equal, who have the same authority, same qualifications, and the same charge from God to shepherd the flock. For many of us that is a stunning claim, perhaps when you think of this church you think of me as the pastor—the sole or primary leader. But you’ll notice that when I get up here and make announcements I don’t say, “Hey I’m Chase the Pastor” “I say I’m a pastor” not because I’m humble because it’s true. I’m just one of six pastors here. If you don’t know we have 3 staff pastors and 3 lay pastors. Myself, Thomas Brown, Randy Farthing, and Aaron Smith, Matt Holland, and Peter Givens. And the NT doesn’t admit of any hierarchy there. Matt Holland—the guy who plays the drums—is every bit as much a pastor of this church as I am. This idea of the one-man show, where an individual essentially runs the church and everything is centered around his personal ministry simple is not supported in the pages of the NT. This isn’t your fault...it’s going to take a while for folks to get used to this. But God’s sign for his churches to be led by a plurality of elders is so beautiful for a variety of reasons.

- A Plurality of Elders Offers... **PACE THROUGH THIS SECTION**

- Wisdom in counsel

It goes without saying but when you have multiple people, you benefit tremendously from the collective wisdom of the group. Different ideas, different perspectives, unique life experiences, different personalities—all amount to a kind of wisdom that is greater than any one individual has in themselves. And I can’t imagine trying to lead a church without it.

- Accountability

This puts a check on leadership to make sure one guy isn’t trying to take over and dictate what everyone else is going to do. There’s not one person “in power”. I only have one vote on our elder council. There have been times when I’ve said something and gotten vetoed. You ask any one of my elders and they’ll tell you that they feel free to say no!

- Personal support

- On average, seminary trained pastors last 5 years in ministry. 80% of pastors won’t last 10 years.

It’s probably not hard for you to imagine but in shepherding a church there is far too much for one man to do. For one man to carry the weight of the whole church’s need for leadership and shepherding—that is crushing and absolutely unsustainable and it’s why the pastoral burnout rate is so high! And I am so grateful to my elders for helping me shoulder the responsibilities that God has called us to in caring for this church. And so is my wife!!! What are those responsibilities? What are elders supposed to do?

Three Primary Responsibilities...

And I want to take us back to the apostles for a second. Christ was going back to the Father and so he entrusted the apostles

- Elders lead the church. (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17)
 - Apostles had *direct* authority from Jesus. Elders have *derived* authority from God’s word.
 - Elders are to lead humbly and gently (1 Pet. 5:3)

Heb. 13:17, elders have unique accountability for the church and that translates to a unique authority in the church.

Now it’s important to say two things here. First the elders of the church are ultimately appointed by the Holy Spirit (**Acts 20:28**). So when we talk about elders, we’re talking about the activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. So it’s not just coincidence that we have a specific group of elders. We need to recognize that—in fact 1 Tim. 5:17 says to give double honor to elders who rule well. And yet we need to recognize

that the elders' authority is derived from Scripture, not some mystical ability or spiritual super power. I enjoy praying with people but I don't have more access to God. There is a reason that I'm not a priest. Contrary to our Roman catholic friends, none of our elders have unique access to God, can forgive sins. So when we say elders have authority, we simply mean that they have been set apart by God to give direction and vision and plan and lead the church according to the truth of Scripture. Our authority is only legitimate to the degree that it stays within the boundaries of Scripture. So elders lead the church...

- Elders shepherd the church. (1 Pet. 5:1-2, Acts 20:17-28)
 - Protect against false doctrine and division

Acts 20:28-29. Shepherds protect! This is why elders have to be competent in sound doctrine and able to rebuke it! They must be theologically sound. It is the elders' job to ensure that whatever is taught at their church is biblical and theologically sound. And if it's not that is our failure... WE have to protect the church and...

- Ensure that members are properly cared for

"Elders lead the people of God as a shepherd leads a flock of sheep... Church leaders are not cowboys who drive the sheep. Rather, they are caring shepherds who lead and protect the sheep... the shepherd's primary task is not to run an organization but to care for people's souls." (Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 46).

And it is this shepherding element of leadership that I am most excited about renovating. It's sad but I have had multiple people come up to me and say that the church has taught them well, but particularly struggled they didn't feel like the church shepherded them well. The preaching wasn't lacking but the pastoral care was. And one of those reasons is that we haven't really had a true shepherding model. And I want to say I'm sorry and I'm asking that you'd give this a chance.

I am thrilled to announce that this week, we assigned every single member of this church to an elder we are very much stepping up the level of our pastoral care here. You'll hear from them at some point in the next couple of weeks. And their job is to care for you primarily by praying for you by name on a regular basis and also offering support and aid with a specific need you may have. This will make it nearly impossible for someone to fall through the cracks or suffer anonymously unless they simply don't tell anyone what's going on. And I just felt a wave of joy this week as I sent out the spreadsheet to our elders of each individual that they're assigned to care for via payer and as needed assistance. God help us to love our people well. Elders lead, shepherd and...

- Elders teach and train the church. (Eph. 4:11-12, 1 Tim. 5:17)
 - "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." (Js. 3:1)

I don't mean only elders teach, but that they are the primary ministers of the Word. Teaching the word week in and week out is an unbelievable privilege. That I would be used by God to communicate his truth is amazing to me and yet at the same time it is frightening because of what's at stake. Look at how James talks about this. 3:1 **"Not many of you shall become teachers my brother for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."** That means that at the end of the day that when we stand before God we will be judged by different standards. I will be judged more strictly than you. And so I can assure as a group of men entrusted with teaching the word, our elders by pain of our own judgment are committed to making sure what's taught at this church is biblical and solid and right.

And in teaching God's people we also aim to train God's people. We'll close with this. Eph. 4:11-12. **11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,** This is the only use of the word pastor in the NT. It comes from the word for shepherd and in this context it's connected grammatically to the teacher.

That is, a pastor shepherds primarily by teaching. You may have been thinking earlier, “Are you saying there is no difference at all between you and the other elders.” I’m saying there’s no difference in our authority, and the charge we have from God to shepherd the flock. There is a difference when it comes to emphasis in that because I am paid full-time I’m able to give a unique amount of time to the ministry of the Word. And because of that I serve as the primary preacher and communicator at New Century Church. Out of 52 weeks a year you can expect to see me personally teaching the word about 44 of those weeks. But it’s also important for other elders to teach to allow them to use their gifts and make sure this church is being built around me.

And notice the connection here between verses 11-12. God gives the shepherd-teacher not primarily to do all the works of ministry, but to equip them—the church—to do the works of ministry. And there are too many pastors that try and do every bit of the ministry for their people instead of equipping their people to do the work of ministry. And while to some they may sound nice, because you don’t have to do as much, it cripples people because God has designed his people to grow and develop in the church by doing the works of ministry not by having everything done for them. There is a kind of growth in Christ that you simply can never learn if you’re never engaged in ministering to others and just stand back and “appreciate” those who do.

I’ll keep you well fed, if you do the works of ministry!