

## “The Government of the Church”

### (Part 4)

#### Selected Texts

- INTRO. - This will be our final week on the subject of biblical church government and will wrap up our summer series on the church. We’ll be going back to the Book of Romans.
- But this morning we need to finish the rest of last week’s outline. We have seen the *Plea* for Biblical Church Government, The *Pattern* for Biblical Church Government, and we started (last week) on The *Procedures* for Biblical Church Government.
- And quite frankly, it is at *this* point (of appointing elders) that many churches fail. We have learned the painful lessons in regard to this here at PBC. Our most difficult years as a church came from this issue of appointing an elder.
- Unfortunately, there are (often) men who should never be appointed, that (sometimes) end up serving as elders in some churches -- and (on the other hand) there are others who *should* be serving that do *not* serve.
- Remember now, there are clear standards given in Scripture for those who would serve in this capacity -- and those standards are the very same for full-time paid pastors as they are for what some might call “lay-elders.” The qualifications are the same. There is no double standard.

- All pastors are to be fully qualified, formally and carefully examined, and publicly installed into office. And last week we got through the first point in the outline, which is *The Standard For Elders*. Now, let’s continue with the second point:

## II. THE SELECTION OF ELDERS

- The NT clearly indicates that elders were uniquely set apart (or appointed) to their office. Acts 14:23 says, “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
- The word “kathistemi” (appoint) is *usually* understood as “ordain.” This is the term that is used for the special appointment of elders, and it involved an official recognition service, at which there would be the setting apart of these men for this special service by the “laying on of hands.”
- In 1 Tim. 4:14 Paul told Timothy, “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed upon you through prophetic utterance *with the laying on of hands by the presbytery.*”
- The “presbytery” was *not* a special group with authority *higher* than the local church. This was simply the term used for the “council of elders.” The elders (apparently) were the ones who were to “lay their hands” on the new elders, as official

representatives of the local church, in setting them apart for spiritual leadership.

- Now, (interestingly), the concept of “laying on of hands” is one that comes from the OT sacrificial system. Whenever a sacrifice was given in the OT, the hands of the offerer were placed upon the sacrifice, to show identification.
- So the laying on of hands became a means by which one could identify himself with another. In the same way, (in the NT), ordination was used to demonstrate a special bond (or solidarity) between the elders that were already serving, and the new ones being ordained.
- It was a visible means of saying, “We commend you to the biblical ministry of shepherding the flock of God. We stand with you and commit to support you and affirm your authority to serve as a fellow elder in this local body.”
- But now, the question for *us* becomes, “How were these men *selected* and brought to the place where they were *set apart* for this kind of service? There is a biblical *process* to follow in the appointment of elders -- and that is what we need to examine now.
- First of all, we need to see *who* it is, that is to *initiate* the process, and who is to guide the process along. Let’s begin with who it is that should direct the process for appointing elders.

- 1 Tim. 5:17 says that the elders are the ones who “rule” the local church. And although we are usually uncomfortable with that word “rule,” it really means that the elders are the ones who are to “lead, manage, or direct” the church.
- So, certainly, in an important matter such as the appointment of spiritual leaders, the current elders (or pastors) should be the ones to lead the church through the process of appointing new elders.
- We know, that in every NT case where an initial council of elders or deacons were appointed, the apostles (or an apostolic designate) supervised the appointment process. (We see that in Acts 6:1-6; Acts 14:24; and in Titus 1:5.)
- So I believe that the biblical precedent, is that, whatever spiritual leadership is already in place should direct the appointment process and the selection of new elders.
- Now, even though the NT does *not* provide any specific examples of elders appointing other elders, I believe that the perpetuation of elders is implied in the elders role as shepherds, stewards, and overseers of the flock.
- I believe that one of the primary responsibilities of shepherds and overseers of God’s flock, is to make sure that biblical, spiritual leadership continues when the present council of elders passes off the scene.

- And in order to insure this, elders are to be installing new elders to help shepherd the flock, and to help younger men become prepared for this role for leading the generations to come.
- As Paul told young Timothy, “And the things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Tim. 2:2)
- There is the important aspect of handing the baton on to other men, who will be able to lead the church of God, and to teach the Word, and to protect the flock.
- Ideally, young men in the congregation will be trained and disciplined by the elders, and then observed by the congregation as faithful, long before they are ever considered as candidates for eldership.
- So we have seen *who* gives the *leadership* through this process, but what about the question of who *initiates* it? I think that the Bible is clear, that the one being considered as an elder, is the one who is to initiate the process of appointment.
- Really, we *should* say that God initiates it, because He is the One who puts it on the heart of that man to serve in this way. In 1 Tim. 3:1, we see these words, “...if any man *aspires* to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he *desires* to do.”
- Now, the desire to become an elder is *not* a sinful (or self-seeking) desire, *if* it is one that is generated by the

HS. Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that it was the HS that had placed them in the church as elders.

- That is, the HS placed in the heart of those men to serve God as an elder. So this is the starting point of the whole process. God places a burden on the heart of a man, that He is calling him out to serve as an elder, a shepherd of His flock.
- 1 Peter 5:2 says “...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God...” This is something God does in His own sovereign will. And those who surrender to the will of God in this way, are those who voluntarily choose to serve.
- Listen, we should *not* go out looking for men that *we* think should be serving as elders and then talk them into serving. It is not up to us to determine that. We are to wait for God to put it on the hearts of those He wants to call into this special service. This is the biblical pattern.
- Now, that’s *not* to say, that it is inappropriate for someone to ask a man if he has ever considered serving in this way, and encouraging him to give it some thought and prayer, but if God does *not* put it on his heart, then he should *not* be talked into it. This is (without question) something a man must feel *called* to do.

- But now, we also need to see something else here. A Spirit-given desire for pastoral eldership is going to naturally show itself in practical service to the body.
- A man who feels this God-given desire (to serve as an elder) is *not* going to be one who is *not* already involved in the ministry of the local church. It is inconceivable (and wrong) to expect for someone who is *not* already faithful in service to the Lord, to suddenly one day say, “God has called me to be an elder.”
- It is important for us to understand, that the ones God calls, are going to be those who are already serving faithfully in the body, and have already exhibited a heart for ministry, and *then* God will convict them of the need to serve as an elder. We should *not* even *consider* someone who is *not* already involved in ministry, in and through the local NT church.
- And often this God-given desire will often lead the man to get more training, and to focus more on developing his gifts and leadership skills. Sometimes this will mean that he will go to a seminary, and take some formal education -- but that is *not* always the case.
- However, (regardless of whether or *not* he goes to seminary), one thing that will be evident, is a willingness (and a hunger) to devote much time and energy into caring for God’s people, and in studying the Scriptures.
- I do *not* believe that there is any such thing as a Spirit-given desire to serve as an elder, without the accompanying evidence of sacrificial, loving service and a hunger for God’s Word.
- And I believe that the stronger a man’s desire for eldership, the more evident these things will be in his life. So before we ever appoint a man as an elder, he should be already proving himself by serving, teaching, and bearing responsibility in the church.
- But you may be wondering, “What is the actual process that should be followed in the selection of elders in the church? How do we determine which men should be appointed and which men should *not*?”
- I mean, obviously, *any* man could come up and say, “I believe God wants me to be an elder.” How do we decide whether he should be or *not*? Is there any biblical guidance in making these kinds of decisions?
- Of course, we have the qualifications, but beyond that, one of the problems, is that the Bible is *not* as clear on this as we might like. And what is (often) most needed is to “just say no.” But as you know, that takes a lot of courage.
- It is very difficult, when a man says that he feels led by God to serve as an elder, to have to say, “We can’t affirm that” -- and yet that is absolutely necessary for the sake of the spiritual health of the body of Christ (at times).

- I believe that it is a sacred trust to do so. And we'd better be more concerned about pleasing God (at this point) than pleasing men. Even when there are adverse consequences (initially) for doing so, it is very necessary in the long run.
- But what does the Bible say in regard to this? (pause) Well, it is often thought that Acts 6:1-6 provides the model for all the stages in the process of appointing deacons or elders.
- The problem, (though), is that Acts 6 doesn't tell us all the details of how the original 7 deacons were chosen, or how they perpetuated themselves.
- There has (also) been some debate as to whether these were really deacons. They are *not* called deacons in Acts 6, and we are *not* told whether they were replaced by others later on.
- Now, I (personally) believe that these were (indeed) the first deacons, primarily because the role they were appointed to function in, matches the role of the servant, from which the word "deacon" derives.
- Whether this is true or *not*, we clearly see (later in the NT epistles) that deacons are firmly established in the NT church. For example, Phil. 1:1 says, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons..." And in 1 Tim. 3, we see the qualifications for both elders and deacons.
- But getting back to the issue of *process*, there are a lot of unanswered questions regarding the exact steps that a church should follow in the selection of elders or deacons.
- How did the congregation (in Acts 6) "choose" the seven men who would originally serve in this capacity (as deacons)? We're certainly *not* told that they took a vote! Is this referring to some kind of nomination process? We know from the text that it was the apostles who actually *appointed* them (although the congregation was in agreement with this).
- And how were new deacons selected later? Did the Seven ask the congregation to select new members and have the apostles lay their hands on them? Was the group always required to have 7 members, or could there be 6 or 10? Was there a fixed time each year when the church selected new replacements for the Seven? How were deacons appointed in other churches?
- The truth of the matter is, that we really don't know the answers to those questions. And some of the same questions could apply to the appointment of elders.
- The first occasion of the appointment of elders is found in Acts 14:23, which says, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."

- But even if (in Acts 14:23) Paul and Barnabas were following the model of Acts 6 (only this time in regard to elders), we still don't know *how* the Galatian elders perpetuated themselves after the Apostles were gone.
- The fact is, that the NT says very little about such *details* for appointing elders. The exact *procedures* are *not* spelled out. So we have to use the wisdom (He gives us) when it comes to the actual selection and appointment process.
- One thing is for certain -- however we do it, we need to make sure that the men who are appointed meet the biblical qualifications given. I believe that there should be a very *thorough* examination of each candidate before they are appointed.
- And although the elders (that are already ordained) should give *guidance* in this whole process, the *entire church* should be actively involved in the selection, examination, and appointment process.
- Everyone in the church is to know and understand the biblical qualifications for elders, and we *all* have a responsibility to make sure that elders meet those qualifications. The same would apply to deacons.
- And there is another thing that is for certain, and that is, that this whole process must be bathed in fervent prayer. Sadly, too many churches do *not* spend enough time in prayerful consideration before appointing men to serve as elders.
- The Scripture clearly states that no one is to be appointed to the office of elder in a hurried, thoughtless manner. 1 Tim. 5:22 says "Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others..."
- But all this is why we have developed a very *thorough* two-year process for the purpose of qualifying and examining and testing an elder candidate, before they are officially appointed to serve as an elder.
- But once men have been called and examined, then they are to be affirmed. So we see the next stage is:

### III. THE SEPARATION OF ELDERS

- After the examination process, and the elder's final approval, the candidate should be publicly installed into office by the "laying on of hands." 1 Tim. 3:10 gives us the proper order: "And let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach." Of course, this is directed to the ordination of deacons, but the ordination of elders would be the same. *Both* scriptural offices are to be treated in the same way in this regard.
- Now, the NT gives very little guidance as to what kind of service this should be, to install an elder publicly into office. The OT says nothing at all about it either. The OT *does* give a lot of detail about the installation of priests, but there really is no comparison between NT elders and OT priests.

- In fact, we need to be careful *not* to sacrilize these NT offices more than the Scripture allows. There is no “holy rite” to perform. There is no “special ceremony” to perform.
- And I believe, that the terms that are used in the NT, are carefully chosen to reflect that this is to be a simple appointment to God’s service.
- The NT makes it clear, that a vital part of this service is to be the “laying on of hands” by the spiritual leadership of the church, in affirmation of the call of God for these men to serve in this way.
- We find this practice referred to in 1 Tim. 5:17-25, Acts 9:17, 2 Tim. 1:6 and many other places in the NT. The formal installation of an elder before the congregation by the laying on of hands and prayer, is to be the signal of the beginning of the elder’s *official* ministry. From that moment, the new elder has full authority to shepherd the church of the Lord (which was purchased by His own blood). But I also need to say a word concerning:
- And as Christ’s undershepherds, the elders are God’s stewards, and are under the strict scrutiny of Christ as those who will give an account.
- They also have been granted authority by Christ to lead His church. They are certainly instructed by God’s Word *not* to “lord it over” those whom they shepherd -- nevertheless they are called (and appointed) by God to lead His church.
- And because of this, Scripture is clear that elders are worthy of respect from the congregation. 1 Thess. 5:12-13 says, “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”
- Now, (interestingly enough), that word “appreciate” (there) is a word that means “to know intimately.” It implies a close relationship, involving appreciation, respect, love, and cooperation.
- And the reason for this great feeling of respect and appreciation, is “because of their work.” They are to be respected because of the calling they are fulfilling. They are to be appreciated for the loving care they provide for the sheep.
- We looked at Heb. 13:7 before, but it is worth looking at again. It says, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.”

#### IV. THE SUBMISSION TO ELDERS

- First (and foremost), for the local church that sincerely desires to follow the NT model, Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, and Scripture is the final and sufficient guide for everything we do in the church – but the elders are the undershepherds.

- And verse 17 adds, “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”
- The congregation is spiritually accountable to the elders, and the elders are spiritually accountable to God. Now, that does *not* mean, that if an elder sins, it should be ignored. 1 Tim. 5 gives us clear instructions on what to do in that situation. And we have specific guidelines (based on that passage) for how we handle that situation here at PBC.
- Now, we know that submission is always difficult in *any* setting, and yet we are commanded by God to submit to our spiritual leaders, even in trying and difficult circumstances.
- And please understand something, there is no such thing as a perfect elder, and every one of them will fail at times. Because of that, it is (often) easy to rationalize and to justify reasons for *not* following their leadership -- and yet we need to understand that God holds us accountable to do so.
- The requirement to submit, however, is *not* meant to suggest blind allegiance. Nor does it suggest that elders are above questioning, or immune from public discipline, if needed.
- 1 Tim. 5:19-21 says “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also may be fearful of sinning. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.”
- An accusation of sin against an elder is *not* to be received *lightly*, but neither is it to be *ignored*. Elders are to be disciplined for sinning just as any other believer. In no way are they to receive preferential treatment because they are elders.
- Elders are most assuredly accountable to the other elders, and to the congregation. The church is responsible to hold its spiritual leaders accountable to faithful adherence to the truth of God’s Word. But the greatest accountability of elders is to the Lord.
- And there are certain things that may disqualify elders from continuing to serve -- and when that occurs, they should be removed from office as an elder. And we have a process laid out, based on Scripture, to give us direction in the event that should ever occur.
- But the bottom line of everything I have said is, that whenever the church submits to God’s pattern for leadership, it will be blessed. Whenever we choose to do things our own way, we will suffer the inevitable consequences.

- Well, there is one last thing I want to mention this morning, and that is:

## V. THE STEPS TOWARD ELDERSHIP

- Maybe there is a man here this morning that is beginning to be convicted by the Lord that he is to serve as an elder in this body of believers. What do you need to do in response to that?
- Well, the first step is to request an application packet. The process that is laid out is to move that from a *subjective* sense of calling to an *objective* evaluation.
- The process is lengthy, because we need to take the time necessary to do a good job of qualifying and testing a candidate before appointing him.
- But if this is something that you “desire” (like 1 Tim. 3:1) says, and you believe God has given you that desire to serve His church in this way, then take the next step and move into the process.
- But having said that, we all know that the vast *majority* of us need to respond in a *different* way this morning. We need to commit ourselves to following our spiritual leaders, and praying for them, and fully supporting them.
- We need to enable them to be able to serve with “joy” and *not* with “grief.” (make appeal)
- PRAYER