WHO RUNS THIS CHURCH?

Titus 1:5

By

Steven J. Cole

February 18, 2007

© Steven J. Cole, 2007

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation
Who Runs This Church?
Titus 1:5

I want to answer the question, “Who runs this church?” While this may be a review for some of you old timers, those who are relatively new in this church may not understand how we operate as a church government. Many people wrongly assume that as the pastor, I run the church. One time in California, when my office was at home, a woman from the national headquarters of Pioneer Girls called to ask me how the program was going in our church. Marla took the call and it took her a long time to convince this lady that I didn’t have a clue how things were going, because I didn’t oversee the Pioneer Girls program. She just assumed that the pastor ran everything in the church.

Many people also wrongly assume that our church government is patterned after the U. S. government and operates as a democracy. The pastors and the elders are the elected officers, similar to the President and Congress. At church business meetings, members can voice their opposition to whatever they don’t like and vote according to their preferences.

While that system is fine for America, at the risk of sounding un-American or anti-Baptist, I must say that democracy is not the biblical way to view church government. As shocking as it may sound, God is not an American! He didn’t set up His church as a democracy, where the most powerful factions control the purse strings. We’re not free to impose our American ideas about government onto the church, unless we find those ideas in the Bible.

Another model that has greatly influenced how American churches are governed is that of American business. Most Christians work in the business world and are used to various management and operational procedures. Most businesses have the chairman of the board at the top, with his board of directors beneath him and the stockholders as the voting members of the corporation. When that gets carried into the church, the pastor is viewed as the CEO, the elder or deacon board are the directors, and the congregation represents the stockholders, who have their annual meet-
ing to vote on how the business should operate. With that model, the answer to the question of who runs the church is, “The pastor does, along with the board of directors.” But, the stockholders have a say in things, and if the company isn’t going the way that they wish, they can vote those guys out of office!

While there may be a few similarities between the business and government models and the church, the biblical picture of church government is different. One major difference is that the church is not just an organization, but also a living organism. All living organisms are highly organized, so we would be mistaken to throw out careful organization. But as an organism, the body of Christ, is not merely an organization. Webster defines an organization as “an administrative and functional structure.” He defines an organism as “an individual constituted to carry on the activities of life by means of organs separate in function but mutually dependent.” That describes the church. We are a living unity, the one body of which Jesus Christ is the head. Each member is a vital part of that body, separate in function, but mutually dependent on one another and on Christ, the head.

Thus the main idea of biblical church government is to allow Jesus Christ truly to function as the living head of His body. None of us should be seeking or voicing our will about various matters in the church, unless we are very convinced that our will coincides with God’s will as revealed in His Word. And, rather than any one man running the church, God’s way is that...

**Christ runs His church through a plurality of godly men who shepherd His flock under His headship.**

The situation behind our text was that Paul had left Titus in Crete to “set in order what remains and to appoint elders in every city,” as Paul had directed him. There were a number of fledgling churches scattered across the island, but they were struggling against the pagan culture. And they were plagued with false teachers with selfish motives, who were upsetting whole families (1:10-11). The letter of Titus is aimed at correcting these problems.

We don’t know much about Titus, but he must have been an unusually wise and solid young man. Years before, Paul had taken him along to Jerusalem as a test case, to demonstrate to the apos-
tles that Gentile converts did not need to be circumcised to be saved (Gal. 2:1-3). That would have been an awkward role to play! Later, Paul had sent Titus to Corinth to deal with that rowdy bunch, and he had done well. Now, Paul trusted him to set in order (the Greek word is used of setting broken bones in place) matters in the various churches, to get them on solid footing. Calvin notes that this reveals Paul’s humility, in that he was willing for a younger man to follow up his work and bring it to maturity. He was not trying to hog any glory for himself.

It is significant that a major part of Paul’s prescription for fixing these various problems was to install godly leadership in the churches. Next week we will look at the qualifications for elders, but for now I just want to point out that churches need godly, mature leaders who can stand for the truth and refute error (1:9). Churches will be strong or weak depending on the spiritual maturity and doctrinal soundness of the leaders. Today, I want to answer three questions: (1) What is an elder? (2) What should elders do? (3) How are elders chosen?

1. What is an elder?

My definition: An elder is a spiritually mature man, knowledgeable in the Scriptures, officially recognized by the local church to work with other elders in exercising oversight and shepherding God’s flock. We will unpack that definition as we work through this message.

There are several terms used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to church leaders: Elders, overseers, pastors, and leaders.

A. Elders

This is the word in our text (and in many other texts). Obviously, they were a clearly defined, officially recognized group of men. I use “men” because the clear teaching of the New Testament is that this office is restricted to men. Since elders are to teach and exercise authority over a local church, to have women elders would violate Paul’s clear directive that women are not to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:11-15).

By the way, in the New Testament, the churches are always described by the city: the church in Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, etc.
As we will see, there are always multiple elders per city (as in our text). Due to size, the church in a particular city may have had to meet in several locations (usually homes) on the Lord’s Day, with one or more elders in charge of each location. But the church in each city was viewed as a unit. There were not yet the many divisions over minor (or major) doctrinal issues that exist today. I would like to see that early sense of church unity restored in our day, but frankly, I have no idea how to go about it. I do know how not to go about it, namely, holding “unity” services where we set aside major doctrinal truths in order to come together!

But to come back to our subject, the word “elder” was adapted from the commonly used Jewish term for leadership. It referred to mature men, who by virtue of their wisdom and experience provided leadership in the various communities of Israel. Applied to church leaders, “elder” emphasizes the character of the man. He must be a spiritually mature man as reflected in consistent godly character.

The Bible does not give any age requirement. When Paul told Timothy not to allow anyone to look down on his youthfulness (1 Tim. 4:12), he was probably in his mid-thirties. Also, the term may be somewhat relative to the particular church. A man may qualify as an elder in a church composed of relatively new believers, who would not qualify as an elder in a more mature church.

The New Testament frequently refers to the elders of various churches. The church in Jerusalem had elders (Acts 11:29, 20; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). Paul and Barnabas were quick to appoint elders in the churches that they founded on their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). When Peter wrote to the believers scattered throughout the regions of modern Turkey, he addressed the elders among them as a fellow-elder (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1). The Philippian church had both elders (called overseers) and deacons (Phil. 1:1). (I cannot address the topic of deacons today, but I did devote a message to that, on 1 Tim. 3:8-13.)

B. Overseers

Elder and overseer are used interchangeably to refer to the same office (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7). Overseer (Greek, episkopos) comes from the secular Greek culture, where it referred to
those appointed by the emperor to lead captured or newly founded city-states (Answering the Key Questions About Elders, John MacArthur, Jr. [Word of Grace Communications], p. 9). It looks at the function of the elder, namely, to superintend, watch over, and guard the local church. Later in church history, the term came to refer to the singular bishop or overseer of a city, who was over all of the other pastors in that city. The Roman Catholic and Episcopal (or Anglican) churches have that system of church government. But in the New Testament, there is no difference between the elders and the overseers. The two words refer to the same group of men.

C. Pastors

The noun “pastor” (which means “shepherd”) occurs only once in the New Testament with reference to church leaders, where it is coupled with “teacher” (Eph. 4:11). More frequently, it is used as a verb. Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28; see v. 17), “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Note that the elders are called overseers and they are to do the work of shepherding the church.

The same three ideas occur in 1 Peter 5:1-3, “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder, ... shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” The elders are to shepherd the flock by exercising oversight. They have authority over those allotted to their charge, but they are not to lord it over them, but rather, to lead by example.

D. Leaders

This term is used in Hebrews 13:17 where the church is commanded, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them also do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” (See, also, Heb. 13:7, 24; 1 Thess. 5:12; Luke 22:26.)

2. What should elders do?
In a sentence, the elders should work together to exercise oversight and shepherd God’s flock in a given local church.

A. Elders should shepherd God’s flock.

The picture of the shepherd and his flock gives us many of the functions of church leaders. The shepherd led his flock to rich pasture, where they were fed. The elders must feed God’s Word to the church. While all elders must know the Scriptures well enough to be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), so that they can “exhort in sound doctrine” and “refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9), this does not mean that all elders must have the gift of teaching publicly. Paul indicates (1 Tim. 5:17-18) that some elders devote themselves to the work of preaching and teaching and should be compensated financially so that they can carry out that work.

Shepherding the flock also involves caring for the flock, binding up the wounds of the injured, nursing the sick back to health, and helping the young to grow in health and maturity. The elders are to pray for the physically ill (James 5:14) and for all the church (Acts 6:4). They are to disciple younger men, to train some to be future leaders (2 Tim. 2:2). They must gently exhort and encourage each one as a gentle mother or a tender father toward their children, imparting not only the gospel, but also their own lives (1 Thess. 2:7-12).

B. Elders should give oversight to the flock.

This refers to general superintendence of the life of the church. The elders must keep their fingers on the pulse of the church, making sure that it is spiritually healthy. This may involve guarding the flock from error, determining church policies, making decisions about the needs and direction of the church, overseeing church finances, coming alongside ministry leaders to give guidance or help, working to resolve conflicts between members, and many other tasks. The elders do not necessarily do all of the work that needs to be done, but they need to make sure that it gets done by delegating it to qualified workers.

C. Elders should work together to exercise oversight and shepherd God’s flock.

This is to say that the leadership of any local church should be plural. Every time the term elder is used in the New Testament
with regard to a single local church, it is plural (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 6, 22; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). While, as I said, individual house-churches may have had a single elder over them, there are no references to a one-pastor church in the New Testament. In one negative case, John calls attention to Diotrephes, who was lording it over others as the leader (3 John 9-10). Watchman Nee wrote (The Normal Christian Church Life [International Students Press], rev. ed., 1962, p. 44):

To place the responsibility in the hands of several brethren rather than in the hands of one individual, is God's way of safeguarding His Church against the evils that result from the domination of a strong personality. God has purposed that several brothers should unitedly bear responsibility in the church, so that even in controlling its affairs they have to depend one upon the other and submit one to the other. Thus in an experimental way they will have opportunity to give practical expression to the truth of the Body of Christ. As they honor one another and trust one another to the leading of the Spirit, none taking the place of the Head but each regarding the others as fellow-members, the element of "mutuality," which is the peculiar feature of the Church, will be preserved.

The plurality of elders does not mean that a single man should not emerge as the leader of the leaders. A variety of spiritual gifts, personalities, training, and maturity means that this usually will be the case. We see this with the twelve apostles. All were equally apostles, but Peter clearly was the leader and most frequent spokesman. In the early church in Jerusalem, James, the half-brother of our Lord, was clearly the leader. Between Paul and Barnabas, Paul took the lead. And yet, as we see at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the leaders worked together to arrive at a unified decision about the important matters at hand.

With regard to making decisions on the local church level, the elders should strive for unanimous consensus in most cases. If four elders are in favor of a decision and three are against it, the majority should not rule. Rather, they should seek through further discussion and prayer to determine the mind of the Lord, based upon any biblical principles that apply. As Paul stipulates here (Titus 1:7), elders must not be self-willed or quick-tempered men. Working
together in humility and mutual respect, the elders should seek to be of one mind in shepherding Christ’s flock under His headship.

3. How are elders chosen?

I trust that by this point you are catching the difference between the world’s ways of government and God’s way for His church. The idea of the church voting a man into leadership because he’s a popular, likeable guy or because he is a successful businessman who is willing to “serve a term on the board,” is not God’s way! In the New Testament, the apostles or their delegates (Timothy and Titus) appointed elders in the churches based on discerning (sometimes by prayer and fasting, Acts 14:23) which men met the biblical qualifications. We are not told whether they gave the churches an opportunity to recommend certain men or disapprove of others; but that is a reasonable assumption, in that it represents good leadership.

Rather than “voting” on who should be church leaders, it is better to say that the church should officially recognize men who meet the qualifications for elders, who agree to serve. We will look at those qualifications next week, but suffice it to say here that an elder must be a man of mature, godly character, summed up by the first item on the list, “above reproach.” Also, it should be obvious that such mature, godly men are not sitting around doing nothing, then get put into office and start functioning as shepherds. Rather, they are shepherds by virtue of who they are, so they have been functioning as shepherds. It is their calling from the Lord, not just a task that they agree to do for a term of office.

Our process here is that we as elders look for men who are already doing the work of shepherding and oversight. Anyone in the church is welcome to recommend such candidates to us. We examine candidates in light of the biblical qualifications, the first of which (1 Tim. 3:1) is that he desires the office. We shouldn’t have to push him into it. We try to have any prospective elders start attending our meetings, both so that he can see how we work together and to see if he fits with us. We have him fill out a lengthy questionnaire about his personal life and his doctrinal beliefs. We interview him, going over any of the matters in the questionnaire.
If we approve of him, then we recommend him to the nominating committee, which consists of all our elders and deacons. They must unanimously approve of his being qualified to serve as an elder. Then we announce his name to the church in the bulletin for at least four weeks prior to a congregational meeting. We also post part of the candidate’s questionnaire on the bulletin board (some of the questions are too personal to post publicly). If anyone has concerns about the candidate, they should contact one of the elders during this waiting period.

Then, at the church meeting, the candidate must be approved by at least two-thirds of the members present. Our elders all serve one-year terms and must be reinstated year by year. This gives the men a chance to take a break if they need to. And, it gives the church a chance to bring to our attention any elder who may not be living up to the qualifications, so that we can either help him change or urge him to step down if necessary.

The system is not foolproof, because we are all human and because men can be deceptive hypocrites. As many of you know, several years ago a man who had formerly served as an elder here was convicted and sent to prison for a serious crime that had been kept secret. But, although none of us are perfectly mature, we make every effort to insure that only qualified men are put into office. We ask you to pray and work with us to this end.

Conclusion

Like the Marines, we are looking for a few good men—not to serve as soldiers, but as shepherds of God’s flock. If you are a younger man who desires the office, let us know. We would be glad to work with you in bringing you along to that goal. We also urge you to take many of the courses offered at our Bible Institute, which are designed to help equip potential leaders. We also urge you to be involved in shepherding others, by leading a small group or by taking an active role in discipling others. To repeat: Christ runs His church through a plurality of godly men who shepherd His flock under His headship. The church will only be strong and resist the pressures to conform to this evil world when it has such strong, godly leaders. May it be so here, for the glory of our Lord!
Application Questions

1. Some say that it doesn’t matter what form of church government you have, as long as it works. Your response?

2. If the church is not a democracy, what keeps the elders from becoming a power unto themselves, accountable to no one?

3. How would you answer someone who uses Gal. 3:28 to argue that it is biblically justifiable to have women elders?

4. Why is it important to distinguish between “voting” at a church meeting versus “seeking the mind of the Lord”? Discuss the implications of this difference.