

“Why Titus Was Left Behind” – Titus 1:5

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take a Bible and meet me in Titus 1...

If you've ever walked into a room that was supposed to be finished, but clearly wasn't, then you know the feeling right away. Maybe it's a house that's been partially remodeled. The walls are up, but the trim is missing. The wiring is there, but the lights don't work quite right. Everything is present in some sense, but nothing quite feels complete. It's functional, but it's not ordered. It's not what it's supposed to be yet.

That's the picture we step into when we come to Titus 1:5. The Gospel had already come to the island of Crete. People had believed. Churches had begun. But something was off. Something was unfinished. The work had started, but it hadn't been brought into proper shape. And so the Apostle Paul writes to Titus and reminds him why he was left there: not just to maintain what existed, but to bring it into order. Not to create something entirely new, but to address what remained—what was lacking, what was out of place, what needed to be set right.

And as we begin this passage, we're going to see that this isn't just about Crete. This is about how Christ builds His Church in every place and in every generation. Because the truth is, no church naturally drifts into health. Left alone, things don't move toward order. They move toward disorder. They settle for incompleteness. So what does the church need? How does God take something that is real, but unfinished, and bring it into maturity, stability, and strength?

In Titus 1:5, Paul gives us a clear answer. We can follow the flow of this verse in four simple movements: we're going to see the problem, the solution, the strategy, and the standard that governs it all. And even though we will only dive into this single verse today, it would be good to read the whole paragraph it introduces for the sake of context. Let's do that now. If you are able, let me invite you to stand to your feet in recognition of the authority of God's Word. Follow along as I read, beginning in verse 5...

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:5-9)

This is God's Word. You may be seated...

So look again at the verse we are focusing on today, verse 5...

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you...” (Titus 1:5)

For those of you who do not know, Crete is an island that spans about 3,000 square miles,¹ making it the largest island in modern Greece. In Greek mythology, Crete was regarded as the birthplace of Zeus and the home of the legendary Minotaur.² In the first century, it was a very strategic location in the Roman world due to its role as a commercial weigh station for sea-going trade. Due to this traffic it became something of a “mixing pot of religious, philosophical, and other influences.”³ Sound familiar? Depravity abounded from coast to coast. Indeed, Paul will even call attention to this fact in verse 12, where he suggests that “the dishonesty, immorality, and laziness of the inhabitants of Crete were proverbial.”⁴

That said, we know there was also a significant Jewish population on the island, and Cretans were notably present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:11), so it’s possible that the seeds of the Gospel were planted on the island at a very early stage as pilgrims converted through Peter’s preaching returned home to Crete from Jerusalem. It’s also possible that Paul and Titus were instrumental in the founding of various churches across the island, since we’re told, in verse 5, that Paul “*left*” Titus there, implying that they were at one point together somewhere in Crete. The book of Acts doesn’t detail this specific missionary effort, but most scholars believe it occurred sometime after Paul’s first Roman imprisonment.⁵

In any case, at some point Paul had to depart from Crete, but something is wrong. Paul says that there were things that “*remained*” undone. In other words, there were gaps. There were deficiencies. There were areas where the churches in Crete were not yet what they needed to be. And this fact leads us to the first thing we need to see in this verse...

The Problem: What Remained Unfinished

That phrase, “*what remained*,” is important because it tells us something very honest about the early church in Crete. There were real believers. These were real churches. The Gospel had already taken root there. And yet, at the same time, they were still lacking. They were still disordered. They were still incomplete in significant ways.

And if we’re honest, that shouldn’t surprise us too much. Why? Because that’s the nature of every local church this side of heaven. No church starts out fully formed. No church naturally moves toward health without intentional effort. There are always things that remain—things that need to be addressed, corrected, strengthened, and brought in line with God’s design. So before we rush ahead to solutions, we need to sit here for a moment and recognize the reality: the church in Crete had a problem. Not a problem of existence, but a problem of order. Not a problem of making a good start, but a problem of making progress. And that’s where Paul begins.

We tend to think in extremes. Either something is alive or it’s dead. Either it’s faithful or it’s false. But the reality is, many churches—like those in Crete—are somewhere in between. They can have genuine believers, real conversion, and even some level of growth, yet still be disordered in significant ways. They are real, but unfinished. Functioning, but not yet fully formed.

And Paul doesn’t ignore that. He doesn’t pretend everything is fine. He doesn’t say, “Well, at least the Gospel is there, so just leave it alone.” No, he identifies the gaps. He acknowledges what is lacking. Why? Because he understood that what remains unfinished will eventually become what causes instability.

Think about it this way: If a building is left incomplete—if certain structural elements are missing—you may not notice it immediately. It may stand for a while. But over time, the weakness of the structure will eventually start to show. Cracks will form. Pressure will expose what was never properly put in place. The same is true in a local church. When key things are missing—like a lack of structure, leadership, or doctrinal clarity—it may not seem all that urgent at first. But eventually, disorder reveals itself. Confusion creeps in. Instability grows.

So Paul begins here, with an honest assessment. There were things that “*remained*” unfinished. And this forces churches today—including our own—to ask difficult questions. Questions like: What remains in our church? Where are the areas that are not aligned with God’s design? Because we don’t grow by ignoring what is lacking. We grow by identifying it and bringing it under the authority of Christ.

And this brings us to the next part of the verse. Paul doesn’t just point out the problem, he gets at what can be done about it...

The Solution: Putting Things In Order

Titus has been left by Paul in Crete, according to verse 5, that he “*might put what remained in order.*” Paul’s departure was not an abandonment of the work that remained but a strategic deployment of a trusted colleague to address the needs of these churches that were in a critical state of spiritual and structural infancy.⁶

The verb he uses, “*put...in order,*” is very intentional. It carries the idea of setting something straight, correcting what is crooked, bring something into proper alignment. This Greek word (*epidiorthoō*) is actually related to the modern term for “orthodontist,” who is a specialist that deals with straightening out your smile by bringing crooked teeth into alignment. Another related word would be “orthopedist,” someone who brings broken bones or bent limbs into alignment.⁷ Both of these specialties straighten out what needs to be put in order, be it teeth or bones.

That is why Titus was left in Crete—to straighten out what needed to be put in order. It’s not about starting over. It’s about fixing what is already there. In other words, Titus is not being called to tear the churches down and rebuild them from scratch. He’s being called to step into what already exists and bring it into the shape God intends. It’s a call to reformation. It’s reminiscent of what would become the clarion call for the Protestant Reformation: *Semper Reformanda*, meaning, “always reforming.” Not for the sake of reformation itself, but for the sake of constant realignment with our magisterial authority—Scripture alone.

Every church, no matter how miraculous its founding, begins in a state of imperfection and requires constant attention to reach maturity. John Calvin was right when he said, “The building of the Church is not a work so easy that it can be brought all at once to perfection.”⁸ We always need to pursue alignment with God’s purposes. We won’t ever arrive, this side of glory. Paul knew this. Titus knew this. So he stayed to put things in order. But he was pursuing reformation, not invention. And that’s an important distinction.

Sometimes when we see problems—whether in a church, or even in our own lives—the temptation is to think that the answer is something entirely new. A new structure, a new approach, a new direction. But Paul’s instruction here is not innovation. It’s correction. It’s alignment. The church doesn’t need to be reinvented. It needs to be ordered according to God’s design.

And that tells us something about how God works. He is not a God of confusion or disorder. He is a God of order, clarity, and intentional design. And when His church is not aligned with that design, the solution is to bring it back into alignment—not according to our preferences, but according to His Word.

But notice this as well: this kind of ordering doesn’t happen accidentally. Titus is told to *do* this. To act. To engage. To intentionally address what is lacking. That means this is not a passive process. Churches don’t drift into order. They must be led into it. And this is where this becomes very practical for us. Bringing things into order often requires hard work. It requires discernment. It requires addressing things that may have been ignored for a long time. It requires courage to say, “This is not as it should be, and it needs to change.”

But it also requires patience. Why? Because, again, you're not building something new. You're carefully setting in place what should have been there all along. So Paul gives Titus a clear mandate: take "*what remained*"—what is incomplete, what is misaligned, what is lacking—and bring "*into [proper] order*."

Yet this raises a natural question: How? How does that actually happen in the life of a church? And that's exactly where Paul goes next.

The Strategy: Appointing Elders

So how does this ordering actually take place? How does Titus take what remains and bring it into proper alignment? Paul answers that question very directly—"*appoint elders in every town*" (1:5). That is the strategy. This is the means by which order is established in the church.⁹ Not through programs, not through events, not through innovative systems, but through people. Through qualified, godly leadership. Through elders. So Paul tells Titus, "*appoint elders in every town...*" And, for what it's worth, this was Paul's regular practice. We're told, for example, in Acts 14, that as Paul went about planting churches, he "*appointed elders for them in every church*" (Acts 14:23).

Of course, this raises a new question: What are elders? Well, in the New Testament this is the language that is used most often to refer to the primary leaders in a local church. It's one of two church offices that the New Testament describes, along with the office of deacon. The deacons are a church's chief servants, who assist the elders with various tasks in order to free the elders to carry out their primary role of leading the church through the ministry of the Word and prayer. The elders are the primary leaders in a local church.

Confusion arises for a couple of reasons that, I would argue, are largely owing to a lack of biblical literacy or a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching. For instance, sometimes confusion arises because a church doesn't use the language of elders at all. So occasionally someone will say something like, "Well, the church I came from didn't have elders at all, they just had pastors." But, you see, this misunderstands something crucial. The statement assumes that the office of "pastor" and the office of "elder" are two distinct offices within the church that we can pick and choose from, when in fact, within the New Testament, they are simply two distinct terms that refer to the same church office. And there's actually a third term as well that is quite common in the New Testament for this position, and that's the term "overseer." So "elders," "overseers," and "pastors" are all ways of referring to the same individuals.

Time will not allow us to look at all the uses of these words in the New Testament, so let me simply give you an overview of some key observations.¹⁰ First, the most commonly used term used in the New Testament for these leaders is the term "elders." The Greek term is *presbyteros* (πρεσβύτερος), it's usually translated "elders," and it's from this Greek word that we derive English terms like "presbyter" or "Presbyterian." This seems to be the primary term for the office, which would make sense since it was a term that was commonly used in the Old Testament for the tribal leaders in Israel, called "elders." Interestingly, that term in Hebrew (*zāqēn*) probably derives from the Hebrew word for "beard" (*zāqān*). The elders were the "bearded ones," which was a way of indicating their maturity.¹¹ Church leaders in the New Testament were not always old or elderly (cf. Timothy; 1 Tim 4:12), but they were to be mature.

The other two terms—overseer and pastor—describe the function of the elders. Elders oversee things in the church, hence they are called "overseers." The Greek word for "overseer" is *episkopos* (ἐπίσκοπος), which combines a preposition (*epi*) meaning "on" or "over" with a noun describing one who watches (*skopos*). So the elders "watch over" things. They've been charged with exercising "oversight." And, for reference, the Greek word for "overseer" is where we derive English terms like "episcopal" or "Episcopalian," and, believe it or not, "bishop."¹²

What about the term “pastor”? Well, this may surprise you, but the ESV never even uses the term “pastor,” and when you compare other English translation, you’ll likely not find the word either, except in one verse, Ephesians 4:11. The word used in Ephesians though is actually the normal word for “shepherd,” which is how the ESV renders the term, *poimēn* (ποιμήν) there. And that’s what a pastor is meant to be—a shepherd of God’s people. They feed, guard, and care for the sheep of God’s flock. This term is used less frequently than the other two in the New Testament to describe church leaders, but it does occur (Eph 4:11; cf. verbs in Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2).

So taken together, in view of the New Testament uses, I would argue that “elder” is the primary term for the main leaders in the local church, and the other two terms—“overseer” and “pastor”—help us understand how the “elders” function—they’ve been charged with exercising oversight (as “overseers”) and with caring for God’s flock (as “shepherds”). That make sense? Regardless of what you call them, that’s their calling.

Of course, some of you may be scratching your head a bit wondering why other Christian traditions use these biblical terms to refer to distinct offices within the church. For example, Episcopal, Anglican, Catholic, and many Methodist churches will use the term “overseer/bishop” for someone who holds a regional position that supervises various churches and reserve the term “pastor” (or priest) for to refer to a local congregation/parish leader. But I think this mistakenly overlooks that within the New Testament the terms are used for the same individuals. I’ll give you a few examples that demonstrate this.

The first one is right here in Titus. Right after Paul explains, in verse 5, that he left Titus in Crete to “*appoint elders*” in the churches, he starts listing qualifications for these elders. He says in verse 6, they must be “*above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.*” Why? “[Because]”, verse 7, “*an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick tempered*” and so on... There is no change in subject. There’s no shift in topic. He’s describing the qualifications for the “*elders*” (1:5) and in the course of doing so he calls them “*overseers*” (1:7). Two terms, same office.

Here's another example. In 1 Peter 5, we read:

*“So I exhort the elders [from *presbyteros*] among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd [verbal form of *poimēn*] the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight [verbal form of *episkopos*], not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)*

So here we see Peter addressing the “elders” of the churches in Asia Minor, and he instructs them to “*shepherd*” and “*exercise oversight*” in those congregations. All three terminologies used for the same church officers.

Similarly, in Acts 20, we read: “*From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church*” (20:1; NIV). When they are gathered together, Paul instructs them to...

*“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [from *episkopos*]. Be shepherds [verbal form of *poimēn*] of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28; NIV)*

Again, the “elders” are said to have been appointed by God to serve as “overseers” who “shepherd” God’s people. The same language matrix all applying to the same church office. So I conclude that that the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “shepherd/pastor” all refer to the same church office. And while I don’t particularly care what terminology we use most often, so long as we recognize their interchangeability as we encounter this language in the Bible.

And lest you think this doesn't sound very [Southern] Baptist,¹³ I should remind you that the first version of the Baptist Faith and Message (1925)—the statement of faith for our denomination—said, in its section on church government:

“[The church’s] Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons.”

So two offices—elders (also called bishops) and deacons. And the most recently version of the Baptist Faith and Message, which was amended into the clearest of all those that preceded it and remains consistent with the original, reads:¹⁴

“[The church’s] two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.”

What you notice is that there is an attempt to make crystal clear that the New Testament language of “pastor,” “elder,” and “overseer” are all referring to the same office in the church. There’s also an attempt to state explicitly what was implied in early versions of the BFM, that this office is reserved for men, which is the consistent teaching of the New Testament, something we will explore in future weeks. In any case, it turns out what I’m arguing is pretty “Baptist.” But honestly, I care more that it is biblical, which hopefully you have seen that it is.

Related to this matter—what is biblical—we should ask ourselves what we can learn about the Bible’s teaching about the appointment of elders from this particular section of Titus. Let me boil it down to three principles, the first related to plurality.

Elder Principle 1: Plurality

It’s a simple observation, but Paul instructs Titus to appoint “*elders*,” not an elder, in every town. The norm in the New Testament is for churches to be led by multiple elders, not a solitary leader, whenever possible.¹⁵ This is why Paul and Barnabas appointed “*elders [plural]...in every church*” (Acts 14:30). And his letter to the church at Phillipi is addressed to the “*overseers*” (plural) of that church (Phil 1:1). And Paul told Timothy that the “*elders [plural] who direct the affairs of the church [at Ephesus] well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching*” (1 Tim 5:17; NIV). And James instructed the sick to call upon “*the elders [plural] of the church*” to pray over them (James 5:14). Peter told the “*elders*” (plural) to “*shepherd [plural verb] the flock [singular] of God*” (1 Pet 5:1-2). You get the idea. The pattern is so uniform that Benjamin Merkle, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on the role of elders in the church, draws the following conclusion:

“The church should be led by a plurality of elders/overseers. In every case that the term ‘elder’ is used in the New Testament it is found in the plural (except in 1 Tim 5:19). This strongly suggests that the New Testament church was governed by a group of qualified leaders and not by one individual. The local church should not be structured in such a way that one leader has sole authority within the church. The model of Scripture is that a group of qualified leaders are needed which provides accountability, balance, and the sharing of responsibilities.”¹⁶

I agree. And Titus 1 is just one more brick in the case we could build to this conclusion. But Titus 1 also reminds us of...

Elder Principle 2: Locality

Notice that Titus is commanded to appoint elders “*in every town*” (Titus 1:5). This reminds us that leadership should come, whenever possible, from within the church and be “local in nature,”¹⁷ ensuring that the church was “specific to each city.”¹⁸ This does not mean that leadership cannot be brought in—like Titus himself was—from other locations to serve local congregations. But when elders are enlisted in this fashion, as I was, they should endeavor to be as local as possible.

That may seem obvious to many of you, but I assure you it is not always the case. I knew one man who once served as a pastor of a church where the vast majority of the elders were not local or even in regular attendance. They functioned as a remote board that most of the congregation had never even met. This led to unnecessary hardship and the eventual exit of this pastor. All of this could have been avoided if more weight was given to this principle of locality.

And, for what it’s worth, this is one reason why churches (including our) should consider lay elder, whenever possible. These are people who meet the biblical qualification of eldership, who have grown into that maturity among us, who God calls out and we appoint to serve as part of our team of elders. Facilitating this very trajectory was the task Titus was given. There’s nothing in the Bible that suggests that all elders have to be paid staff. And there are good reasons for some of them not to be. This is a conversation for another day, but we are in a season where we should be thinking more about this and what it could look like in our church.

But there’s one more principle for us to notice. We’ve seen the important of plurality and locality when considering the appointment of elders. The third principle relates to quality.

Elder Principle 3: Quality

Verse 6 through 9 are a list of qualifications that every elder in a church should meet. The list is similar to the list we find in 1 Timothy 3, though not identical. And in both instances the focus is largely on character, not skill. Pastor James is going to walk us through Titus’ list of qualification next Sunday, so stay tuned.

What I want to emphasize today is that the qualifications for pastors/elder/overseers that we find in the New Testament qualify the other two principles we have considered today. So, for example, it is true that churches should strive to be led by a plurality of elders (pastors), but in the absence of qualified men, we should not be appointing new elders just so we can check that box of plurality. Plurality is the biblical ideal, but there will be some occasions when it is not possible immediately because a church is too young or doesn’t yet have men who live up to the biblical expectations. Does that make sense?

Similarly, in a perfect world, we would have our elders raised up organically from within a local church. But there will be occasions—especially when, for instance, we are looking for a lead preaching elder—where we may have to look more broadly to bring someone in to serve among us. That’s what Paul did with Titus and Timothy. But part of their tasks was to build up systems that would prevent people like them, from without, from being needed in the future.

So, I would argue, that the principles of plurality and locality are vital, but they don’t trump the principle of quality. In the absence of the biblical qualifications being met, we should not be appointing elders from any place and at any time. But we *should* be taking steps to remedy that deficit in time with God’s help. In other words, when a church does not have enough qualified men to appoint more than a single elder, they should not appoint additional elders. But they should be discipling men to remedy that problem in time. They should be pursuing plurality and locality through shepherding men toward quality.

This is in line with what Paul instructed Titus. Appointing elders was the strategy for how things would be put in order in Crete. And I think that's significant because it tells us that one of the primary ways God brings stability and health to His church is through those who shepherd it. The church is not meant to be self-governing in a loose or undefined way. It is meant to be led—intentionally, carefully, and biblically.

And Paul's directions to Titus are comprehensive: "*in every town*" (1:5). In other words, this isn't optional. This isn't just for large churches, or for certain regions. Wherever there is a church, there must be leadership. Wherever the Gospel has taken root, there must be men who are set apart to oversee, to teach, and to care for the people of God. Without such leadership, disorder remains. Gaps stay unaddressed. Problems go unresolved. The very things Paul has identified will continue if there is no one tasked with addressing them. But with faithful leadership, things begin to change, with God's enabling. Elders bring clarity where there is confusion. They bring stability where there is instability. They help guard doctrine, guide the church, and care for souls. They are instruments God uses to bring His church into the order He desires.

Furthermore, it's important to see that Paul doesn't just say "find leaders," he says instead "*appoint*" them. This is intentional. It involves recognition, evaluation, and setting men into a role of responsibility. It's not casual, and it's not based on popularity or personality. It's based on qualification, such as those found in the ensuing verses.

So the strategy is clear: If the church is going to be brought into order, it must have the right kind of leadership in place. But, wait, aren't we a congregational church? Yes indeed. I've articulated a biblical case for congregationalism elsewhere. I don't have time to detail that today, and that's not the point here in Titus 1. Suffice it to say that the leadership of elders in a church is not incompatible with congregationalism. We are not an elder-rule church. We are an elder-led, congregational-rule church, where all carry out their respective role under God.

And that leads to the final piece of the puzzle. We have to see next that even the leadership of the elders is not the ultimate authority. There is something that governs how Titus is to do all this, which is where Paul ends the verse. And this brings us to...

The Standard: Apostolic Direction

Paul closes verse 5 with a short phrase, but one that carries enormous weight: "...*as I directed you.*"¹⁹ At first glance, that might just seem like a simple reminder. But I would argue that it actually anchors everything we've seen so far. The problem, the solution, the strategy—all of it operates under a higher authority.

Titus was not positioned in Crete to figure things out on his own. He's not experimenting. He's not building churches based on what seems effective or what might work best in that culture. He is acting under direction. Under instruction. Under authority. And that authority ultimately comes from Christ, through His Apostles, and is now preserved for us in the pages of God's Word. Thus, there is a "divine mandate" to everything that follows in the text.²⁰

This means that the ordering of the church is not left up to preference or chance. It's not determined by trends, personalities, or pragmatism. It must be governed by what God has said, what God has instructed. And that's critically important—in our day and in Titus' own—because even something as good and necessary as leadership can go terribly wrong if it's not anchored to the right standard. Leaders are not the final authority. God is and so His Word must shape everything that happens in a local church. As Sam Storms writes,

“[T]he subject of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) is of vital importance. Simply put, bad ecclesiology hurts people. When the local church deviates from the principles of governance set forth in the New Testament (such as the one we are considering in Titus 1), it puts the spiritual welfare of God's

people in jeopardy. Although there are rarely any guarantees, following the New Testament principles of local church organization and structure will go a long way in preventing the emergence of pastoral bullies and other forms of abusive leadership. Texts such as Titus 1 (and 1 Tim 3) are designed to provide inspired guidance for the way in which we ‘do church’ and should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the spiritual health of God’s people.”²¹

Therefore, Titus is called not just to appoint elders, but to do so as he has been directed. According to a pattern. According to a revealed design.

And the same is true for us. If we want to be a healthy church—if we want to move from what remains into what is rightly ordered—we must submit ourselves to the authority of Scripture. Not selectively, not partially, but fully. We don’t get to decide what kind of church we want to be. That has already been defined for us. So Paul ends where we must end: not with human effort, not with human wisdom, but with divine authority. Why? Because the only way the church will ever be truly ordered is if it is ordered according to the Word of God. Not according to human preference, but according to God’s design. It’s His church, after all, not ours.

The Savior

As we conclude our time together, it’s important that we see something even deeper than church structure and leadership—we need to see the Gospel that underlies it all. Because the reason the church can be brought into order at all is not ultimately because of Titus, or elders, or any of our efforts. It is because Christ Himself.

Left to ourselves, we are not just disordered, we are dead in our sin, unable to fix what is broken within us. But Christ stepped in our behalf. Through His life, His death, and His Resurrection, He has done what we could never do: He has reconciled us to God, forgiven our sin, and begun the work of making us new. That’s what happens for those who trust in Him alone to save them. And that means that everything we’ve talked about—bringing things to order, addressing what remains, establishing faithful leadership—flows out of that reality. We are not trying to build something in order to earn God’s favor. We are responding instead to the grace we have already been given in Christ. The church is not a human project striving for perfection. It’s a redeemed people being shaped by their Savior. And the same Christ who saves His church is the one who sanctifies it, who orders it, who completes what remains.

So our hope is not in our ability to fix what is lacking, but in His faithfulness to finish what He has started. And because of that, we can pursue order, pursue health, and pursue faithfulness with confidence, knowing that Christ Himself is building His church, and He will bring it to completion. He’s committed to that. Through His life, death, and resurrection, He doesn’t just command order—He creates it, first in us, and then, by extension, in the local church. Which means the call of this passage is not first to fix ourselves, but to look to Christ, because only those who have been redeemed by Him can truly be reordered by Him. The same Savior who justifies us also sanctifies us. And as He does that in individuals, He does it in His church. He raises up leaders, He shapes His people, and He brings all things into alignment with His Word.

Our hope, then, is not in our ability to get everything right, but in Christ’s power to make us right. And our mandate is not figure everything out, but to listen the instructions He has left for our good. And because of that, we can welcome His ordering work—not as a burden, but as a grace—trusting that the One who died for His church is also the One who is faithfully building it.

In the end, brothers and sisters, the Christ’s church will be brought to order—not by us, but by Him, through His Word and Spirit, and for His glory. So let’s rejoice in His commitment to His church. And let’s be a people who works with Him, not against Him.

God help us. Let’s pray...

¹ Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 477.

² Daniel L. Akin, “Titus,” in *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*, CCE (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2013), 234.

³ Jon C. Laansma, “Commentary on Titus,” in *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Hebrews*, CBC (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2009), 231.

⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy & Titus*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 311.

⁵ E.g., Walter L. Liefeld, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 312; Hayne P. Griffin, “Titus,” in *1, 2, Timothy, Titus*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 275-276; Yarbrough, 476.

⁶ Todd A. Wilson, *Zealous for Good Works: Mobilizing Your Church for the Good of Your Community* (Chicago: Moody, 2018), 50.

⁷ “The verb *epidiorthoō* (set in order) is comprised of two prepositions, *epi* (‘upon’) and *dia* (‘through’), attached to *orthoō* (‘to make straight’). It is from *orthos* that we derive *orthodontist*, a dental specialist who straightens and aligns crooked teeth. In ancient times, the term was used of setting broken bones and straightening bent limbs, a function of the medical specialty that today we call orthopedics.” John MacArthur, *Titus*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), 20. According to Köstenberger, “Intriguingly, the sole written instance is found in a second-century BC inscription from Hierapytna, a Cretan city, with reference to the activity of a regional local administrator. Perhaps Titus’s role mirrors that of this Cretan official.” Köstenberger, 312.

⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 21b:288.

⁹ Yarbrough, 477.

¹⁰ For those curious, the following chart was compiled by some college professors of mine many years ago:

“Elder”		
Meaning	Scripture References	
1. Jewish leaders	Matt. 15:2; 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47, 57; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 28:12 Mark 7:3, 5; 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1; Luke 7:3; 9:22; 20:21; 22:52, 66 ^A Acts 22:5 ^A ; 1 Peter 5:1 ^B (Peter as an elder)	
2. Older person	Luke 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; 1 Tim. 5:1, 2; Heb. 11:2; 1 Pet. 5:5	
3. Author of 2, 3 John	2 John 1; 3 John 1	
4. Order of angels in Revelation	Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:5, 6, 8, 11, 14; 7:11, 13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4	
5. Christian leaders in the original Jerusalem church	Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 21:18	
6. Church leaders	Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 4:14 ^A ; 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1	
^A - πρεσβύτεριον ^B - συμπρεσβύτερος		
“Overseer”		
Meaning	Scripture References	
1. “See to it”	Heb. 12:15 ^C	
2. Visit, coming	Luke 19:44 ^D ; 1 Pet. 2:12 ^D	
3. Place of leadership	Acts 1:20 ^D	
4. Jesus as Overseer	1 Pet. 2:25	
5. Church leaders	Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1 ^D , 2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2 ^C	
^C - ἐπισκοπέω ^D - ἐπισκοπή		
“Pastor”		
Meaning	Scripture References	
	Verb	Noun
1. Lead in a generic sense	Matt. 2:6	Matt. 9:36; 25:32; Mark 6:34; Luke 2:8, 15, 18, 20; John 10:2
2. A literal shepherd of sheep	Luke 17:7; 1 Cor. 9:7	
3. Peter as shepherd	John 21:16	
4. Ungodly leaders	Jude 1:12	John 10:12
5. Jesus’ rule	Rev. 2:27; 12:5; 19:15	
6. Jesus as Shepherd	Rev. 7:17	Matt. 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 10:11, 11, 14, 16
7. Church leaders	Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2	Eph. 4:11

¹¹ Murray Capill, *The Elder-Led Church: How an Eldership Team Shepherds a Healthy Flock* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2024), 4.

¹² For an explanation of the etymology of the terms “bishop,” see: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/bishop>.

¹³ Just how “Baptist” these notions are can also be verified by reading the First London Confession (1644), the Second London Confession (1677), the New Hampshire Confession (1833/1853), and various writing by historic Baptist figures such as Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), Benjamin Griffith (1688-1768), Samuel Jones (1735-1814), William B. Johnson (1792-1863), J. L. Reynolds (1812-1877), et al.

¹⁴ In the years that followed the original BFM, the language of bishops fell out of favor because that language was used in other denominational traditions very differently, and the language of “pastor” to describe the office of elder became much more

popular in our denomination. A later update to the Baptist Faith and Message (1963) reflected this shift, and stated, in the same section: “[The church’s] Scriptural offices are pastors and deacons.” I would argue that this wasn’t a theological shift. They understood at that time that when the New Testament referred to elders or overseers/bishops that it was referring to the pastors of the church. This is confirmed when you look at the biblical texts that this version of the BFM cites in support (e.g., Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1-15; 4:14). So they recognized that Bible used different terms to refer to the same office commonly referred to as pastor. The problem was that in time people forgot that. Confusion surrounding the biblical language emerged. People started saying things like, “We don’t have elders, only pastors.” It became clear that the language of the BFM was actually creating confusion, and needed to be updated again. And so, the most recent version, was amended to reflect the interchangeability of the language (cf. “pastor/elder/overseer”).

¹⁵ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *How to Build a Healthy Church: A Practical Guide for Deliberate Leadership*, 9Marks: Building Healthy Churches (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 174; Wilson, 51.

¹⁶ Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003). J. Scott Duvall, when writing a case for elder-led congregationalism for a church he was part of planting, remarks the following: “The biblical evidence is indeed overwhelmingly on the side of multiple elders. Of the five major texts that seem to argue for single elders (Revelation 2-3; 2 John 1; 3 John 1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7), only the last two passages raise serious concerns:

1 Tim. 3:1-2—Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer [singular], he desires a noble task. Now the overseer [singular] must be...

Titus 1:7—’Since an overseer [singular] is entrusted with God’s work, he must be...

The leading evangelical New Testament Greek grammarian of our day, Dan Wallace, argues persuasively that even these two texts do not demand single-elder rule. The singular term ‘overseer’ is used here as a generic singular to specify a class as opposed to an individual. The context of 1 Timothy 3 includes references to many classes of individuals. For example, in 2:9-10 he addresses ‘the women’ and in 2:11-12 reverts to the singular—‘a woman should learn quietly.’ Paul is not speaking of a particular woman, but is using a generic singular to speak of women as a class. Also, the larger context in both letters supports Wallace’s conclusion (the ‘elders who rule well’ in 1 Tim. 5:17 and ‘appoint elders in every town’ n Tit. 1:5). We would not go so far as to say that a Baptist church is unbiblical when it has only one pastor, but we believe that the Bible recommends a plurality of elders.” J. Scott Duvall, “A Case for Elder-Led Congregationalism,” prepared for Fellowship Church in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. For a wonderful exploration of the practicality of this biblical pattern, see Dever and Alexander, 175-177.

¹⁷ Griffin, 277.

¹⁸ Laansma, 235.

¹⁹ Note also the emphatic ἐγώ, fronted for emphasis—“I myself directed you.” Cf. John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, BST (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 173.

²⁰ MacArthur, 22.

²¹ Sam Storms, *2 Timothy & Titus: A 40-Day Bible Study*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle, Planted in the Word (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2025), 143–144.