

Biblical Leadership (Part 1) – Titus 1:5-9

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Titus 1:5-9. We're in the middle of a mini-series about the foundations of a solid church, because solid churches don't just happen. Just like skyscrapers, they're *built* on bedrock and *stand* on bedrock. Including the bedrock of biblical leadership.

Years ago, Becky and I stayed with some friends at their house on Lake Michigan. It was a beautiful home on a beautiful property, with lakefront access and spectacular views. Awesome. Except for one thing. The house was sinking.

Built on the sand dunes overlooking the lake, it had sunk about six inches over the years, and the rate was increasing. Which might not sound like much, but in the world of architecture it's catastrophic. The walls started cracking, the floors started heaving, and the structural integrity was failing right before their eyes. Making the house useless and eventually worthless.

All of which is a perfect picture of *churches* built on sand. Including the sand of unbiblical leadership. From leadership *structures* that are contrary to the Bible, to unfit *leaders* according to the Bible. It's sinking sand.

So let me cut to the chase and get right to bedrock.

Solid churches are led by a group of elders

That's the main point and the only point. This week *and* next. Solid churches are led by a group of elders.

Not that they make *all* the decisions, but all the *big* ones. Not that they're the *only* leaders, but the primary ones; leaders where the buck stops. Not that they *do* all the ministry, but empower it. Surrounded by a host of *other* leaders: Pastors and Directors; Deacons and teachers; Small Group leaders and counselors.

But they're led, the church is led, by a group of elders. At least solid churches are.

Which is . . .

• Based on three primary passages

Three passages in the New Testament contain the bulk of elder leadership. Describing the character, and qualifications, and responsibilities of elders.

The first is . . .

– 1 Timothy 3:1-7. Written by the Apostle Paul to Timothy. A young pastor in Ephesus. (1 Tim 4:12) And as we'll see a little later, next week especially, it's heavy on the qualifications and character of elders.

The second is . . .

– Titus 1:5-9. Written by Paul to Titus; one of his co-workers. Saying in v5 – *This is why I left you in Crete [where Paul evidently planted some churches], 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.* (ESV)

[7] *For an overseer, as God's steward [someone responsible to manage God's work],*

must be above reproach. [Living in such a way that no one can make a legitimate accusation of sin against him.] 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. Once again, heavy on the qualifications and character of elders. The second passage.

Third, is . . .

– 1 Peter 5:1-5. Written by the Apostle Peter to the church at large. And after saying that we're going to suffer for Christ, all of us, he says in v1:

[1] *So I exhort the elders 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 the flock of God that is among you [lead them and care for them in their suffering], exercising oversight, 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 [Jesus], you will receive the unfading crown of glory. [You'll be honored.] [5] Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders [another mark of solid churches]. Clothe yourselves, all of you [elders and followers], with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

Different than the first two passages, this one is heavy on the *responsibilities* of elders. *Shepherd the flock* it says. As in care for them; feed them; lead them. And exercise *oversight*, v2. Look after the church, keep watch on it, protect it. Not grudgingly, but willingly. Eagerly. As an example; someone to follow; someone to imitate. That's what you find about elders in the Bible. And the reason solid churches are led by them.

What you won't find are passages on *congregational* leadership; leadership by a committee of the whole; where everything is voted on. Nor will you find passages on single-pastor leadership. Or trustees. Or presbyteries, archbishops, and hierarchies. They're just not there.

What's there, is elder leadership. And solid churches practice it.

Second, solid churches are led by a group of elders . . .

• With three main titles

I've been using one of them, and we just saw another in the passages we read. And while they're similar, all three convey slightly different meanings; different nuances. Which rounds out the responsibilities and characteristics of elders.

The first is . . .

– Elder – a term of authority and maturity

We saw the maturity part in the list of qualifications. Things like humility and steadiness, self-control and holiness. Elders are mature.

But the title also conveys authority. Because of what they do. Which is govern. Or to use the biblical word, *rule*. **1 Timothy 5:17a** – *Let the elders who rule well be considered*

worthy of double honor. Rule, as in govern. Which makes elder a term of authority.

The second is . . .

– **Overseer – a term of protection and oversight**

Overseer, because it's used interchangeably with elder, and associated with the same responsibilities. Look again at Titus 1:5 – *I left you in Crete* [Paul says, to] . . . *appoint elders in every town as I directed you*—[6] *if anyone is above reproach, [etc., etc.] . . . [7] For an overseer* [v7], as God's steward, must be above reproach.

Appoint elders above reproach, because overseers must be above reproach. Paul uses the terms interchangeably. So an elder is an overseer and an overseer is an elder. (See also Acts 20:17, 28.)

And it's a term of protection and oversight. Oversight by definition – an over-*seer* provides over-*sight* – and it's a term of protection by duty. They don't just *watch* the sheep, they *protect* them. From others and themselves.

And third, the third main title for those who lead solid churches, is . . .

– **Shepherd – a term of leadership and care**

We saw that in 1 Peter 5:2 where he exhorts the *elders* to *shepherd the flock of God that is among you*. He doesn't explicitly *call* them shepherds, but tells them it's a part of their responsibility. Implying that they *are* shepherds. (See also Acts 20:28-31)

And we know it's a term of leadership and care for two reasons: (A) That's the meaning of the metaphor. Just like shepherds of *actual* sheep lead and care for them, shepherds of *people* lead and care for them. And (B) That's the example of God. As our Chief Shepherd. Think Psalm 23.

[1] *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.* [He provides for us.] [2] *He makes me lie down in green pastures.* [He cares for us.] *He leads me beside still waters.* [3] *He restores my soul.* (1-3a)

By way of the metaphor and the example of God, “shepherd” is a term of leadership and care. And the third main title, main characteristic, of those who lead solid churches.

That said, I want to emphasize the fact that it's a group of . . .

• **Elders plural**

Solid churches are led by a plurality of elders. Not *one* elder, like the *Senior Pastor* or *Lead Shepherd* in some churches. Nor a group of *deacons*; who kind of *function* as elders but take their cues from the congregation. But a group of elders. Plural.

It's something that's implied by a host of Scriptures. Like . . .

Acts 14:23 – they had appointed elders for them in every church; plural.

Acts 20:17 – [Paul] called the elders of the church

Acts 21:18 – all the elders were present

Titus 1:5 – appoint elders in every town

James 5:14 – call for the elders of the church

1 Peter 5:1 – I exhort the elders among you

Almost every time elders are spoken of in Scripture, the word is plural. Indicating a *group* who leads.

A group where the burden is distributed, responsibility is shared, duties are delegated, and wisdom grows. At least if the *right* people are at the table. A group where grace is extended and love is shown. A group where unity is sought and peace is treasured.

And a group . . .

– **Where decisions are made by consensus**

Consensus, as in agreement; harmony; unanimity. Not voting. Voting is one of the most sterile and divisive things elders could do. It might lead to easier decisions or greater efficiency, but it creates winners and losers along the way. Fragmentation. Opposition. Voting is necessary in a democracy, but not among elders. In fact, it's the death of elders. At least the death of their unity and peace. Their joy.

So elders in solid churches make decisions by consensus. In that they all agree or they don't move forward; they don't make a change. They don't have to feel the same *passion* as everyone else, but they do have to be facing and pulling in the same direction.

Second, solid churches are led by a group of elders . . .

– **Where each person has an equal voice and equal authority**

An equal voice, meaning they have the same opportunity as everyone else around the table to speak and be heard. And equal authority, in that their perspectives and *decisions* are just as valid as the others. Elders in solid churches have an equal voice and equal authority.

But not necessarily equal influence. Some elders have more influence than others. By virtue of their abilities, or knowledge, or experience, or position. Especially true of the Senior Pastor. The lead shepherd. The one who eat, sleeps, and breathes the ministry. The one who preaches the Word. The one who casts vision. The one *called* to the work of ministry. His influence is naturally greater. And naturally respected by the others.

Which is why he's considered *first* among equals at the elder board. Deferred to as much as possible. Not at the expense of wisdom and doing what's best, but recognizing the value of his perspective, and gifts, and calling, and position.

And for his part, the Senior Pastor listens to, and submits to, and defers to the *others* as much as possible. All of which makes for a solid board and a solid church. Led by a group of elders, plural.

And last, solid churches are led by a group of elders . . .

• **Comprised of men**

And men only. Between the three main Scriptures about elders, God gives us a list of 19 different qualifications. 19 character traits, and heart attitudes, and abilities in order to determine whether someone is fit to lead or not.

And while most of them are *subjective* – like determining whether they're above reproach, or sufficiently holy, or well thought of by outsiders – there's one criteria that's very *objective*. As straightforward as it gets. Elders must be men.

For three reasons. First . . .

– **Paul refers to them as husbands**

Which until yesterday in the course of history, meant men. Now, we can't even define what a man or woman is. At least in some circles.

But Paul could. And does. Saying in Titus 1:5 to – *appoint elders in every town . . . if anyone is . . . the husband of one wife*. Or literally, a *man* of one woman. Speaking to his fidelity.

Same for 1 Timothy 3:1-2. Flip back a few pages. [1] *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer [elder], he desires a noble task [an honorable role]. [2] Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife . . .*

That's the first reason elders can only be men. Paul refers to them as husbands.

Second . . .

– Paul uses male pronouns

When Paul refers to elders, he regularly and only uses masculine pronouns: “he,” “his,” and “him.” He never uses feminine pronouns. Look at 1 Timothy 3:4. We’ll come back to v3 and all the qualifications next week. For now, just notice the pronouns.

[4] He [still referring to the overseer, or elder] *must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, [5] for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? [6] He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. [7] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

That's about as straightforward as it gets. Elders can only be men because Paul only uses male pronouns to describe them.

And third . . .

– Paul doesn’t permit women to do what elders do

Which is teach men and have authority over men. Look at 1 Tim 2:12, a few verses earlier. *I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet.* Quiet with respect to teaching men the spiritual truths of the Word, and quiet with respect to *leading* men spiritually. Not quiet altogether.

Both of which, teaching and leading, are the primary responsibilities of elders. Including pastors; those who *labor* in preaching and teaching. (1 Tim 5:17)

So elders and pastors can only be men, because Paul doesn’t even permit women to do what elders and pastors do. In addition to the fact that he consistently refers to elders as men.

Now, that usually raises two questions: “Isn’t this cultural, just for Paul’s day?” And, “Are women chopped liver? Wallflowers?” No and no.

You can’t say this is cultural and dismiss it, at least not legitimately, because in the very next verses, 1 Timothy 2:13-14, Paul cites the creation order of God and the example of Adam and Eve as the *basis* for the restriction. Both, historical facts that never change. Therefore the prohibition they support can’t change.

In other words, because Paul bases his prohibition on something that’s timeless, not cultural, the prohibition itself can’t be cultural. Nor is there anything in the following list of qualifications, that indicates his *pronouns* are cultural. The Bible is clear.

And second, women are not chopped liver in the church; mere wallflowers to be seen but never heard. Far from it. They’re just as gifted, just as capable, and just as needed as men. To lead and teach other women, lead and teach kids, offer wisdom and perspective, and serve the church as a whole. God help us without the presence of godly, gifted women.

So men-only as elders has nothing to do with ability or equality. It’s simply the way that God has designed and ordained that his church be led.

And given the fact that he’s perfect and loving, solid churches trust his design and follow it. Led by a group of elders, plural, who love and shepherd the church, on behalf of the *Great Shepherd*.

Prayer – God, do help us in this. Help us as elders to lead and love and care for this church as you would have us. To pay careful attention to ourselves, and to those for whom you gave your life. And help those who struggle with these things to trust; trust your goodness, trust your leaders, and trust your way.

You Are Loved