

Defining Elders

By D.A. Carson

A lightly edited transcript of a talk given at Capitol Hill Baptist Church

1 Timothy 3:1-7

1Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. 2Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. 5(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) 6He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. 7He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Titus 1:6-9

6An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. 7Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. 8Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. 9He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

Before plunging into these texts, I should perhaps begin by saying that in New Testament times, there were only two distinctive offices. On the one hand, there were elders, also called pastors, also called overseers ("bishops" in older English); on the other, there were deacons. The reason for thinking that "pastor" and "elder" and "overseer" refer to the same person or office springs primarily from the way the three are linked in such passages as Titus 1:5-7 and 1 Peter 5:1-2. The point has long been recognized. That illustrious Anglican scholar, J. B. Lightfoot, undertook a lengthy demonstration of this point in his commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians. It was not until the second century that "bishops" (i.e. "overseers") were split off to constitute a third office.

The word "pastor" comes from a Latin root that means "shepherd," which in Jewish metaphorical usage carried overtones of authority, looking after the sheep, directing them, nurturing them, protecting them, ruling them. The "elder" terminology springs from both the synagogue and the village, and suggests maturity and (one hopes!) wisdom. The word "overseer" recognizes the legitimate place of governance. All the words are necessary because the task is complex and integrated.

So now we turn to our text.

These verses teach us that the primary characteristic of the Christian elder/pastor/overseer is that his life constantly reflects Christian values, morality, conduct, and integrity; that's the baseline. In some respects, the list is remarkable for being unremarkable. In other words, there is nothing about superior IQ, charisma, powerful personality or the like. The Christian minister is supposed to be gentle, not supposed to get drunk, and so forth: the list is remarkable for being unremarkable. Indeed, with only a couple of exceptions, all of the qualifications listed here are elsewhere in the New Testament demanded of *all* Christians. For instance, this elder is supposed to be given to hospitality. But that is demanded of *all* Christians in Hebrews 13. What this means, then, is that the Christian pastor must exemplify in his own life the virtues and graces that are demanded of all the people of God. There are only a couple of entries here that cannot be demanded of all Christians, viz. "not a novice" and "able to teach." Everything else is the responsibility of all believers, not just the pastors of believers.

We must rapidly survey the entries on this list. In 1 Timothy 2:2, Paul begins his list of qualifications by stating that elders must be "above reproach" – in a sense, blameless. This doesn't mean that such a person is sinlessly perfect; there's too much in Scripture to the contrary of that sort of expectation. What it does mean is that there is no obvious inconsistency or flaw that everyone agrees is there and serves as a reproach to the man.

Second, he must be "the husband of but one wife." In some ways that is the most difficult or disputed qualification in the list. It has been variously interpreted. Some think it means that this man must be married – that he must be a husband. That interpretation is highly unlikely. It is clear that Paul wasn't married, at least at this point in his life,

and certainly the Lord Jesus was never married. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul acknowledges that there are certain advantages to being single in the ministry. I was single when I was senior pastor of a church on the west coast of Canada, and there were all kinds of advantages to that. There were some disadvantages too. But there were some wonderful advantages in terms of the hours I put in, evening visitation, calls when I could get people at home. So there are advantages to being single in the ministry, and singleness should not be despised. It is highly unlikely that this text, therefore, stipulates that an elder be married.

Some people think this verse suggests that the elder/pastor/overseer is forbidden to remarry, if, for instance, his first wife dies: he must be the husband of only one wife, this interpretation would have it, no matter how long he or she lives. Again, that is unlikely. In Romans 7, Paul insists that there is nothing dishonorable about remarrying, marrying a Christian spouse the second time around, after the first one has died. Certainly he gives no hint that such a step is unthinkable in the case of an elder.

Some believe this verse teaches that an elder cannot be a divorcé who has remarried. The Bible certainly warns against divorce in many ways. But it is also very important not to make divorce the worst sin on the horizon, the unforgivable sin, the sin against the Holy Spirit. Some have tried to impose a prohibition against anyone becoming a minister of the gospel who has ever been divorced at any time in his life. So he might have been a murderer, and then paid his debt to society, got out of prison and been converted and become a minister of the gospel. But if he's been divorced, he can't enter the ministry – which somehow projects an image of divorce as the unforgivable sin. Where divorce *does* disqualify a person from ministry, it seems to me, is bound up with a category we've already discussed: an elder "must be blameless." It's a credibility issue; or, again, a little further on, "he must be able to govern his own house well." You worry about someone whose life has cracked up in his marriage, and then three months later, he feels he's qualified to be back in ministry. He has repented, after all, and the gospel is all about forgiveness, isn't it? Clearly the Bible has something more stringent to say than that. Divorce is not the ultimate sin, nor is it the unforgivable sin, yet it may disqualify a person for ministry precisely because it destroys so much of a person's credibility, it destroys so much of his believability. There is more I could say, but divorce simply is not what this qualification is about.

Some people interpret this verse to mean that an elder must not be a polygamist; that is, not somebody who is married to two or more wives. What people object to about this interpretation is that no one in the Christian church was married to two or three wives, so why should it be stipulated at all? Moreover, it is argued, in the first century, polygamy wasn't all that common. Why then do you have to stipulate this particular thing? But it can be shown that there was more polygamy in the first century than some people think, especially in the strata of society where people felt above the common rule. Herod the Great had ten wives. Now, he didn't have them all at once because he murdered two of them, but he had several at a time. Both in the aristocracy and in the borderlands of the Empire – places like Lystra – polygamy was not all that uncommon. If you go to Africa today, you discover that in some tribes polygamy is still not all that uncommon. The more power you have – if you are the chief, for instance – the more likely it is that you have a plurality of wives. The number of wives is connected with your public persona; it's almost bound up with the office, so if you're a chief, you're likely to have four or five wives. For a start, you can afford them. In such a culture, polygamy almost seems to be a kind of leadership qualification. But in the church, it's the reverse: polygamy disqualifies you for leadership.

Suppose a Christian witness moves into one of these tribes today, and large numbers of the tribe, including the chief, become Christians. Does the chief of the tribe become chief of the local church? Not according to Paul; that is precisely what is ruled out. Just because you are a chief in the secular world doesn't mean you are automatically entitled to be chief in the local church. In a derivative sense, that is where the rubber hits the road for us, too. You sometimes find that in a high-flying church, whose members include a lot of middle-level and senior-level executives, it is simply assumed that because these people are leaders in the larger culture, they should be leaders in the local church. Sometimes the people who think that most strongly are the high-flyers themselves. Such people, it must be said, can on occasion be right pains in the local church. The fact of the matter is that if they do not meet the requirements set out by the Scriptures, then regardless of their impressive credentials outside the church, they do not have the right to be elders/pastors/overseers within the church. So far as the precise matter Paul treats here is concerned – the matter of polygamy – polygamists are simply ruled out. One of the reasons is that, in the Bible, marriage is presented not only as a social institution, but a model, a "type," of the relationship between Christ and his "bride," the church – and Christ does not have many brides, many churches. Marriage is a type of the relationship between Christ and his people, the *church*. So there is something to be modeled about Christ and the

church by husband and wife, and thus by a marriage structure characterized not only by fidelity and integrity, but also by monogamy. In any case, Paul rules out the polygamist from being pastor/overseer/elder.

The next three qualifications, "temperate," "self-controlled," and "respectable," all have to do with orderliness of life. "Temperate" conjures up notions of clear-headedness, self-possession, not an extremist. It has nothing to do with the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Then, we read, the pastor is to be "self-controlled" because, after all, we read elsewhere in the Pastorals that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and love and self-control. The word "respectable" sometimes has negative connotations in today's culture; it sounds almost pompous. But that is not what is meant here. The "respectable" person attracts some kind of respect.

The next two qualifications in the list are bound up with Christian witness: "hospitable" and "able to teach." The Christian pastor/elder/overseer must not be a hermit or a recluse, must not be someone who wants always to be isolated from people. It won't do to have a pastor who is a great reader of books and a disciplined thinker, but who loves the church only in the abstract, while being unable to stand people. The ministry is about touching people's lives.

The entry "able to teach" we'll come back to for more probing consideration, but here we may at least say that the criterion presupposes knowledge of the truth and of God, and the ability to communicate such truth. Occasionally you'll find people who are wonderful communicators, but they don't have much to communicate. Alternately, you find some people who have massive knowledge, but just cannot get it across to anybody. In both cases, they're ruled out of this office. Ability to teach presupposes knowledge of the Scriptures and of the God of the Scriptures, and the ability to communicate such knowledge.

Then, verse three, "not given to much wine." That means not only free from drunkenness but free from addiction. The slave of Jesus Christ must not be the slave of anything else. Then "not violent but gentle" – that is, patient, kindly, forbearing; not quarrelsome, not contentious. There are some people who are not only ready to fight, but ready to enjoy it – not least some of us who come from a fundamentalist background where our very orthodoxy is measured not by contending for the faith, but by being contentious about the faith. In this connection, then, it is very important to read a passage like 2 Timothy 2:22-26:

22Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. 23Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. 24And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. 25Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, 26and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.

Do you see that image? Someone who's not a wimp, someone who's standing up to them and trying to teach them, but somehow, someone who doesn't have his ego so much on the line that if he's challenged at any point he loses his cool and blows up and damns them all to perdition and tries to get on with his task of ruling the church. There's no place for that attitude in the life of an elder; there should be self-denial and a firm, immovable gentleness. Moreover, the pastor/elder/overseer is "not a lover of money." Jesus Christ has promised all of his disciples enough for their needs. Therefore the leaders of the church must display a certain carelessness about such needs, because they are trusting Christ. The worst conceivable situation in the local church occurs when the church adopts the attitude, "Lord, you keep him humble and we'll keep him poor," and the minister adopts the attitude, "I'm going to get every cent I can out of this selfish congregation; they have no idea how much I do for them." The best situation occurs where the congregation sees itself in the privileged position of supporting someone in the ministry generously so that he is free to get on with the work of the ministry, and the minister for his part doesn't give a rip – in a sense, he is above all that.

There's a profound sense in which, in the ministry, you do not pay someone for the work they do. There are some things I've done in ministry – some funerals that I've taken, some wretched situations I've gotten into – that you could never pay me enough to do. In fact, what the church is doing is supporting someone so that he is free for ministry. In that kind of framework, you do not want him to be worried about where his next meal is coming from, but you also do not want him to say, "Considering how important I am as the leader of this church, you ought to pay me so much." Somewhere along the line, the combination of 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Timothy 5 come together: he is not

a lover of money, but he is worthy of "double honor" – and the word "honor," of course, is quite often used for "pay" – "to be worthy of double pay, not least those who are committed to the ministry of the Word."

Then, in verses four and five, we are told that the elder/pastor/overseer "must manage his own family well." Verse five calls to mind the parable of the talents reported in Matthew 25:14-30 – if you cannot do it in the smaller arena, how can you be expected to do it in the larger arena? This principle gives an impressive dignity to the Christian home. Not all men are eligible to be elders in the church, but most are eligible to be elders in the home. Within that sphere their responsibilities are somewhat similar. I want to see elders in the church leading family worship, teaching children the way of God, thinking through patterns of modeling and discipline, for this is what demonstrates their qualification for similar roles in the church. Spiritually speaking, the worst Christian home is the one with high spiritual pretensions and low performance; the best is the one with low pretensions and high performance. I say that out of gratitude and respect to my parents. My parents didn't think of themselves as anybody. They thought of themselves in many ways as losers and failures, partly because they lived through the tough years of Quebec when nothing much was happening. Yet I cannot remember a day in all my life when my father didn't pray for at least forty-five minutes, and we knew that he was praying for us and for the church and for his ministry. Burned in my memory is my mother sitting in the kitchen with her open Bible on her knees. My father was never a threat to us from his own ego; he just did not operate on that plane. And when I left home, I could never dismiss them as old fogies or hypocrites: I had been a lifelong witness to the integrity of their lives.

Does this mean that the children of an elder must be devout Christians? There is a passage in the second paragraph that I read at the beginning of this address (viz. Titus 1:6-9) that is sometimes taken to support that view. I think it is mistranslated in the NIV. The NIV renders Titus 1:6, "An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient." Does this mean that the children of every leader must be Christians? And if you say yes, then from what age? Two? Five? Seventeen? In fact, the particular term that is used there, "must believe," is an adjective that in many places is rendered "must be *faithful*." And in fact, in contemporary first-century lists of social virtues, where moral characteristics are laid out, the word always has that force. I think that what the text is saying is not that the children must be saved – after all, grace doesn't run in the genes – but that at the end of the day, they must be faithful, not wild or profoundly disobedient.

The verse does not mean that children of ministers are sinlessly perfect. It does not mean that they cannot do some pretty stupid and immoral things. The question really is, how is the home being handled? What kind of discipline is imposed? What kind of encouragement is there? And how are these strengths reflected in the character, the faithfulness, of the children? Certainly it does not mean that when the children have left home and become adults and are outside their father's purview – when he has no control over them – that they must all be fine, upstanding believers with nothing publicly wrong with their lives, or else their father is disqualified for vocational ministry. Even while they are still children and in his house, what is demanded is neither conversion nor perfection, but the kind of parental discipline that produces "faithful" children. There has to be some kind of display of that least common of gifts, Christian common sense, and grace and tact and discipline and encouragement, and sometimes a yank on the rope and sometimes perhaps an administration of the "board of education" to "the seat of learning," that produces "faithful" kids. Such a combination of modeling and discipline is important because that is also required in the leadership of the church. If you cannot do it at home you certainly cannot do it in the church. If it becomes obvious that the man has lost control of his dependent children entirely, if the kids are thirteen years old and the terrors of the neighborhood, the man is disqualified from public ministry in the church. That is what the text says. We are told in verse six, "He must not be a recent convert," lest he be puffed up with pride, making his fall seem all the greater. Rapid promotion usually spells disaster; he falls under the same judgment as the devil, for the devil himself was lifted up in pride against God. But this is nevertheless a relative category. For example, in the book of Acts, Paul goes out through what is now Southern Turkey and plants various churches there, and then on the return swing he appoints elders in every place. There is no way that those Christians have been Christians for more than a few months; that is what the chronology demands when Paul appoints elders in every place. It would be inappropriate to appoint such people as elders at Capitol Hill Baptist Church. This church is comprised, in part, of Christians who have been Christians for a long time with a lot of experience.

I was brought up in French Canada, and during the tough years, as recently as 1972, in a population of 6.5 million people, there was a grand total of about thirty-five evangelical churches. Only one or two of them had more than thirty or forty people on a Sunday morning. They were small works, mostly supported by English Canadian dollars.

Then between 1972 and 1980, those thirty-five churches grew to about five hundred churches – in eight years. Some of these churches had hundreds of people. I would go to speak at a church in French Canada and discover that there wasn't a single person in the room who had been a Christian for more than eighteen months. In that kind of framework, the elders were people who had been Christians for sixteen or eighteen months, because they were older in the Lord than anyone else in the church. So in that kind of missionary expansion, "not a novice" means something relatively different from what it means in a long-established church. But still, "not a novice" is an important principle, even if it must be variously applied.

Then let me mention a number of characteristics that are drawn from other passages that are not mentioned in this particular list. In 1 Timothy 5:21 Paul tells Timothy at all costs to avoid favoritism, partiality. The result is that there is sometimes a degree of loneliness in leadership. We all have favorite types of personalities, people we get along with better than others. But Christian leaders do not have the right to indulge in such preferences: leadership in the church should not be partial, it should not play favorites. More generally, 1 Timothy 6:11-12 says the Christian elder must pursue all godly virtues. And more generally yet, in 2 Timothy 2, 3, and 4, leaders in the church must expect serious difficulties and be persistent in the face of them, remaining utterly committed. If you think this is going to be an easy ride, go be an astronaut, do something easy in life; don't become a Christian pastor.

I turn now to the one exceptional characteristic, "able to teach." It is exceptional within the list in that it cannot be demanded of all believers (except in the most general sense that all Christians are to "teach" others in some general sense – but certainly not in the sense of James 3:1, which specifies that there should not be many teachers in the church, since we know that they will be judged more severely). It is the one characteristic that is never demanded of deacons. In other words, a deacon may teach, but that is not a *necessary* part of his role as deacon. Perhaps, in passing, I should mention that some translations render the Greek expression as "teachable" rather than "able to teach." I shall not take the time here to explain why I am persuaded that the second rendering is correct. I shall instead restrict myself to saying two things about this qualification. First, there are some people who argue that there are two orders of elders in the New Testament, those whose task is primarily administration, and those whose task is primarily teaching. That distinction is based entirely on one verse, 1 Timothy 5:17, which says, "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." So some have argued that there are two tiers of elders, namely those who direct the affairs of the church, and then another group, the "especially" group, who add to this the gift of teaching. My hesitations in this regard are twofold.

Number one, this is the only text in the New Testament which might be taken to support that view, and I am reluctant to impose on the conscience of the church something which on the face of it is said only once – not because something has to be said many times for it to be true, but because something has to be said more than once for me to be sure I understand it properly. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 15, there's a reference to those who were baptized for the dead. Now the Mormons think they know what that means, but I'm not sure I do. In fact, in the history of the church, there have been about forty different interpretations of what that phrase means. The multiplicity of interpretations stems from several things: the phrase only shows up once (so there are no parallels to help us out), there is more than one syntactical possibility, and in any case the expression itself is slightly obscure. I think I can narrow the options down to three, but even if I ventured a guess as to which one is correct, there is no way I have the right to impose my conclusion on the conscience of the church. So also with respect to 1 Timothy 5:17: the fact that the relevant expression shows up only once makes me reluctant to infer an entire ecclesiastical structure from this one text. Number two, the word rendered "especially" in this verse does not refer to a separate category of elders so much as it accentuates what all the elders must do: "those who direct the work of the church, indeed these who teach or preach the Word of God" – something like that. You see, in the New Testament, the authority that rules the church is not primarily an authority of independent office; it's an authority that is ministered through the Word. I cannot stress that enough. We do not obey pastors/elders/overseers because they are pastors/elders/overseers, because they've got the job and therefore they're "up," we're "down" – they're the administrators so we obey them; and then also there are people that teach. That is not the idea.

The idea is that the authority they wield in ministry is precisely the authority of ministering the Word of God. That is why if they claim to be teaching the Word of God, yet are transparently lending their support to false teaching, you have every right to challenge them, because they are not to put themselves over the Word of God: they are under the Word of God. But if they are genuinely teaching the Word, then of course devout Christians will see that the real authority lies in the Word, in the Lord of the Word, even if in due course such elders accrue to themselves

an enormous amount of credibility and a functional authority, because they are seen to be faithful teachers of the Word of God. Thus, the administration of authority in the church is not so much bound up with office, or merely manipulation of administrative leaders, although in any large organization there are various needs for and kinds of administration. Rather, the fount of authority is the Word. And out of this framework come teachers who explain that Word well and apply it well, so that believers say, "Yes, this is the mind of God."

The second thing to say about this, then, is that when you look at all the passages on this teaching authority in the Pastoral Epistles and beyond, the teaching/preaching of elders is bound up with an extraordinary mixture of proclamation on the one hand and superb modeling on the other. It is never one without the other. You find this not only in the Pastorals, but in other texts as well. In 1 Peter 5, Peter writes:

1To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

So you have an emphasis on oversight, but also on *examples*.

There is one more qualification for vocational ministry that I dare not ignore. There is a stress in the Pastoral Epistles on observable spiritual growth in the leaders. Look at 1 Timothy 4:14-16 – "Do not neglect your gift which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, *so that everyone may see you progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely.*" If your pastor isn't more knowledgeable and a better preacher and teacher of the Word of God five years from now than he is now, and if he isn't better now than when he came here three-and-a-half years ago, quite frankly, there's something wrong with him. He ought to be growing in his thinking, his reading, his understanding, his ability to apply the Bible and get it across. You should see in him an apparent growth in holiness and conformity to Christ, that is, in his *life*, on the one hand, and in his *doctrine*, on the other. Ministers are not static people. It is intriguing that two other New Testament themes are sometimes interwoven into passages about spiritual leaders. They are, first, doxology, praise of God; and, second, eschatology, that anticipation of the end which keeps everything in a certain kind of perspective. Let me give you a passage or two by way of example. In 1 Timothy 6: 11-16, Paul writes:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. 12Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses. 13In the sight of God, who gives life to everything, and of Christ Jesus, who while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you 14 to keep this command without spot or blame until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15which God will bring about in his own time – God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, 16who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see. To him be honor and might forever, Amen.

All of this exhortation is what a leader is supposed to be. Paul wants Timothy to press on to the very end – that's eschatology – for God himself is absolutely glorious – and that's doxology. Those sorts of links are fairly common: we read something about leaders and what they should be like, and then the leaders are seen, or see themselves, in the light of Christ's return and final judgment, and especially in the light of God's sheer glory, majesty, and wonder. Another passage with the same combination of themes is 2 Corinthians 4:7-18. Read it at your leisure, and you will see why these themes are linked. The ministry is not an end in itself. The ministry is committed to preparing the whole church of God for Christ's return. Moreover, ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ – elders/pastors/overseers – should not be in this business in order to garner praise for themselves, but to bring glory to God.

Finally, there is one more reflection that I should offer. It comes out of a lot of passages from the New Testament, but the reflection cannot be generated by putting your finger on a single one of them. It would take fifteen or eighteen passages to establish this reflection in some detail, but a brief summary may prove useful even though I cannot here provide all the evidence. In the New Testament, how many elders/pastors/overseers should there be in any local church? This question elicits rather complex answers, in part because some of the New Testament terminology is not exactly like ours. For example, in the New Testament, the word "church" in the singular is regularly bound up with the city. One reads of the church at Jerusalem, the church at Ephesus, the church at Rome. However, the word "churches" (in the plural) is bound up with larger geographical units: the churches in Judea, the

churches in Samaria, the churches in Asia Minor. Today we do not use that kind of distinction: we speak of the churches in Boston, for example, or of the churches in Chicago. But in the first century, not only were the cities smaller than ours, but the ecclesiastic terminology was distributed a bit differently.

The church in Jerusalem was made up of one unified "church": denominations had not yet been invented. But although for a while Christians could meet together in a large venue such as Solomon's porch, it wasn't long before this venue would not do, both because they became too numerous, and because of virulent opposition. This meant that the one "church" in Jerusalem was soon broken up into many house groups. It was the same in Ephesus. There wasn't one physical assembly, even though Christians spoke of the "church" (singular) in Ephesus. All the people of the one church in Ephesus met in different locations, in different assemblies. It was not long before Christians became so numerous that there was no one site suitable for a single meeting. Obviously, they could not rent the stadium – the same stadium where, slightly later, they were fed to the lions – so they met in various houses. As a result, what we refer to as "house churches" in the ancient world functioned in some ways a bit like our individual "churches," except that our local churches are often bigger, and sometimes much bigger, than their "house churches." But all of their "house churches" in one city constituted, as far as they were concerned, the "church" of that city. How the elders of that one "church" were distributed, it is impossible to say. Perhaps smaller house churches had one elder each; perhaps larger house churches had several elders. We simply do not know.

Out of these terminological realities have sprung two or three competing theories. In particular, the Presbyterian view of things holds that all of the elders – the presbyters – of a particular area constitute one body, the body as a whole having some kind of control over all the local churches in that area. But there is another view, one with which I am personally more comfortable. But to explain it, I need to establish a larger framework.

In the New Testament, a final authority rests, in many cases, with the congregation. In 1 Corinthians 5, for example, there is an instance of church discipline that goes to the whole congregation, however much it may be instituted by the elders. Again, in Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus insists that when things come down to the crunch, you tell the conflict *to the church*. You tell it *to the church* – for not only is there wisdom in the whole church, but there is a final sanction in the whole church.

In fact, in the New Testament, there is a running tension between the authority that rests with the church and the authority bound up with the elders/pastors/overseers. There's a running tension because, quite frankly, either side can go bad. Thus, in 2 Corinthians 10-13, there are leaders in the church who Paul says should be kicked out by the church. And if the church does not effect this discipline, then when he gets there he, as an apostle, will take action and remove them. On the other hand there are passages like Hebrews 13 where the emphasis is on obeying the leaders. After all, the church as a whole can go bad, or simply be in need of instruction and discipline more generally. The leaders are supposed to take primary responsibility. But, in fact, sometimes they have to be disciplined too, so there is a running tension in this pattern in the New Testament.

Assuming the importance of this running tension between the authority of elders and the authority of the church, we remind ourselves of the fact that "churches" today vary in size from the little "house church," which may have only one elder/pastor/overseer, to the sort of big Jerusalem-sized church, which might have thousands of people in it and many elders. As far as I can see, there is no absolute biblical rule requiring that a certain number of elders is necessary for larger churches, or that a percentage of the congregation must be elders. Of course, one might reasonably argue that there is safety in numbers; even more reasonably, one might argue that one should not appoint as elders those who are unqualified. Probably it is true to say that in the New Testament there is a bias towards a plurality of elders in the church, but instantly one recalls that the New Testament local "church" might have numerous "house churches" or assemblies comprising it. A large "church" today, with many elders/pastors/overseers, may easily be comprised of more Christians than were found in entire cities in the ancient world. It goes beyond the clear teaching of Scripture to argue that such a church's form of government is inappropriate unless its elders/pastors/overseers are linked with those of other churches. In any case, what is clear is that elders/pastors/overseers are charged with general oversight, direction, and teaching of the Word of God in the local assembly, but that the local assembly is nonetheless collectively responsible for the elders.

Much more might be said, but these observations on what the Bible says on the topic may serve as a beginning point for further reflection and discussion.

Q&A

Q: If a prerequisite for being a pastor is to be able to teach, what motivates so many seminaries to give out degrees to people who can't? I mean, we've all sat in churches and you think, man, where did this guy come from? Who gave him that diploma? Is it that they're afraid? Is it money? The school doesn't want to lose money or the dean is afraid he'll lose his job?

DC: I'm sure all of those things apply on occasion. On the other hand, I think that one must also say that at least in the free church / Baptist churches tradition, you don't proceed from seminary graduation to ordination. That is, a seminary education is a step along the line, but then there is inevitably a period of trial, training, apprenticeship in the local church – it's called various things – before ordination. But the ordination is done by the church. Most of the people to whom you are referring were finally ordained by a church. In other words, there is shared responsibility for having pushed them quite that far, for there is nothing that obliges a church to ordain someone just because he graduated from a seminary. Moreover, seminaries train people other than pastors. Some people will be trained for other roles in Christian ministry (e.g. editing, writing, lecturing, counseling, and so forth). But I do agree with you that there needs to be more emphasis in many seminaries on how to teach the Word of God well.

Q: Where in the New Testament is the idea as we currently see it today of the senior pastor or lead pastor?

DC: If by "senior pastor" you mean a separate category, i.e. someone rather different from "pastor," then obviously there is no New Testament warrant for the office. But where you have a group of elders, a group of pastors, a group of overseers, then inevitably, in the very nature of the case, some are going to be more senior than others, whether because they have been in the task longer, or because they are more experienced or they know more, or because they are better teachers of the Word of God. So inevitably a functional discrimination is made. That is also true within the pages of the New Testament. For example, Timothy is told to find others who will be able to learn the foundational Christian things and pass them on to others. That means there should be some kind of mentoring going on within the local church. Functionally, then, you have a senior elder and a trainee elder. So there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such functional distinctions. Those who try to insist on a purely democratic structure to every elders' board, as if everyone on that board has exactly the same authority, not only overlook the degrees of competence and maturity attested by the New Testament, but they forget that at the end of the day the authority is not in the individual but in the Word. Inevitably, this fact suggests that the person who knows the Scriptures best and who teaches them best is likely to end up with an enhanced functional authority, whether formalized or not. If formalized, then he is being recognized by the church (whether or not the title is used) as the "senior pastor." This doesn't mean he knows everything, or that on every topic he is invariably the best teacher, but by and large, in terms of his experience, his example, his knowledge of Scripture and his ability to teach the Word of God, that person will become, *de facto*, the senior pastor, even if he does not have that title.

Q: How did the church move from the relative simplicity of the New Testament division between "deacons" and "elders/pastors/overseers" to the three-fold office that dominates in many denominations today (namely, bishops [or overseers], pastors, deacons)?

DC: The changes came about for many reasons. The first step occurred early in the second century. The church was expanding so fast Christians were happy to embrace a lot of roving teachers who were able to communicate the Christian faith to people in one locale, then move on to another locale, and so forth. Moreover, this was culturally acceptable because there were a lot of roving "philosophers" in those days who earned their money by such itinerant lecturing. But eventually some of these roving preachers proved to be heretical or near-heretical. Alternatively, and equally sadly, some who were formally orthodox became grasping or greedy. Eventually rules were imposed on the churches about what should be done in this regard.

There is a very famous document dated from the beginning of the second century, some years after the last of the New Testament documents was written, called the *Didache*, which gives a handful of rules about what to do. If a traveling teacher comes by and he wants to stay for more than three days, don't trust him. If he asks for money, don't trust him. You give him a bed and food, but if he asks for money he is probably a charlatan. And above all, if he does not adhere to the glorious gospel of our blessed Jesus, then do not trust him, even if he formally adheres to the other stipulations.

The fact that such rules existed hints at the scope of the problem. So eventually, what happened was almost predictable. I myself have been to parts of the world where the church is expanding very quickly, and very large numbers of immature believers desperately need serious teaching. Sometimes in one small geographical area you find, say, ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty churches, most of which are painfully ill-taught. But among this collection of churches, there might be two or three that are led by pastors who really are better informed, better trained, more discerning, and more widely read, than the common run of pastors. Pretty soon they are consulted by the others. This group of two or three more mature pastors soon exercises remarkable (even if informal) influence over pastors and churches that are less gifted. Who else will protect these small and immature churches from dangerous teachers –

not least if those dangerous teachers come like wolves in sheep's clothing? One can imagine the leaders of smaller, weaker churches saying to an itinerant, "You know, I don't know if I should take you on or not. Go see Pastor Jim over there, have a chat with him, and if he says you're okay, you're okay." So the itinerants go and get checked out by Pastor Jim. Well, de facto, Pastor Jim is now exercising a kind of veto ministry over everybody else in that area. He is becoming a bishop in the second-century sense.

Thus the bishop was soon seen as the one who defined doctrine and in some sense protected the churches in his region. Not too surprisingly, already by about A.D. 115 to 120, Ignatius goes so far as to say that where the bishop is, there is the church. You cannot imagine anyone saying that sort of thing in any New Testament document. But however good the motives that called forth these developments, the plain historical reality is that now the church was lumbered with the beginnings of a fledging power structure that would attract more and more authority to itself. It is not difficult to understand the further developments that took place across the centuries.

Q: With the clear teaching from 1 Timothy 3 about who should be elders, how did things get so topsy-turvy where sometimes the pastor and his wife assume the headship of the church?

DC: That question could be answered comprehensively only by looking at a great many passages outside the purview of this initial survey. In other words, the answer to your question turns on the adjacent topic of the Bible's teaching regarding the roles of men and women in the church and in the home. Even after we make as many allowances as possible for different interpretations of the one set of texts, it is very difficult to avoid an embarrassing conclusion: very often current practices and interpretations of the Bible depend rather more on faddish cultural stances quietly but effectively domesticating the Scriptures, than on close and reverent study of the Scriptures themselves. Still, these are questions slightly adjacent to today's topic, so I shall leave them to one side.

For more extensive treatment of some of the relevant passages of the Pastoral Epistles, delivered in oral form, visit christwaymedia.com.