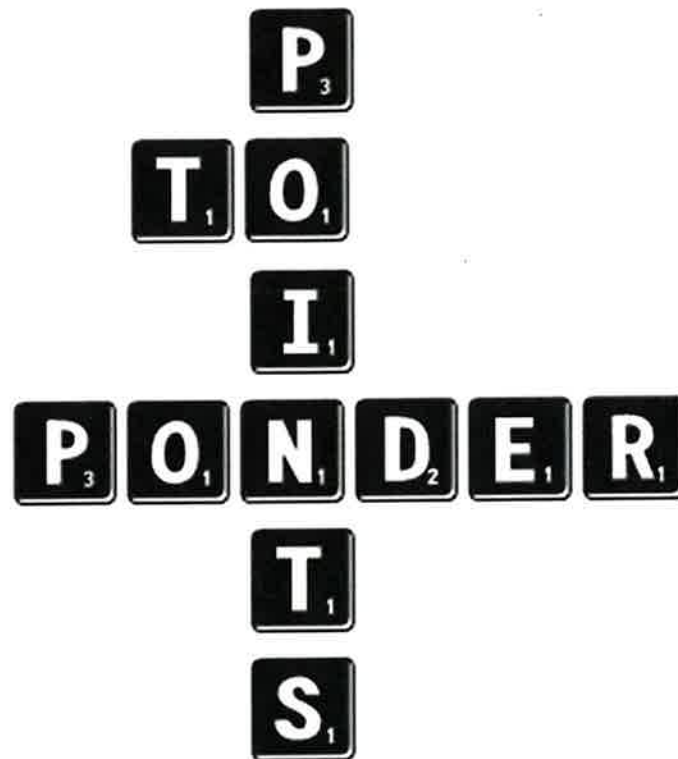




2026 Weekly Devotions

Week of: August 3rd - 9th

Sermon: August 2nd



SMYRNA BAPTIST CHURCH
building community ◊ equipping believers ◊ serving Jesus

August 3

Romans 1:16; Ephesians 5:26

The phrase that begins our text from Sunday's message is quite telling. Titus 1:5 starts with this simple declaration, "This is why I left you in Crete." I hope to begin our journey through our points to ponder for this week by focusing on God's will that we seriously consider how to execute His plans. It is one thing to be given the blueprint for success and an entirely different thing to get to work on achieving success. Today, we will begin to ponder how God proposed that we fulfill all that Paul spoke of in the previous 4 verses of Titus 1.

I trust that you recall Pastor Aaron's message this past Sunday on Titus 1:1-4. He reminded us that it was God's plan to call Paul to be a preacher of His Word. It was through Paul's teaching and preaching that God's people would grow in their faith and knowledge of the Truth which would lead them to holiness pursuant to eternal life. Please don't fail to see the centrality of the preaching of God's Word in growing His people and His church. Think about how counterculture this is in our world today.

So many churches are looking for gimmicks and attractional events to draw crowds while all along it is preaching that is intended to be the means by which God grows and strengthens His church. The "problem" with God's plan is that it boils down to simple and long obedience in the same direction over time. It is not flashy and can't really be packaged so it doesn't "sell" in our society today. People want a quick fix, a method that doesn't require getting their hands dirty in the lives of messy people, or dedication that is going to require months and even years of steady faithfulness to God's Word.

Paul stated in Romans 1:16 that it was (and still is by the way) the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation for all who will believe. He wrote just before saying that "For I am not ashamed of the gospel" (Rom. 1:16a). Folks, God's plan is to reach people with the clear preaching and teaching of His Word. Jesus said in John 17:17 these clear words, "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth." You see brothers and sisters, the way to help people to grow in holiness which is a result of growing in faith and knowledge, is to give them God's Word.

I am reminded of what Paul said to the Ephesian believers recorded for us in Ephesians 5. There it is written to husbands regarding loving their wives these words, "Husbands, love your wives...that you might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word..." (Eph. 5:26). Everywhere you turn in the Scriptures you will find that the application of God's Word to a person's life is His means of growing them into the likeness of Christ. In other words, His plan is that people sit under good, Bible saturated preaching so that they will advance in faith, knowledge, and holiness. There are no tricks or short cuts to sanctification.

August 4

Titus 1:5

I remember when I stepped into my first pastorate over thirty-four years ago. I was only twenty-four years old and was extremely “green” as I had never pastored before. A memory stands out from the first few days of my ministry there. I was told that my job would be to preach and that “they” would “run” the church. Even then, as a young and inexperienced preacher, I knew that didn’t sound right. I had not yet been to seminary but had learned a lot from my mentor Roland Powell. Interesting note, when I arrived at Smyrna, I was actually told the same thing. Two pastorates and two distinct congregations, and yet the admonition was the same.

The baggage that is attached to the above-mentioned statement is heavy, burdensome, and flows from years of mistrust, misunderstanding, poor leadership, pastoral abuse, scriptural ignorance, an unregenerate church membership, and a plethora of other factors. The bottom line is that it reveals a cancer that has plagued many-a-church. I hope to speak to that gently but boldly too as we attempt to connect some dots as to why churches often end up the way they do.

Paul’s admonition to Titus was to “put what remained into order.” This implies that a particular order or approach to ministry does indeed exist. This means that on the other side of the coin, a wrong way exists too. Remember that the purpose of the “order” that is to be established is for the purpose of accomplishing the assignment mentioned in verses 1-4 which was to grow God’s children in faith, knowledge, and holiness by preaching His word. This was to be done by appointing elders in every town as Paul had directed him to do. Pastor Aaron, Lord willing, will address the qualifications necessary for those chosen as elders in the church.

Church family, leading the people of God is not to be left to anybody who wants to do it. It is not an easy task and the wrong people in positions of leadership can make or break a congregation. It saddens me sometimes when I realize there are those who think there is nothing to leading a church and that any warm body can fill the spot. I wish more people would recognize there are real, tracible reasons as to why some churches flourish and some flounder.

One of the things I did when I arrived at Smyrna was to simply preach the Word of God and do my best to love God’s people for a year without attempting to change anything or address any “problems.” I learned a long time ago that folks had to know you cared before they would be willing to follow you anywhere. Once I earned some trust, I then began to slowly speak to and address places in the church where I sensed changes needed to be made and different people needed to be in particular positions. I hope that you will see that it is called, “putting what remained in order” just like it was for Titus when God placed him in Crete. More on this tomorrow.

August 5

Acts 20:17

One of the realities that I witnessed as a young man growing up in the church and within the world of church life, was that when a pastor resigned, retired, or was terminated from a church the congregation usually suffered greatly. Typically, those who “liked” the pastor and his family would leave and the number of those in attendance would drop off terribly. The routine was for the church to put together a pastor search committee who would be tasked with finding the next guy. This committee would be made up of segments representing the powers that be in the church, resumes would come in, trial sermons would be preached, and ultimately the next pastor would be hired.

This process would normally take 6 months to two years and during that time, numbers would decrease and any momentum from the last guy would be lost. The new man would come in, and the church would simply start all over. I have mentioned this before and will once more to make my point: the average tenure of pastors here at Smyrna throughout the history of this church has been three years. Think about it, for more than one hundred years, a pastor and his family would come and go, on average, every three years.

Now, consider the churches where a pastor stayed for some twenty years but served as a single pastor. By single I mean a setting in which there were no other pastors on a staff. I believe what you typically find in those settings is that when a beloved pastor with that much tenure leaves, if he had been a solo pastor who shouldered the leadership of the church, you end up with a tremendous decline in church attendance and ministries too. He may have been a gifted preacher, a good pastor, or the rare man that was both. People loved him and as it turned out, much of the “success” of the church was built upon his abilities, charisma, and winsome personality. When he leaves, it leaves such a void that it becomes hard to fill.

The other approach or “order” to church leadership is a plurality of pastors or elders in the same congregation. If you want to know what that looks like, look no further than our own church. Pastor Aaron and I have functioned that way for more than a decade now and I think we would all agree that it works well and serves the church in an effective manner. I believe that if one of us were to leave, the church would be set up to remain healthy.

Paul told Titus to appoint elders in every town. We will dig deeper into this later in the week but there is good reason to believe that he meant for Titus to assign multiple elders or pastors in each town or congregation. It certainly sounds like there was a plurality of elders at the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). We will consider the benefits of the plurality of elders later. Also, as we wrap up today, know that the term for elder is interchangeable with that of pastor and can include both paid and unpaid men.

August 6

1 Peter 5:1-5

Here is a list of the duties that fall to elders in a church. This is certainly not exhaustive but provides a good idea of the enormous responsibility that they shoulder, which is one of the many good reasons for a plurality of elders rather than a church in which one man does it all. This is a good place to interject that when I speak of a group of elders leading a church, I am talking about a group of men who make leadership decisions together who, as I said yesterday, are not all necessarily paid staff.

As a group of men jointly pastor the church, they are also tasked with teaching the word, protecting the church from false teachers and abhorrent doctrine, exhorting and admonishing believers, praying with the sick, and simply shepherding the flock as necessary. Shared pastoral leadership is to be executed by a team of scripturally qualified, Spirit-placed elders. Scripture must be our final authority as to how our church is led and how it functions.

Note who Peter is speaking to in 1 Peter 5:1-5. He is addressing the elders and refers to himself as a fellow elder called to shepherd the flock and to exercise oversight in the church. Here are a few other passages that refer to the elders as leaders and shepherds in the church: James 5:14, 1 Tim. 5:17-22, and Acts 15. Let me interject here while it is on my mind. A group of men referred to and filling the office of the elder is not the same thing as a deacon body. Deacons are called to serve the needs of the congregation (Acts 6) and are not required to be able to preach and teach. They are to be men of wisdom and having evidence of the Spirit in their lives, but the office of the deacon and that of the elders are distinctly different.

When I think of the advantages of shared pastoral leadership, I can't imagine why anyone would want to do it any other way. First, the reality of human fallenness, sin, self-deceit, pride, blind spots, and weaknesses make the need for multiple leaders obvious. Just like a husband and wife provide strengths to the other to make the marriage stronger, so a group of men working humbly together will strengthen the team and the effectiveness of the ministry and safeguard it from one man's shortcomings. As a partner with pastor Aaron, we have sharpened, protected, and strengthened one another through so many situations.

I have pastored both in a single pastor led church and as part of a pastoral team and I can tell you from firsthand experience that the latter is far better in countless ways. We have operated from positions of equality with functional diversity. By that I mean we view each other as equals who have strengths and weaknesses and therefore recognize that there are times when it is best for one of us to lead rather than the other. By the way, did you ever notice that none of the apostles were called senior or lead apostle? They were equal and different all at the same time.

August 7

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Luke 10:1

Many who sit in our congregation today do so having come from various congregations in which they felt there was clear pastoral abuse of authority. Unfortunately, this plagues many churches in the world today. Shared pastoral leadership, otherwise known as a plurality of elders, provides accountability that should serve to curb such abuse. When there are no clear checks and balances in place, it is much easier for a person to flex their power by working to gain support for their preferences and who turn every decision into a battle ground and a hill on which to die. This is unnecessary and easily avoidable.

Sometimes, me included, church leaders can become lazy, distracted, and forgetful as they allow the wrong things to overtake their primary responsibilities. Partners in ministry serve to encourage, motivate, and even provide someone to whom the other person must be answerable. A good coach knows that athletes who train together push each other to greater achievements and sacrifices. I know when I have run in races, I do much better when I am running with someone who inspires me to keep going and to go a little harder. This may be one of the reasons why Jesus sent His disciples out two by two (Luke 10:1).

Another reason why shared pastoral leadership makes so much sense is because pastoring is hard work. Shepherding people is so tiring and presents endless challenges. When this load is shared among several qualified shepherds, it becomes so much more doable and enjoyable. I think about the wisdom of Solomon expressed in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 where it says, "Two are better than one...For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up – a threefold cord is not quickly broken." In so many ways, elders can serve as pastors to one another which becomes a great blessing to one in ministry.

I mentioned this earlier but shared leadership can provide an elder with critically needed balance against his faults and weaknesses or deficiencies. We all have blind spots and imperfections that can be overcome and corrected with a good pastoral partner in ministry. I think we would all agree that we all need people in our lives to help us see our own blind spots and errors. Think about some of the Proverbs from Scripture. Proverbs 15:22 says, "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed." Or Proverbs 11:14 which says, "In an abundance of counselors there is safety." Friends, it just makes sense that shared pastoral leadership or a plurality of elders is the wisest way to order a church for accomplishing God's plan for the church. Not only that, but it appears to us to be the most biblically faithful way to order the church as well.

August 8

Ephesians 4:11-16

I have written a good deal this week about the biblical basis for a plurality of elders, or what may be more easily understood as shared pastoral leadership. Today, I want to return to what it means to put the church in “order.” Our passage is familiar to many of us, yet it is often overlooked when church members consider how the church should be organized and what expectations should be placed on the pastor(s). As Paul helped organize the church in Ephesus, he gave these instructions about a vital role pastors/elders are to play in the life of the church.

In this letter to the Ephesians, he is teaching them to view their leadership as gifts from God with specific purpose. In Ephesians 4:11-12 it says, “And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...”. This means that the office of the pastor/elder is intended to grow believers in faith, knowledge, and holiness which is exactly what Paul wrote to Titus in the beginning of our focal book of the Bible through November. It should be easy to realize why it is imperative that we choose men who are spiritually and biblically qualified in accordance with Titus 1:6-9 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. This is an enormously important part of the job of the pastors.

You see friend, when Paul told Titus that he left him in Crete for the purpose of putting the church in order, this is what he was talking about. From the outset, God designed the church in a particular way. Godly, called, spiritually mature and wise men were to be sought out and put in these places of leadership. The job of the congregants was to listen to their teaching by humbly placing themselves in a position to receive the teaching both in word and deed, and to serve the body of Christ (the church) as they received from the leadership godly training and instruction. These pastor/elders were to guard the doctrine of the church and in so doing protect the flock to which they had been given oversight.

When the church functions in this manner dear ones, you can expect that church members will be prepared and developed for the work of ministry and that together the congregation will “grow in their unity of faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to mature adulthood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:12-13). Church family, this all begins with setting the church in order from the start. There are right ways and wrong ways to serve God as the church. Our goal is to understand His plan and to execute it in accordance with His Word. It begins with godly and qualified men to lead the church by the teaching and preaching of His Word and to disciple His people to grow in faith, knowledge, and holiness. Anything that does not aid in this endeavor should not be the priority of the church.

August 9

2 Chronicles 17:9

I doubt that you have often seen this passage from the book of 2 Chronicles as devotional material. As I have been reading the Bible through this year, I came across this verse over the past week. It says, "And they taught in Judah, having the Book of the Law of the Lord with them. They went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people" (2 Chron. 17:9). This single verse is written within the context of King Jehoshaphat's reign over Judah around 850 B.C. Judah was the southern kingdom of Israel after it had divided at the end of Solomon's reign as king over all of Israel.

The history of the northern kingdom was atrocious, which led to the captivity of the northern kingdom at the hand of the Assyrians in 722 B.C. The southern kingdom of Judah was only slightly better and lasted until 586 B.C. before being taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Most of the kings were ungodly men who most often did not follow the ways of God. Every once and a while, a good king would rise up and lead the people well. One such king was Jehoshaphat. It is written of him these words, "The Lord was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father David" and also "His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord" (2 Chron. 17:3,6). Notice now what He did in obedience to God.

He sent his trained officials and the Levites who were the priests to all the cities of Judah. The question that we should ask is what he sent them to do. The short answer is to teach them the ways and expectations of God recorded in the Book of the Law; That was the "Bible" to date. Ponder this point today church family – of the things the king could have taken time to do, this is what he chose. He recognized the value of the Word and the impact it would have on the people whom he was called to lead. Should we not take a page from this example and realize the preeminent place in the life of the church that the teaching and preaching of God's Word is supposed to have in the church and among God's people?

We have often referred to 2 Timothy 3:16-17 and I will again. It says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." Friend, we must not fail to see the importance, the value, and the necessity of teaching and preaching the Bible. This is what we are called to do, and it must remain at the forefront of all we do as a church family. When churches abandon the Bible, they have in essence lost the very means by which they will ever grow into a healthy and mature congregation.

There are those out there who see Pastor Aaron and I as prideful in our attitude towards Smyrna. We *are* proud of what God is doing here and genuinely believe that our God is pleased for the most part. Why is that arrogant? If a carpenter builds a structure to spec and is able to do the job with precision and expertise, should he not walk away with a sense of accomplishment and confidence that this structure is strong and done well? We are so grateful to what God is doing here at Smyrna and do feel confident that we are ordering things well. I think the old adage, "The proof is in the pudding" applies.