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INCREASING THE UNDERSTANDING OF LAKE HILLS
BAPTIST CHURCH IN SCHERERVILLE, INDIANA
OF SHARED PASTORAL OVERSIGHT

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INCREASING THE UNDERSTANDING OF LAKE HILLS
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For the glory of God

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B&H	Broadman and Holman
<i>BFBC</i>	<i>Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches</i>
IVP	InterVarsity Press
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NTP</i>	<i>New Testament Polity</i>

PREFACE

As I sit beside my wife, I'm reflecting on the support she has offered me throughout my graduate and post-graduate education. Seminary has been a soundtrack in the background of our lives for years. While furthering my education has been a blessing, even Mozart gets old if you listen long enough. But not once has Lynsey asked to hit the "stop" button. She remains my favorite.

My advisor, Dr. Hunter, has been kind, patient, encouraging, and generous in his remarks and suggestions. May the Lord give him great fruitfulness in ministry. May he find great joy in his children and grandchildren during this season of his life.

The people of Central Oaks Community Church in Royal Oak, MI are to be commended. They were abundantly patient with me for 10 years as I "cut my teeth" in ministry. They were also supportive of my initial pursuit of this degree. May the Lord redeem any and all mistakes I made in serving them.

Lastly, I am thankful for the people of Lake Hills Baptist Church in Schererville, Indiana. They make watching over their souls often joyful and rarely a groan. They have received me and my family in such a way that makes them easy to love. May King Jesus honor them tenfold for the honor they show to me and may my efforts through this project result in their joy.

Jacob Riggs

Schererville, Indiana

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If possible, local churches should be led by a group of pastors. These pastors are also called “elders” or “overseers.” This is a biblical practice and has many practical benefits. But, many churches do not have a biblical understanding of this practice.

Multiple variations of leadership in local churches exist. Some employ a Senior/Lead Pastor + Board of Deacons who essentially provide oversight to the Senior Pastor.¹ In this model, some deacons serve in practical ways and some do not, depending on the church. Other churches have elders, technically speaking, but the elders don’t actively share in shepherding the congregation alongside the Lead Pastor. In this model, differentiation is made between the elders and *The* Pastor. But in practice, it is the same as a Senior Pastor + Deacon Board model. The only change is nomenclature.

Instead, what is seen in the New Testament is a group of qualified men who jointly shepherd one local church by utilizing each of their unique spiritual gifts. These men may be called “pastors,” “elders,” or “overseers.” Each title has biblical precedent, but the practice is shared oversight and shepherding.

Churches will benefit from this practice in numerous ways. First, it models the kind of community Christ desires for the entire congregation. The pastors of a church should be a microcosm of the “one another” passages each local church should strive towards. Second, it shows a dependence on the sufficiency of Scripture, which glorifies God and expresses faith. Lastly, it helps protect the church from pastoral abuse.

It is not just churches that will benefit from this model, but pastors. Multiple

¹ In this project, the terms “Senior Pastor” and “Lead Pastor” will be used interchangeably.

sources show that pastors are struggling.²³ One of the most common areas of struggle is the loneliness pastors experience. It is understandable. Most pastors have few people around them who can relate.

These things, in addition to the reality that the livelihood of many pastors is held in the hands of the people they pastor, can often lead godly men into isolation to deal with any struggles and cry out to King Jesus in the dark.

But a church that practices biblical pastoral community has pastors who have pastors. This community is iron to sharpen iron. In this situation, a lonely pastor would have another voice that knows and loves him to remind him of the promises of God when they do not feel true. It is difficult to overstate the benefit this brings to a pastor.

In this project, I seek to increase the understanding of Lake Hills Baptist Church of the biblical practice of plural pastoral oversight. May King Jesus help me and be glorified throughout this endeavor and may the saints of Lake Hills and any onlookers grow in the joy of godliness.

Context

Lake Hills Baptist Church (LHBC, Lake Hills) is an evangelical church in Schererville, IN that has many signs of health. She has loose affiliation with the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (GARBC). As is the case with any church, she has strengths and weaknesses. The purpose of this section is to identify those strengths and weaknesses and pinpoint a prominent need that warrants the actions of a ministry project.

² Barna, "Excerpt: A Rapid Decline in Pastoral Security," Barna Group, last modified March 15, 2023, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastoral-security-confidence/>.

³ Aaron Earls, "U.S. Pastors Identify Their Greatest Needs," Research.lifeway.com, last modified January 11, 2022, <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/01/11/u-s-pastors-identify-their-greatest-needs/>.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Lake Hills has a heart for hurting people. This quality is seen in various ministries she has undertaken: (1) “Grief Share” is a program of help to those who have experienced the loss of a loved one; (2) “Courtside” equips people to engage, pray with, and perhaps evangelize those who are entering our local county courthouse; (3) “Mending the Soul” is for those who have experienced any kind of abuse. More anecdotal evidence toward this heart is the cards people send in the mail to those who are ill, the meals provided for new mothers, and the welcoming of those who have experienced church hurt.

The next strength are the ministries the church employs for children and students. The director of children’s ministry was hand-picked by a retired director, who served the Lord faithfully and established a solid foundation for fruitful ministry. The new director has increased this ministry. The Awana ministry continues to grow, with nearly 100 children actively participating. Children’s classes on Sunday mornings as well as a “Summer Blast” program (like VBS but extended throughout the whole summer) are thriving. There are quality processes for the protection of children and a good sense of camaraderie for the Lord.

The student ministry is also growing. The Youth Pastor (YP) has been serving for twenty-three years faithfully. His ministry has seen several students graduate and move into full-time ministry. Wednesday night “Alive,” the brand name for the student ministry, sees sixty plus students regularly attend, with several adult volunteers investing in the lives of students.

Northwest Indiana is growing due to the exodus of people from the nearby Chicago area. Many people are moving to “The Region” (as Northwest Indiana is affectionally called) to escape liberal policies and high taxes. This migration has impacted the growth of local churches, and LHBC is no exception, by God’s grace.

After serving for nine months at the time of this writing, God has provided for a \$100,000 roof project and paid off \$300,000 of debt. The church is now completely debt

free and spending under the amount of giving.

Lake Hills started in 1960 with a commitment to give twenty-five percent of all giving to missions. Today that number is down, but is still over twenty percent. They have a heart for missions and love missionaries. My predecessor, a former missionary himself, led the church to strengthen their ties with missionaries and served as a mentor for several missionaries.

Over thirty people have taken steps to join the church in the past nine months, with more going through the process. It is an exciting time to be part of what God is doing here. There are other strengths, but these are the highlights.

Now that the strengths have been noted, the weaknesses of the church will now be given an overview. The most obvious weakness is church polity. By in large, the church does not have a biblical understanding of the role of deacon or a plurality of elders. LHBC has a Lead Pastor (LP), a Youth Pastor (YP), and a board of Deacons. In the somewhat recent past, she also employed a Worship Pastor. The deacons are godly men who are serving in some capacity. But they have an unbiblical level of authority over the church. They support the LP and have great respect for his position, but at the same time exercise some authority over him.

Conversely, there is an undercurrent of unhealthy authority entrusted to the LP. In the first few months of my service of the church, I heard the recurring phrase of, “You are the pastor.” Sometimes it was said, “You are the boss.” One even said, “This is *your* church.” Although this has improved since my public address of this concern, the ethos remains tilted in that direction.⁴

One specific way this unbalanced power is seen is in the relationship between the

⁴ It is helpful for the reader to know that, although LHBC does not consider herself to be an Independent Fundamental Baptist Church (IFB), there are semblances of that movement in her DNA. The mecca of the well-known Independent Fundamental Baptist movement sits thirteen miles north of the property Lake Hills stewards—First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana. In a survey conducted of Lake Hills in 2023, twelve percent of the 209 responders said the denominational affiliation for the majority of their life has been the IFB, while fifty-five percent said the generic “Baptist.”

LP and other pastors at LHBC. The LP and YP are not on the same level of authority. Instead, the YP is seen as being part of the LP's staff. The YP has no vote in deacons' meetings, or any say in the compensation of other staff, while the LP sets the salaries for all staff outside of himself and the YP. Additionally, the LP (or the Deacon Chairman) must sign off on all purchases on behalf of the church.

The last weakness is related to the great commission of Christ. He has called His disciples to make other disciples—to help people follow Jesus (Matt 28:16–20). This calling of the Lord is the primary purpose of our existence on earth until the Parousia. However, the saints at Lake Hills are not fully engaged on this mission in the area evangelism.

For context, thousands of new homes are being built within a five-minute drive of LHBC. For those who know the Lord, they will need a new church. For those that do not know the Lord, they need to be evangelized. Yet despite this obvious reality, the church does not show consistent concern to address this need and opportunity.

I suspect that LHBC has an additional aversion from evangelism than most churches. The reason is the experience many at Lake Hills have had with aggressive evangelism tactics of the Independent Fundamental Baptist churches in the area.

There are other challenges and issues in LHBC. But the ones mentioned above are primary in my assessment.

Plan

The purpose of this project is to increase the understanding of LHBC of the biblical teaching of shared pastoral oversight (SPO). The following plan is intended to accomplish this goal. First, I will assess their current understanding of what Scripture teaches regarding plural eldership in a local church.

Second, Lake Hills needs to understand (1) that the New Testament teaches that every local church should be led by a plurality of elders/pastors, (2) that the biblical role

of deacons is not to oversee a church, but to serve it, and (3) the importance of the elders/pastors/overseers sharing equal authority but fulfilling various roles in a church.

In addition to the biblical defense of these topics, it will be helpful to communicate the practical needs of a church having a plurality of pastors. I believe LHBC will benefit from (what is currently called) her LP having biblical community and accountability. These changes will provide encouragement and sustainability to the LP but also help guard LHBC from pastoral authoritarianism or abuse.

After teaching this, the project will assess the effectiveness of the teaching that was implemented. This assessment will help determine the level of success accomplished by the project.

Rationale

Lake Hills Baptist Church would greatly benefit from growing in her understanding of the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight. There are several reasons for this. First, it will help prepare the church to identify and implement elders/pastors outside of paid staff. There are already some men that somewhat function as pastors/elders. The congregation has an opportunity to affirm what the Holy Spirit is doing in them.

Another benefit of this project is to help build a foundation for the church to trust in the sufficiency of Scripture. LHBC loves God's Word and has not strayed into heterodoxy. But like many churches, LHBC has embraced pragmatism. This is seen in two different "worship experiences" based on the desires of various people and in allowing non-members to serve in various leadership capacities. What better way to show the sufficiency of Scripture than teaching and modeling what Scripture says about how LHBC should be governed?

The final reason to pursue this project is for the future health of the pastors at LHBC. Anticipating successful execution of this project, the church would then be

primed to identify and affirm more pastors. These pastors would then share in the oversight and shepherding of the growing number of sheep at Lake Hills. What a blessing that would be to her current pastors.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to increase the understanding of Lake Hills Baptist Church in Schererville, Indiana of shared pastoral oversight.

Goals

The following goals are intended to increase the understanding of Lake Hills Baptist Church of shared pastoral oversight. Each goal is intended to build upon the other to accomplish this ultimate goal.

1. The first goal will be to assess the church's understanding of the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight.
2. The second goal will be to develop a curriculum that teaches the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight.
3. The third goal will be to teach Lake Hills Baptist Church by implementing the curriculum in a large group setting.

A specific research methodology has been created that will measure the successful completion of these three goals.⁵ This methodology is described in the following section.

Research Methodology

The first goal will be to assess the church's understanding of the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight. A test of key terms and concepts will be developed to aid in this assessment. Participants in the research will take the test prior to implementation of the curriculum developed in goal 2.

⁵ All of the research instruments used in this project will be performed in compliance with and approved by The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary Research Ethics Committee prior to use in the ministry project.

The second goal will be to develop a curriculum that teaches the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight. The curriculum will be graded by a panel of pastors and theologians who have a biblical understanding of plurality of elders. It will be considered successful when the curriculum is graded at above ninety-five percent. If it does not meet the ninety-five percent grade, it will be re-tooled and re-graded until it meets the ninety-five percent standard.

The third goal will be to increase the understanding of LHBC on the biblical benefit of shared pastoral ministry by implementing the curriculum in a large group setting. This goal will be measured by having participants retake the test from goal 1 and comparing the results. It will be considered a success if a t-test for dependent samples demonstrates a positive, statistically significant difference between pre- and post-teaching survey scores.

Definitions and Limitations/Delimitations

The following definitions of key terms will be used in the ministry project:

Senior/Lead Pastor (LP). “The clergy member in overall charge of the ministries of a church.”⁶

Shared pastoral oversight (SPO). The function of multiple pastors/elders/overseers who utilize their individual time and giftings to collectively shepherd one local congregation.

Youth Pastor (YP). A pastor in a local church that is primarily tasked with overseeing students in grades 7–12, or ages 12–18.

Two limitations will apply to this project. First, the faithfulness of attendees of the class to attend every teaching session. To mitigate this limitation, a summary handout of each week’s teaching will be made available for those who miss various weeks.

⁶ Bart Lee Denny, “A Phenomenological Study of Pastoral Leadership Development Behaviors in the Revitalization of Small Evangelical Churches,” accessed April 30, 2024, <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5061&context=doctoral>.

Second, the honesty of the panel of pastors and theologians. Whether or not the panel chosen to grade the curriculum is honest about their grading cannot be controlled. To mitigate this limitation, an honor code will be given to those grading the curriculum.

Two delimitations will apply to this project. The first is the age of participants. Considering that participants need to have a foundation of the Bible and biblical terms, and younger members or attendees of LHBC have not had that opportunity, the age limit of people from LHBC participating in this study is set at sixteen years. The second is the frequency of gathering on Sunday mornings by attendees. Those who are participating in this study will be limited to those who regularly attend LHBC on Sunday mornings at least three times each month.

Conclusion

The rest of this project will (chapter 2) consider the biblical/theological basis for shared pastoral oversight in a local church, (chapter 3) note the theoretical/sociological support for shared pastoral oversight in a local church, (chapter 4) detail and describe the project, and (chapter 5) evaluate the project.

CHAPTER 2
BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE
PROJECT

This chapter will show the biblical basis for shared pastoral oversight with three building blocks. The first is the legitimacy of the terms “pastor,” “elder,” and “overseer” as referring to one and the same office in a local church. The second is the example of churches in the NT having multiple elders/overseers/pastors. The third consideration is the instructions in 1 Peter 5:1–2 and Acts 20:28 for multiple elders to collectively shepherd one church. These building blocks show that shared pastoral oversight in one church was likely an expected practice for New Testament churches.

**Titus 1:5–9 and 1 Peter 5:1–2 Show That “Pastor,”
“Elder,” and “Overseer” are Three Legitimate
Names for One Office in a Local Church**

The first, and most foundational support for shared pastoral oversight is the biblical use of various titles referring to one office in a local church. Those titles are *pastor* (ποιμάνατε), *elder* (πρεσβυτέρους), and *overseer* (ἐπίσκοπον), and they are given credence to this claim in Titus 1:5–9 and 1 Peter 5:1–2, among others.⁷ This section seeks to prove this claim.

Titles Found in Titus 1:5–9

Titus 1:5–9 contains two titles: “elder” and “overseer.” The section that follows will show how these terms can be used interchangeably to refer to the same office in a local church. Brief observations begin the section, with support from various authors throughout history to follow.

The small letter of Titus was written, in part, to put things in order in the churches on the island of Crete (1:5). Not surprisingly, Paul introduced the topic of elders

⁷ Other relevant passages are Acts 20:28, Eph 4:11, 1 Tim 3:1–7, among others.

early in his instruction regarding church leadership. He claims Titus was left in Crete to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Then he wrote a list of qualifications for elders. But in the middle of those qualifications, Paul switches terms from “elder” to “overseer” (1:7), indicating that the man serving as an elder can also be referred to as an overseer.

Many commentators have made this observation throughout history. Jerome, church father from the 3rd and 4th century, said this passage “clearly proves a bishop and a presbyter to be the same.”⁸⁹ Theodore of Mopsuestia, a contemporary of Jerome, attested the same thing.¹⁰

Likewise, during the Reformation, John Calvin said, “Scriptural usage . . . interchanges these terms” (he included pastors and ministers alongside elders and bishops).¹¹ Calvin was not referring to the Titus passage solely, but he still affirmed that overseer and elder refer to the same office.

Against Calvin and Jerome stood William Fulke, a Puritan. He held a distinction between bishop and elder in church government but not in authority in preaching and administering the sacraments. He stated it like this: “In government, by ancient use of speech he is only called a bishop which is . . . chief in government, to whom the ordination or consecration by imposition of hands was always principally committed.”¹²

⁸ Jerome, “Presbyter and Bishop Were the Same,” in *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Peter J. Gorday, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IX (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), ProQuest, 433.

⁹ Note that “presbyter” is simply a transliteration of *πρεσβυτέρους*, which is translated as “elder.” Also note that “bishop” is a different translation than “overseer” from the same word *ἐπίσκοπον*.

¹⁰ Gorday, *Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, 433.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John McNeill (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2006), 1060.

¹² William Fulke, “Bishops as Chief Ministers or Superintendents,” in *1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, ed. Lee Gatiss and Bradley G. Green, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament XII (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019), ProQuest, 604.

William Williams, professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in the 19th century, said that bishops and elders “are not names of different offices but different names of the same office. This is abundantly proved . . . by the fact that these names are sometimes used interchangeably in the New Testament, the same person who is called in one place bishop, being called elder in another (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7).”¹³

Modern commentators have also affirmed this understanding of Titus 1:5, 7. William Mounce affirms this understanding. His basis for the two terms being used interchangeably is that “Paul instructs Titus concerning elders (Titus 1:5) and then in the next breath calls them overseers (Titus 1:7) with no indication that the audience has changed.”¹⁴ Indeed the audience has clearly remained the same.

Another modern scholar who has written on this topic is Tom Schreiner. For him, the justification of “elder” and “overseer” referring to the same office is as follows: “Paul charges Titus to appoint ‘elders’ in Titus 1:5, but in v. 7 he shifts to ‘overseer.’ The ‘for’ connecting vv. 6–7 suggests that a new office is not in view.”¹⁵ That “for” indicates an explanation or justification of a previously made point. Roman Catholic George Montague makes this same point.¹⁶ Schreiner and Montague are right—elders and overseers are the same local church office.

Thomas Lea and Hayne Griffin are more nuanced in their explanation. They write, “There is no indication from the text that Paul made a distinction between ‘elder’ and ‘overseer’ in this letter. The terms appear to be used either synonymously or with

¹³ William Williams, *Apostolical Church Polity* (Philadelphia: The Bible and Publication Society, 1874), 9.

¹⁴ William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46, ed. Bruce Metzger (New York: Harper Collins, 2013), ProQuest, 386.

¹⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1-2 Peter and Jude*, The Christian Standard Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clenden and Brandon D. Smith (Nashville: B&H, 2020), ProQuest, 205.

¹⁶ George T. Montague, *First and Second Timothy, Titus*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture, ed. Peter S. Williamson and Mary Healy (Ada, MI: Baker, 2008), ProQuest, 219–220.

‘overseer’ being employed generically, thus describing a function of the elder's role in the church.”¹⁷ Whether the terms were *used* synonymously or not, Lea and Griffin affirm that the terms are referring to the same office.

The convincing consensus from these authors is that Titus 1:5, 7 uses “elder” and “overseer” to refer to the same office in a local church. But what of the term “pastor”? “Pastor” is most popular today in Baptist churches, but is not mentioned in the Titus passage. The following section will consider the question regarding the biblical precedent for using “pastor” to refer to the same office as elder/overseer.

Titles Found in 1 Peter 5:1–2

First Peter 5:1–2 only includes one title for an office in a local church: “elders” (v. 1). However, Peter’s instruction includes a form of the other two words that can refer to the same office. It is only one of two occasions in Scripture (the other being Acts 20) where a form of the words “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” are used in the same passage. In what follows, I claim the legitimacy of using all three terms as titles and support it from various theologians and commentators.

The connection between the words is evident in 1 Peter 5:1–2. In verse 1, Peter addresses “the elders” and tells them to “*shepherd* the flock of God . . . exercising *oversight*” (emphasis mine, 1 Pet 5:1–2). The church office title used in this passage for these leaders is “elders.” The other words that are often used as titles are what the elders are to do (shepherd, exercise oversight).

Since elders are to “shepherd . . . exercising oversight” (1 Pet 5:1–2), to call someone a “pastor” (again, an alternate translation instead of “shepherd”) or “overseer” is not calling someone a different office in a local church. Instead, it is to use their function

¹⁷ Lea, Thomas, and Hayne P. Griffin. *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New American Commentary, vol. 34 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), ProQuest, 268.

as a title. Therefore, “pastor,” “overseer,” and “elder” are three terms that can refer to the same leadership position in a local church.

Various exegetes support use of the term “pastor” as referring to the same office as elder/overseer in their comments on 1 Peter 5. Wayne Grudem supports this view in his commentary when he states, “The combination of the term ‘elder’ with the verbs related to ‘pastor’ and ‘bishop’ (‘overseer’) in such close connection in verses 1 and 2 is good evidence that the terms ‘pastor,’ and ‘bishop, overseer’ were interchangeable during the New Testament period.”¹⁸ For John Hammett, “synonymous use seems obvious”¹⁹ based on 1 Peter 5:1–2. In Robert Picirilli’s commentary on 1 Peter, the Classical Arminian said, “In the N.T. in general, the term ‘elder’ seems essentially equivalent to ‘bishop’ or to ‘pastor.’”²⁰ Calvin notes, referring to the term “elders” in 1 Peter 5:1, “By this name he designates pastors and all those who are appointed for the government of the church.”²¹ A consistent theme is evident among these interpreters: a pastor is an elder is an overseer.

Other contemporary authors are worth highlighting. Benjamin Merkle, noted NT scholar and professor, argues for “pastor” as the same office of “elder” and “overseer” like this, “Since the verb ‘to pastor/shepherd’ is the task of the elder/overseer, it is easy to see why such a person could be called a ‘pastor/shepherd.’ . . . we can be reasonably certain that the office of pastor is identical to that of the elder or overseer.”²²

¹⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), ProQuest, 203.

¹⁹ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2019), 162.

²⁰ Paul Harrison and Robert Picirilli, *James, 1, 2 Peter, Jude*, Randall House Bible Commentary, ed. Robert Picirilli (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1992), 203.

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/calcom45/cache/calcom45.pdf>, 144.

²² Benjamin Merkle, “Hierarchy in the Church? Instruction from the Pastoral Epistles Concerning Elders and Overseers,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Fall 2003): 33.

In the book *Baptist Foundations*, Merkle makes the following inference, “It would be strange if the elders were not the same people as those who were called ‘pastors’ or ‘overseers’ since they both performed the same duties.”²³

However, Merkle goes too far to make his point at times. He uses 1 Peter 5:1–2 as one of three texts (the others being Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7) that “clearly demonstrate . . . synonymous *usage*”²⁴ (emphasis mine). He stretches his point beyond tenability here. The texts use the terms differently, not synonymously. What the text demonstrates is the *justification* of synonymous usage.

Schreiner is more balanced. He says seeing those three as synonymous “is the most plausible way of reading the NT evidence.”²⁵ It is plausible that the term “pastor” can be used as synonymous with “elder,” but it is not *clear* that NT churches did so.

But *can* local churches today use the term “pastor” to refer to someone holding the office of elder/overseer? Yes. Since “overseer” and “elder” are used interchangeably in Titus 1:5–9, and since pastoring (shepherding) and exercising oversight is what the elders of a church are to do in 1 Peter 5:1–2, it is biblically justifiable for local churches to call their primary leaders “elders,” “overseers,” or “pastors.” The three terms refer to the same office, and it is biblical to use each term to refer to said office.

Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, and James 5:14 Show That Churches in the New Testament Had Multiple Pastors/Elders/Overseers

Proving biblical justification for synonymous usage of the terms “pastor,” “elder,” and “overseer” is one thing. Showing that churches in the New Testament had

²³ Benjamin Merkle, “The Scriptural Basis for Elders” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever, and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville: B&H, 2015), ProQuest, 247.

²⁴ Merkle, *Baptist Foundations*, 246.

²⁵ Schreiner, *1-2 Peter and Jude*, 205.

multiple elders/pastors/overseers is another. Proving the NT did so is necessary to justify that 21st century churches could or should do the same.

Shared pastoral oversight is found throughout various churches in the NT. Some authors even note that shared pastoral oversight is the *only* example in the NT.²⁶ For the purposes of this project, three passages will be considered: Acts 14:23; 20:17; and James 5:14.

The Example of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Acts 14:23

Shared pastoral oversight in one local church was modeled in the churches from the cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. About two-thirds of the way through his first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas came upon Lystra. There, the Lord healed a lame man and the people responded by worshiping Paul and Barnabas. But shortly thereafter, some Jews came and persuaded the people to help stone the apostle and his companion. They left him because they thought he was dead. But he wasn't, and went to Derbe before returning to the area.

The text does not say how long Paul and his companions were gone, but it was not a long time. Acts 14:21b says, "They returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples" until they "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23a). Notice the plurality of the word "elders" and the singularity of the word "church." In this case, Paul and Barnabas appointed multiple leaders who were all called "elders." They did this for every church. Therefore, the church in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch each had multiple elders.

Only a few comments from others are necessary here. Notes from the ESV Study Bible on this passage say, "The language here indicates a plurality of elders in

²⁶ John MacArthur in *The Master's Plan for the Church*, 221, Benjamin Merkle in *Why Elders?* 31, and John Hammett in *BFBC*, 178.

every church.”²⁷ Darrell Bock states it simply in his commentary, “There was more than one elder per community.”²⁸ Mark Dever affirms this as well in his book, *The Church*. Referring, in part, to Acts 14:23, Dever says, “The direct evidence in the New Testament indicates that the common and even expected practice was to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation.”²⁹

Some of the earliest churches Paul established had shared pastoral oversight. This structure is evident in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch according to Acts 14:23. This reality is widely accepted.

The Example of Ephesus in Acts 20:17

There is another example of shared pastoral oversight in a local church. It’s found in the church at Ephesus. Acts 20:17 mentions this. Some background is warranted.

On his way to Jerusalem, Paul called the elders of Ephesus to him while he was at Miletus. Previously, Paul established the church in Ephesus, spending two years there (Acts 19:1–10). Luke does not say when Paul appointed elders. But at some point, elders were recognized and established in the church in Ephesus.

Acts 20:17 shows an example of shared pastoral oversight when it says Paul “called the elders of the church to come to him.” A pattern begins to emerge: Paul called the “elders” (plural) of “the church” (singular). The same structure of shared pastoral oversight was evident in the church in Ephesus.

David Mathis thinks Acts 20:17 is showing this same organization. In *Workers for Your Joy*, he states, “Throughout the New Testament, leadership in the local church is

²⁷ John B. Polhill, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2008), note on Acts 14:23.

²⁸ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), ProQuest, 575.

²⁹ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2012), 58.

always plural: first the apostles, then the elder-pastor-overseers.”³⁰ In another place he asserts, “The New Testament consistently and pervasively attributes formal leadership in the church to a plurality of elders.”³¹

John MacArthur infers the following from Ephesus having elders, “It is significant that the church at Ephesus had elders because all the churches of Asia Minor—such as those listed in Revelation 1:11—were extensions of the ministry at Ephesus. We can assume that those churches also identified their leadership by the pattern established in Ephesus—a plurality of elders.”³²

Whether or not MacArthur is correct in his assumption, what is clear is that the church in Ephesus had shared pastoral oversight (plurality of elders). This reality is evident by the equating of “elder” with “overseer” and “pastor” in other passages and Paul’s calling of the “elders” (plural) of the “church” (singular) in Ephesus. The multiple elders/pastors/overseers from one church in Ephesus shows that Ephesus had shared pastoral leadership.

The Instruction in James 5:14

The third passage in consideration is the instruction given in James 5:14. James, the brother of Jesus, wrote to “the twelve tribes in the Dispersion,” or scattered Jewish Christians around Palestine. Near the end of his letter, he states what someone should do if they became sick. In his words, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the *elders* of the *church*, and let *them* pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (Jas 5:14b, emphasis mine).

A few observations about these verses are appropriate. First, the sick person is

³⁰ David Mathis, *Workers for Your Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 277.

³¹ Mathis, *Workers for Your Joy*, 285.

³² John MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 207.

to call “the elders of the church.” As observed earlier, there are multiple elders in one church mentioned. But when James refers to “elders,” is he talking about older saints in a local assembly or those who were put in the office of elder in that local assembly?

Scot McKnight holds to the former. He writes in his commentary on James:

It is the absence of the term ‘elders’ in James 3:1–4:12 and the rather casual appearance of the term here in 5:14 that leads me to suspect that James does not have an office in mind with the word “elder” but a traditional Jewish reference to the senior wise, respected, and honorable—and probably male—leaders of the (messianic) community.³³

Craig Blomberg disagrees. He says the “elders” in James 5:14 “represent the entire local Christian community.”³⁴ By “represent,” Blomberg says the elders are in the office of “elder” in the local churches to which James was writing. However, his statement could use more clarity as to whether the elders were informal representatives who were older, wiser men (as McKnight attests) or whether they were official elders/overseers of their churches.

Others believe James to be referring to those holding the office of elder, however. Douglas Moo is one of them. “James assume[s] the existence of elders in the church, showing that the office must have been a widespread one in the early church,”³⁵ Moo remarks. Note his use of the word “office.” Moo believes James referred to the *office* of elder, not the traditional Jewish usage of the term.

Another who believes James is referring to the office of elder is Robert Plummer of Southern Seminary. He writes, “It is noteworthy that James assumes there

³³ Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), EBSCOhost sec. 8.3.3. para. 5.

³⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, Mariam J. Kovalishyn, *James*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2009), ProQuest, 235.

³⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *James*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 16, ed. Eckhard J. Schnabel and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), ProQuest, 11.

will be a plurality of elders in the local congregation.”³⁶ Plummer agrees with Moo, in contrast to McKnight.

One passage to be considered related to this conversation is Acts 21. There, Paul visits James in Jerusalem. Noteworthily, verse 18 says, “On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:18). When Paul visited James, were those present those who held the office of elder, or simply unofficial Jewish leaders? Considering that in Acts 15, those same elders, along with the apostles, made an important decision for Gentile Christians (about not becoming Jewish, essentially), it seems more likely that the elders in Jerusalem (of which James was affiliated) were those who held the office of elder/pastor/overseer.

If, when Paul visited James, he met with all those who held the office of elder of the church in Jerusalem, it would be strange for James to refer to non-office “elders” in James 5:14. The evidence in Acts 15 and 21 shows that James regularly interacted with men who held the office of elder. Since that is the case, why would he tell a sick person to call the elders of a church and use the word “elder” to refer to something different than what is seen in Acts 15 and Acts 21? Doing so would be dubious on the part of James—something out of character for someone who so asserts the importance of works in the Christian life (James 2:14–16)!

Blomberg and Plummer’s instinct rings truer here than McKnight’s interpretation of James 5:14. It seems much more likely that James is simply assuming the Christians in “the Dispersion” would have men who held the office of elder. Therefore, he instructs that if anyone is sick, they should call the men in their local assembly who hold the office of elder to come pray for them.

The Christians James wrote to in “the Dispersion” likely had men who held the

³⁶ Robert Plummer, *James in ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 12, *Hebrews-Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James H. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Skylar (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 282.

office of elder in their churches. James assumed there would be multiple elders, and in the case of praying for the sick, they each were called to share that responsibility. James' instruction for the sick Christian shows evidence of local churches having multiple elders who shared pastoral ministry.

Those three passages do not exhaust the biblical evidence, but they do give good proof that local churches in the New Testament had shared pastoral oversight, or plural elders. Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, according to Acts 14:23, had multiple elders. Acts 20:17 shows that the church in Ephesus also had shared pastoral oversight. Lastly, the Christians James wrote to also likely had multiple elders who shared in pastoral ministry in one local church.

First Peter 5:1–2 and Acts 20:28 Instructs Multiple Elders to Collectively Oversee One Local Church

So far, this chapter has sought to stack building blocks to make a case for shared pastoral oversight in one local church. The first block was the biblical justification for using the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” as titles for the same office in a local church. “Elder” and “overseer” are used interchangeably in Titus 1, and “pastor” is what the elders/overseers are to do in 1 Peter 5:1–2. Therefore, the terms can be used interchangeably.

The second building block was to show examples in the New Testament of churches having multiple elders/overseers/pastors. Those examples were shown in Acts 14:23, 20:17 and James 5:14. In each of those cases, the singular word “church” was used in conjunction with a plurality of eldership.

There is one more building block, and an important one to consider. It's the instructions given to elders in 1 Peter 5:1–2 and Acts 20:28. In 1 Peter, the author tells multiple elders to collectively shepherd one congregation. Paul tells the Ephesian elders something similar in Acts 20:28. These passages deserve further investigation. To this end we now turn.

Collective Oversight in 1 Peter 5:1-2

Peter tells the elders of the Christians in “the Dispersion” to collectively oversee one flock. That instruction is for shared pastoral oversight to occur by a group of elders over one group of Christians. Brief exegesis is in order, followed by interaction with the perspectives of others.

The letter is addressed to dispersed Christians in Asia Minor; Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, to be exact (1 Pet 1:1). They were undergoing a time of persecution as evidenced by multiple passages addressing suffering (1:6, 2:19; 3:9, 13–18, etc.). The instruction to the elders begins in chapter 5.

Peter said,

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: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet 5:1–3).

Peter is addressing the πρεσβυτέρους, translated here as “the elders.” He claims to be an elder himself as well as a witness of Christ’s sufferings and a partaker of the glory to be revealed. Then he moves to his main instruction for these elders. The instruction is to ποιμάνετε—a second plural, aorist active imperative of the word ποιμαίνω which means “you all go shepherd.” Peter is telling all the elders to shepherd or pastor. Regarding this word, Edwin Blum elaborates, “Its meaning embraces protecting, leading, guiding, feeding. Peter reminds the elders that the flock is God's and that they are responsible for its loving care.”³⁷ But who is it that they are to shepherd?

He clarifies by saying ποιμάνετε τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον—woodenly, “shepherd the among you sheep” or “shepherd the sheep among you.” Greg Forbes, Robert Yarbrough, and Andreas Köstenberger say “ἐν ὑμῖν has a distributive sense; the flock

³⁷ Edwin A. Blum, *1 Peter*, in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, *Hebrews Through Revelation*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 250.

present in each separate location.”³⁸ But ὁμῶν is plural, referring to the elders. Therefore, in each separate location there was a group of elders.

Dr. Robert Picirilli doesn’t seem to see this as multiple elders collectively shepherding one group of Christians. Notice how he phrases it in his 1 Peter commentary,

The appeal, therefore, is that the elders of the Christian community he is writing to will set themselves determinedly to be shepherds to the flock of God *in their areas*. Doing so, they will be exercising watchcare . . . not as domineering over *their respective portions* of the flock but by becoming models for the flock to copy.³⁹

It seems that Picirilli assumes that each elder will shepherd a portion of the flock. Each elder has some of the flock “in their areas.” They are to watch over “their respective portions of the flock.” But Picirilli seems to contradict himself here by referring to the elders as “*the elders of the Christian community*” (my emphasis). If each elder had responsibility over a respective portion of the flock of God in his own area, then why refer to all the saints there as “*the Christian community*”? Perhaps that is splitting hairs or perhaps that is not Picirilli’s intention. Either way, it seems more natural to see Peter as calling a group of elders to collectively shepherd one flock among them.

If Peter did mean to tell each individual elder to shepherd the smaller portion of the flock in his individual care, wouldn’t it have been better to say, “I exhort *the elder* among each of you”? Instead, Peter exhorted “the elders among you.” That’s plural elders among a plural group of people.

How are these elders to shepherd the sheep of God among them? Participial phrases follow, but only one deserves narrow attention now. It’s the one translated as “exercising oversight” (verse 2). The Greek word is ἐπισκοποῦντες. It’s a present, active, plural participle of the word ἐπισκοπέω which means “all of you overseeing.” As a participle, the overseeing is part of how the elders are to shepherd the sheep of God. They

³⁸ Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2014) 167.

³⁹ Picirilli, *James, 1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 206.

are to shepherd *by* overseeing them.

Tom Schreiner agrees with my exegesis by saying, “The participle ‘overseeing’ specifies another function of the elders. As God’s shepherds and leaders they are to oversee the church and superintend it.”⁴⁰ This charge is given to the pastors/elders.

That this passage teaches collective oversight by a group of elders/pastors is affirmed by others as well. “The early church utilized more people than the church today does and so put the spiritual leadership in the hands of a plurality,”⁴¹ says Edwin Blum. He wrote this in reference to 1 Peter 5, which implies he means spiritual leadership in the early church was by a plurality of pastors/elders.

German Lutheran R.C.H. Lenski also saw it this way. About 1 Peter 5:1–2, he said, “These were the pastors of the New Testament congregations, and each congregation had several who were chosen and called by the congregation.”⁴² He affirms the collective oversight by these pastors directly.

The Dutch American Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof saw this passage as teaching shared pastoral oversight. “These officers clearly had the oversight of the flock that was entrusted to their care,”⁴³ he said. He communicates collective oversight of one flock entrusted to multiple officers, in this case elders. That’s shared pastoral oversight of one church, and in Berkhof’s opinion, this passage teaches it “clearly.”

While there is some argument or uncertainty by a few commentators,⁴⁴ there is

⁴⁰ Schreiner, *1–2 Peter and Jude*, 204.

⁴¹ Blum, *1 Peter*, 250.

⁴² Richard C. Lenski, *Interpretation of I and II Epistles of Peter, the Three Epistles of John, and the Epistle of Jude* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1945), 215.

⁴³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 586

⁴⁴ In addition to Picirilli mentioned above, Scot McKnight says Peter is referring not to shared oversight but “almost certainly the role that the individual leaders played in a given house church” (McKnight, Scot, *1 Peter*, ed. Terry Muck, NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, ProQuest, 235–238).

much support to understand 1 Peter 5:1–2 as teaching multiple elders to collectively shepherd one group of Christians by overseeing them. This interpretation seems most plausible.

Collective Oversight in Acts 20:28

First Peter 5 is not the only passage worth considering that has something to say about collective pastoral oversight. Acts 20:28 is also important to this discussion. In the same pattern as before, a brief exegesis will be given followed by interaction with various authors' views on the passage.

Acts 20:17 tells us that Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church to meet him at Miletus. He gave them a type of farewell speech beginning in verse 18, which continued through verse 35. Verses 36–39 show they had strong affection for one another and were very concerned about Paul's departure to Jerusalem.

His instruction for these Ephesian elders begins in verse 28 where he says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." They are called to pay attention to themselves, but more directly related to the topic of this project, they're called to pay careful attention "to all the flock." Paul again compares the Christians under the care of these elders to a flock of sheep.

Does he have in mind for each of the elders to individually pay attention to part of the flock? No, the instruction is for all of them to pay careful attention to "all the flock." Again, the intention is for collective careful attention to an entire group of sheep by a group of elders.

The phrase translated "care for" is ποιμαίνειν, the same word used in 1 Peter 5. It is the infinitive declension of ποιμαίνω meaning "to shepherd" or "to pastor." This verse could very well be translated as telling the Ephesian elders "to shepherd the church of God," or, "to pastor the church of God." All the elders of one church (in this case,

Ephesus) are told to pastor “all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The Holy Spirit, then, made all of them overseers of the flock in Ephesus, and together they are to care for them (pastor/shepherd them). Collective shepherding of one church is Paul’s goal for Ephesus.

The British professor F. F. Bruce believes in collective oversight by a group of pastors in one local church. He said, “On those elders, then, lay a weighty responsibility. The Holy Spirit had entrusted them with the charge of the people of God in Ephesus; they had to care for them as shepherds cared for their flock.”⁴⁵ Bruce, discussing Acts 20:28, said the elders were entrusted with the people of God in Ephesus.

Bruce Ware endorses shared pastoral oversight in one congregation as taught in Acts 20:28 in a similar way that Bruce does. “Paul’s calling of the ‘elders’ and the coming of the ‘overseers’ refer to the same group of leaders, leaders who are responsible to ‘pastor’ or ‘shepherd’ the flock of believers in the church at Ephesus,”⁴⁶ he writes. Again, that’s multiple elders over one flock.

Alex Strauch is more pointed in his comments about this passage. He states that God, regarding the responsibility to oversee and shepherd His church, “Did not give this charge to the bishop, or the pastor, or the minister, but to the body of elders.”⁴⁷ At another time he said, “The elders are instructed to shepherd the *entire* flock of God.”⁴⁸ Strauch cannot mean the elders in Ephesus were to personally shepherd the entire flock of God *in the world*, as that would be highly unlikely. Instead, he means the elders in Ephesus were to shepherd the entire flock *in Ephesus*. His understanding seems most

⁴⁵ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), EBSCOhost, sec. 4.c.

⁴⁶ Bruce Ware, “Putting It All Together,” in *Shepherding God’s Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 289–290.

⁴⁷ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Colorado Springs: Lewis & Roth, 2023), 109.

⁴⁸ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 288.

plausible.

Paul had an important message for the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28. He was about to leave them for Jerusalem where danger was impending. These elders had already acted in an official leadership capacity by their involvement in the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). Verse 17 of Acts 20 shows that Paul was speaking to these elders collectively. His call is for all of them to shepherd the sheep at Ephesus, to oversee their souls in light of the Holy Spirit's call on them to do so. There is no implication that Paul is wanting each individual elder to, by himself, shepherd a subset of the church in Ephesus. Instead, they are to work together for all the sheep in the one church in one location—Ephesus.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to build a case for collective oversight, or shared pastoral oversight for one local church from the New Testament. The first building block was the biblical legitimacy of using the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” as referring to the same office in a local church. Various passages support this, but Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5 were zeroed in on in the first section of this chapter. These showed that a pastor is an elder is an overseer. Next, I sought to show that churches in the New Testament had multiple elders/pastors/overseers. The churches represented in Acts 14:23, 20:17, and James 5:14 show examples of this. In each of these, local churches had more than one pastor/elder/overseer. While only three passages were considered, there are others. That was the second main building block. Then, I showed that 1 Peter 5:1–2 and Acts 20:28 give instruction for multiple elders to collectively shepherd one group of sheep. This case shows that collective shepherding by a group of men called pastors, overseers, or elders, was taught by Peter and Paul.

But *Should* We?

Shared pastoral oversight over one group of Christians in a certain location by a group of men called pastors/elders/overseers has strong biblical support, as this chapter

has sought to prove. After looking at the evidence, it is easy to say that plural eldership was the regular practice of local churches in the NT. But is it *required* in each local church today?

Some say no. Jeff Brown, retired missionary and adjunct professor at Central Baptist Seminary in Minnesota, said, “It is important to notice that there are examples in the Scripture which give the local church direction, but there are no commands about one or multiple elders.”⁴⁹ Millard Erickson agrees with Brown when he says, “There is no prescriptive exposition of what the government of the church is to be like . . . The churches are not commanded to adopt a particular form of church order.”⁵⁰ Erickson would go on to say that when it comes to polity, “We cannot discover an authoritative pattern.”⁵¹

Both Brown and Erickson are correct in that there is no command for adopting a certain polity. But just because something is not commanded does not mean it is optional. For example, while there is no express command for each Christian to be recognized members of local churches, there are so many passages that command Christians to do certain things for specific Christians that it is essentially impossible to be a faithful Christian without belonging to a local church in an official capacity (whether it’s called “membership” or not).

The ultimate question Brown and Erickson are not considering in their claims is this: can Christians do all they’re called to do in Scripture without being under shared pastoral oversight? The answer to that question is “no.” Christians cannot “call the elders of the church” in dire sickness (James 5:14) if the church they belong to doesn’t have plural eldership. Christians cannot obey the leaders who are keeping watch over their

⁴⁹ Jeff Brown, *Form and Freedom: What the New Testament Teaches about Church Government and Church Leadership* (Nuremberg: Vtr Publ, 2004), 86.

⁵⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 1094.

⁵¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1095.

souls (Hebrews 13:17) if they don't have multiple leaders. Christians cannot give "double honor" to the elders that labor in preaching and teaching if those who do so are not part of a group of elders (1 Timothy 5:17). In order for Christians to live as God's Word says they should, they need to have more than one elder-pastor keeping watch over them.

John Hammett commented on what this project is seeking to communicate and what it seems the Lord may be doing at LHBC. He said,

On the whole, the weight of the biblical evidence supports plural eldership, and the practical benefits offered by a plurality of elders seem considerable. Thus, churches should move toward a plural elder model with two conditions: (1) that the church have men who meet the qualifications for elder, and (2) that the church be accepting of such a change.⁵²

Lake Hills Baptist Church has accepted clear, biblical teaching wholeheartedly for many years. There is no reason to think she will stop accepting clear teaching when the topic is on shared pastoral oversight.

Up to this point of the project, the biblical/theological support has been shared. But one question has not yet been considered in this project—what is said outside of Scripture that attests to this project? To that focus, chapter three will be dedicated.

⁵² Hammett, *BFBC*, 189.

CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL, PRACTICAL, AND HISTORICAL
ISSUES RELATED TO THE PROJECT

Introduction

Lake Hills Baptist is a wonderful church in Schererville, Indiana. She has been serving King Jesus faithfully since 1960 and has much life left in her. Establishing a healthy community of elder-pastors who collectively oversee the sheep among her will serve them well. This project aims to increase the understanding of LHBC of shared pastoral oversight. So far, it has shown the need for this project and explained the biblical support for shared pastoral oversight. There is more to consider for the project to be successful, however.

This chapter has one main thesis: LHBC needs to understand common over-reaches of church leadership structure and why they should be avoided. To accomplish this thesis, three over-reaches of church leadership structure will be considered: (1) One Pastor with Excessive Authority, (2) Deacons with Elder-like Authority, and (3) Elders with Authority Only. For each of these models, three sub-sections will be included: (1) an overview of the model with examples, (2) a biblical critique of the model, and (3) practical considerations for each over-reach.

Model 1: One Pastor with Excessive Authority

Some churches employ a model where one person holding the office of pastor has excessive authority over a congregation. An overview of this model and examples will first be given. Then, a biblical critique will be shared, followed by some practical considerations.

Overview and Examples

Each pastor-elder-overseer in a local church should exercise a level of authority. However, there are some who have excessive, or primary authority. By excessive authority, I mean more authority than Scripture warrants. This section focuses on churches that give primary authority to one person. These pastors sometimes go by the title of “Senior Pastor,” “Lead Pastor,” or just “Pastor,” depending on the context. Examples are found in various denominations and movements, but because of the context of LHBC, only a few key leaders in Independent Fundamental Baptist churches (IFB) will be considered here.¹

As a minor but contemporary example, Paul Chappell, Senior Pastor of Lancaster Baptist Church in Lancaster, California, says, “It is the responsibility of a pastor to bring order to the local church.”² He keeps the responsibility to a singular pastor. Interestingly, he does so right before quoting Acts 20:28, in which Paul instructed multiple elders to oversee one flock. Chappell’s apparent humility in his works and ministry is appreciated, but his view still entrusts authority to one individual.

G.E. Hodges, a deceased IFB pastor, said in his 1994 work *New Testament Polity*, “God the Father has given unto His Son headship over all things to the church He established in Jerusalem. Jesus Christ was pleased to follow His Father’s blueprint of calling out *a man* to lead His people”³ (emphasis mine). Hodges is referring to a singular pastor to have sole “headship” over one local church. Hodges wrongly equates the authority of pastors to the authority of Jesus in a way that enables excessive authority.

Hodges continues by equating the kingship of Israel to the pastorate in a local

¹ Many members and regular attenders of LHBC have a background in or are at least familiar with the IFB movement.

² Paul Chappell, *Order in the Church* (Lancaster, CA: Striving Together Publications, 2015), vii.

³ G.E. Hodges, *New Testament Polity: Examining and Exclaiming Christianity in New Testament Churches* (self-pub., Sanford, FL, 1994), 120.

church. He states, “The relative position of the ancestors (the Patriarchs; Judges, and Prophets) to the theocratic King is the same for the ‘man of God’ in this New Testament era.”⁴ Instead of acknowledging the theocratic kings in the Old Testament as being precursors to Jesus the king, Hodges equates them with the office of pastor, who he deems the “man of God.” One pastor, in the view of this IFB author, is the “king” of a local church. Excessive authority is an obvious byproduct of such a view.

Excessive authority is seen later in the same work of Hodges in his suggested church constitution. In the section about officers, the author suggests that “When the Undershepherd realizes an effort to restrict his God given responsibility, or reverse his leadership, he will often endeavor to corral or discipline the sheep.”⁵ The authority given to one pastor empowers him to single-handedly “discipline the sheep” who are seeking to “reverse his leadership.” In other sections, Hodges teaches the one pastor is *the* qualified office (my emphasis) to call all meetings.⁶ Certain positions filled by laymen must be approved by the pastor. That same pastor is “the person with the task of caring for the treasury.”⁷ He has “full responsibility before God for every church member, activity, work, and function” of one church.⁸ The word “excessive” may be too mild to describe the level of authority Hodges proposes!

Another IFB pastor deserving consideration is Jack Hyles. Hyles is perhaps the most well-known IFB pastor and long-time pastor of a church near LHBC. Several current members and attenders of LHBC once attended First Baptist of Hammond and had Jack Hyles as their pastor.

Unfortunately, Pastor Hyles promoted excessive authority to one pastor in

⁴ Hodges, *NTP*, 120.

⁵ Hodges, *NTP*, 140.

⁶ Hodges, *NTP*, 141.

⁷ Hodges, *NTP*, 142.

⁸ Hodges, *NTP*, 159.

churches. He said, “I am not the best Christian in the church, but I am the Pastor-Bishop-Builder of the church. I keep my hands on everything that goes on in the church.”⁹ A pastor who claims to be the “builder of the church” and keeps his hands on “everything” in the church has excessive authority.

In his *Hyles’ Church Manual*, Hyles revealed his view of pastoral authority in the way he expected deacons to relate to the pastor. He said, “We demand and expect that our deacons be loyal . . . to the pastor . . . loyal to what God is doing through the church and through the pastor.”¹⁰ A pastor or church that demands deacons be loyal to one pastor is a church that has placed excessive authority in one man.

Again, there are other movements and examples of excessive authority being given to one pastor. The views of these men from the IFB movement have been chosen because of the physical proximity and influence of the IFB perspective on some members and attenders of LHBC. Undoubtedly, the men mentioned and many churches in the IFB movement have done great work for King Jesus. At the same time, the view of pastoral authority espoused in these churches deserves critique.

Biblical Critique

Is there biblical precedent for one pastor having the kind of authority espoused by Hodges and Hyles and others in the IFB movement? That’s the focus of this section. Concepts by both Hodges and Hyles will be considered and weighed with Scripture.

Hodges and Hyles both claim a correlation between the authority of a pastor and the authority of Jesus. For Hodges, just as God entrusted Jesus as head over all things, so Jesus has entrusted one pastor as head over a local church.¹¹ He claimed that

⁹ Jack Hyles, *The Church* (Hammond, IN: Jack Hyles Library, 2022) chap. 19, “What Changes a Church?,” <https://www.jackhyles.com/church2.htm>.

¹⁰ Jack Hyles, *The Hyles Church Manual* (Murfreesboro, TN: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1980), 72.

¹¹ Hodges, *NTP*, 120.

Jesus followed God the Father's blueprint in doing so.

The first chapter of Ephesians speaks of some of what the Father has done for Christ. The Father "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church," (Eph 1:22). This verse does show, as Hodges points out, that Jesus is head over everything for the sake of the church. However, it speaks nothing about Jesus following the Father's blueprint to give or entrust His headship to a man in a local church.

Contradicting Hodges, Colossians 1:18 says Jesus, not a pastor, "is the head of the body, the church." In this passage, God's Word is asserting Jesus' ongoing headship over the church. Jesus *is* the head of the church. Instead of Jesus entrusting headship of the Church to a person, or headship of a local church to one person, Jesus Himself is the head of the Church and always will be. Therefore, if a local church will be a New Testament church, it must recognize that the only pastor qualified to be her head is Jesus. If anyone other than Jesus becomes the head of a local church, she is not a church in any biblical sense. As Paul Tripp said in *Dangerous Calling*, "If Christ is the head of his body, then everything else is just body, including the pastor."¹²

Jack Hyles also claimed pastoral authority is correlated to Jesus' authority. Hyles did this by saying, "I am the . . . Builder of the church."¹³ Granted, Hyles was referring to one local church when he claimed to be the builder. He was not claiming to be the builder of the universal church. But even for local churches, is there any biblical support for the claim Hyles made of being the "builder" of his church?

God's Word does call all Christians to "build up" one another. Paul instructed the church in Thessalonica to "build one another up" (1 Thess 5:11). Paul also told the Corinthians to "strive to excel in building up the church" (1 Cor 14:12). The gist of these

¹² Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 88.

¹³ Hyles, *The Church*, chapter 19.

instructions is for Christians to encourage one another in their faith.

The closest Scripture comes to instructing pastors to “build” the church is in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. Paul claimed he “laid a foundation” in his ministry and that “someone else is building upon it” (verse 10). He then warns his readers by saying, “Let each one take care how he builds upon it” (verse 10). In a sense, people are the ones doing the “building.” This kind of building is a metaphor to describe someone’s ministry. “Each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done” (verse 13). According to this passage, it is possible to “build” in ways that will not survive the coming judgment of Christ, and it is possible to “build” in ways that do survive. This kind of building is referring to ministry for Jesus.

I suggest that the metaphor Paul is using in 1 Corinthians 3 is not what Hyles was claiming when he said, “I am the . . . Builder of the church.” Hyles’ claim is that he was doing what Jesus claimed He would do Himself when Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matt 16:18). Jesus did not mean He would try His best to do a ministry that may or may not be eternally effective. Instead, Jesus was guaranteeing the success of His ministry. It’s evident Jesus meant His work would be successful because He continued by saying “and the gates of hades will not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).

Hyles’ claim to be the builder of the church is claiming something Jesus claimed for Himself. There will be no “burning up” of what Jesus is and will build. But like every other pastor, Hyles’ work is mixed with things that will last and things that will not. Only that which was founded on Jesus will last.

Ironically, in light of the IFB’s disdain for the Roman Catholic Church, some of the IFB views of a pastor are akin to Episcopal ecclesiology. Episcopal government is found in the Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, and Anglican churches. In this view, the ultimate authority is vested in the bishop. Millard Erickson, referring to the episcopal form of government, said, “The bishop is the key to the functioning of church

government.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, IFB Pastor Paul Chappell said, “It is the responsibility of the pastor to bring order to the local church.”¹⁵ Similarly, Hyles said, “The pastor is somebody. He, himself, in the flesh is just an unworthy, undeserving sinner saved by grace, but that unworthy, undeserving sinner saved by grace placed in the position of pastor of the New Testament church makes him the most important person in all the world.”¹⁶ Replace the word “bishop” with “pastor” and the quotes share striking similarities.

Other observations by Erickson about episcopal ecclesiology are worth noting and comparing with IFB pastoral authority. Erickson said bishops are “the primary channel by which God expresses his authority upon earth.”¹⁷ “The bishops define the church. They are not chosen from above but from below,”¹⁸ he said. Again, “The role of the bishops is to exercise the power of God that has been vested in them.”¹⁹ Again, replace the word “bishop” with “pastor,” and the quotes could easily be attributed to the views of Hodges and Hyles.

Scripture shows the terms elder, bishop, and pastor to refer to the same office in a local church, and that local churches in the New Testament had a plurality of this office. In short, excessive authority in one man (other than Jesus), whether called “pastor” or “bishop,” is a foreign concept to the New Testament.

Practical Considerations

In this final part of Model 1, some practical considerations will be made. Based

¹⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1081.

¹⁵ Chappell, *Order in the Church*, vii.

¹⁶ Jack Hyles, “Leadership,” last accessed November 12, 2024, <https://jackhyles.us/?p=101>.

¹⁷ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1082.

¹⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1082.

¹⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1081.

on the following data, reports, and logic, there is strong reason to see a connection between excessive authority in one pastor and pastoral abuse. It does not follow that every pastor with excessive authority is abusive. But when a pastor has excessive authority, it makes abuse more accessible and therefore more likely.

Data performed by various researchers is a valid consideration. For example, in 2009, Diana Garland and Christen Agueta performed a qualitative study on how many first-hand accounts of how Clergy Sexual Misconduct occurred. Their third characteristic of these encounters was “lack of accountability.” They found that the religious leaders “evidently had no one to whom they accounted for the use of their professional time.”²⁰ They continued: “Religious leaders also often have unparalleled lack of accountability for *where* they spend their time and with whom.”²¹

Michael Kruger, in his book *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church*, said that “Most churches . . . don’t have a sufficient accountability structure for the leaders they hire.”²² Near the end of the book he said, “Case after case of spiritual abuse has shown that it was the lack of any real accountability that allowed the pastor to gain a disproportionate amount of power and then to abuse that power with little or no consequences.”²³

One case that shows the connection between pastoral abuse and a lack of accountability was a church in the UK called The Crowded House. In 2020, The Crowded House came to national recognition because of the removal of the Senior Pastor Steve Timmis, who was also the CEO of the Acts 29 church planting network at that time. An independent review was performed on the church by Thirtyone:eight in the

²⁰ Diana R. Garland and Christen Agueta, “How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens: A Qualitative Study of First-Hand Accounts,” *Social Work & Christianity*, 37 (2010), 1–27.

²¹ Garland and Agueta, “How Clergy Sexual Misconduct Happens,” 16.

²² Michael Kruger, *Bully Pulpit: Confronting the Problem of Spiritual Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), 13.

²³ Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 117.

aftermath of scandal. They found that “the majority of participants reported that . . . Steve Timmis was not accountable to either his fellow elders or to the trustees.”²⁴ One participant in their study who was involved in the church from its inception said, “It seems to me that what was lacking from Day 1 of the new fellowship [church] was a clear lack of accountability.”²⁵

In addition to the above data, a logical connection between abuse and excessive authority is worth discussion. A pastor who has excessive authority would be given the benefit of the doubt more than not because of his role in being the “man of God.” Kruger reasoned, “If the church has already indicated (at least implicitly) that the senior pastor is special—he’s not like everyone else; he has a distinctive voice and authority that rise above others’—how does a church then walk that back when it comes time to hold him accountable for his behavior?”²⁶

Excessive authority may persuade congregants that the pastor is beyond sinning in various ways. One congregant of Jack Hyles seemed to think so. He said, “Dr. Jack Hyles does not have an immoral bone in his body. Dr. Jack Hyles does not have a dishonest drop of blood in his veins.”²⁷ Did the authority given to his pastor (or perhaps the apparent fruitfulness Hyles enjoyed) override that congregant’s understanding of the depravity of man? If a pastor is so elevated that a church no longer sees him as a repenting sinner, there are countless opportunities that pastor might have to take advantage of his authority.

Shared pastoral authority seems to be an obvious aid in helping prevent cases of pastoral abuse. If there is no one pastor with excessive authority, surely other pastor-

²⁴ *An Independent Learning Review: The Crowded House*, (ThirtyOne:eight, 2020), 29, <https://thirtyoneeight.org/media/khzkxsimf/the-crowded-house-learning-review-full-report.pdf>.

²⁵ *An Independent Learning Review: The Crowded House*, 28.

²⁶ Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 13.

²⁷ Debra Gruszecki, “Hyles’ Assistant Threatens Advertiser Boycott,” *The Times*, June 7, 1989, page 9, quoting Ray Young.

elders would be empowered to keep one another in check. John MacArthur made that connection in *The Master's Plan for the Church*. In it, he said, "Leadership made up of a plurality of godly men has much to commend. Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual."²⁸ Granted, abuse is still possible by pastors in churches with plural eldership, but in a plurality that functioned well, it would be less-likely.²⁹ Even if a pastor were to abuse someone in some way, having shared pastoral authority should limit the extent of the abuse. But if a pastor cannot be held accountable by other pastors or removed from the church, he could abuse people over an extended period of time.

Model 2: Deacons With Elder-Like Authority

Another model of over-reach is one where deacons have the same level of authority as elder-pastors. More specifically, this section focuses on deacons who exercise oversight in local churches. Benjamin Merkle notes that "in many churches, the board of deacons provides the spiritual leadership in the church in partnership with the pastor."³⁰ These churches generally have one or a few who are called "pastors," and several who are called "deacons." The deacons meet regularly to collectively exercise oversight over the church, with at least one pastor present. Pastors serving in this model often must have approval from the "deacon board" for various decisions to be enacted or to be put before the congregation for approval. Many deacons within this model also serve in practical ways.

²⁸ John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008), 222.

²⁹ For example, Michael Kruger noted the Lead Pastor of the Crowded House and former CEO of Acts 29 was removed for "bullying, intimidation, heavy shepherding . . ." This happened despite the church having an elder board. Kruger said, "the elder board (other than himself) consisted of just two younger men and his own son-in-law." Michael Kruger, *Bully Pulpit*, 7.

³⁰ Benjamin Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 96.

Overview and Examples

Examples of this kind of model are found in various sources. Glimpses, or perhaps a precursor to the model of deacons exercising oversight may be found in an early confession of faith. For example, *The Dordrecht Confession* from 1632 by the Anabaptist Mennonites is worth considering. It states that “the deacons . . . may also in aid and relief of the bishops, exhort the church . . . and thus assist in word and doctrine.”³¹ The exhortation of the church “in word and doctrine” are obvious roles of pastors. However, if Stephen from Acts 6 was an early onset deacon, he obviously handled God’s Word in his testimony in Acts 7. Philip, also mentioned in Acts 6, was called an “evangelist” in Acts 21:8.

In the 1800’s, the concept of a “board of directors” came into vogue in American culture. John Hammett writes, “With the board of directors idea, the distinction between the overall leadership role of the elders and the serving role of the deacons began to blur. In practice, many deacon boards practiced something close to elder rule.”³² More discussion on “elder rule” will take place in a later section of this chapter, but it is interesting to understand some of the potential origin of deacons who serve as elders/overseers.

The statement of faith in the National Association of Free Will Baptists, the denomination in which this author was raised, seems to open the door to deacons exercising oversight or serving as unofficial ruling elders. The statement of faith says that “Deacons are . . . to minister to the congregation and exercise general spiritual leadership.”³³ How are deacons to minister to the congregation? In taking care of physical matters? The document does not say. But they are also to “exercise general spiritual

³¹ William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 73.

³² Hammett, *BFBC*, 196–197.

³³ “Treatise of the Faith and Practice of Free Will Baptists, Inc.” Executive Office of the National Association of Free Will Baptists, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://nafwb.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/13Treatise.pdf>, 39.

leadership.” That sounds a lot like “oversee,” a function clearly attributed to pastor-elders.

In irony to the evidence that some IFB churches give too much authority to the Senior Pastor, some IFB churches also have deacons (or at least claimed to) that oversee the church. In his *Hyles Church Manual*, the author said the deacons “prayerfully consider what direction we ought to go.”³⁴ Later Hyles said, “Our deacons oversee the entire program of the church.”³⁵ These quotes are much more blatant than others and reveal an understanding that deacons are to oversee a local church, or serve as what other churches call “ruling elders.”

The current constitution at LHBC touches on similar themes. Some of those will be mentioned here. First, it gives at least one responsibility to deacons that seems to be more suited to overseers/elders/pastors. That task is to “inquire into the fitness and qualifications of applicants for membership.”³⁶ Practically speaking, deacons take turns interviewing candidates for membership, hearing of their testimony of faith, and recommending or not to the rest of the deacons their entrance into membership. The deacons then recommend potential candidates to the membership for consideration. While there is much respect for the voice of the Senior Pastor of LHBC related to candidates for membership, the deacons are not constitutionally required to follow the suggestions of pastors when it comes to candidates for membership.

Second, the constitution of LHBC states that deacons are to “advise and aid the pastor in all matters pertaining to the spiritual interest of the church.”³⁷ Being an “aid” to the pastor is a biblical role for deacons. But to establish the deacons as a group of

³⁴ Hyles, *Hyles Church Manual*, 73.

³⁵ Hyles, *Hyles Church Manual*, 74.

³⁶ LHBC Constitution, Article IX, Section 2.

³⁷ LHBC Constitution, Article IX, Section 2.

advisors to a pastor seems to give the deacons oversight of the church *and* the pastor. The constitution does not say the Lead Pastor must follow the advice of the deacons, but it does imply that deacons are to oversee the church and the Senior/Lead Pastor. A more concrete example of this is the offer letter I was given before beginning my assignment as pastor. The letter stated that I reported to the deacons.

Biblical Critique

Now that some evidence of deacons exercising oversight in churches has been shared, it's time to consider whether the practice is biblical. Does the Scripture justify the office of deacon being one that exercises oversight over a local church, or is the practice unfounded biblically? This section considers and seeks to answer that question.

The most obvious passage to turn to when considering the answer to this question is 1 Timothy 3. Verse one says, "If anyone aspires to *the office of overseer*, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim 3:1, emphasis mine). After mentioning several qualifications for the office of overseer, verse eight then pivots by saying "*Deacons likewise* must be dignified, not double-tongued" (1 Tim 3:8a, emphasis mine). The text shifts from talking about the office of "overseer" in verse one to talking about the office of "deacon" in verse eight. They are obviously two distinct offices.

Another passage in this discussion is Philippians 1:1. It reads, "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, *with the overseers and deacons*" (Phil 1:1, emphasis mine). Note again the distinction between the office of "overseer" and "deacon." They are two different offices.

The office of deacon is not to oversee the church because one of the titles of the other main office in a church is "overseer." Deacons who oversee a church would be the equivalent of a defensive coordinator on a football team to coordinate the offense. How do we know the defensive coordinator should not coordinate the offense? Because there is someone else on the coaching staff who has the title of "offensive coordinator."

So too, deacons should not oversee a church because there is another office that literally has the job description of “overseer” in the title. And as shown in chapter two, the office of overseer is the same office as elder or pastor.

Is it possible that the office of deacon is biblically mandated to oversee a church even though there is another office in the church called “overseer”? The answer seems obvious, but perhaps it is worthwhile to consider a little Greek at this point. The word translated as “overseer” is ἐπίσκοπος. As a masculine noun it is used five times in the New Testament: Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7, and 1 Peter 2:25. Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3 have already been discussed above. That leaves three instances.

In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the ἐπισκόπους to “care for the church of God.” That’s referring to the office of “overseer.” Titus 1:7 is a sister passage to the qualifications mentioned in 1 Timothy 3. It also refers to the office of overseer: “δεῖ γὰρ τὸν ἐπίσκοπον.” First Peter 2:25 speaks of Jesus when it says Peter’s addressees “returned to the Shepherd and ἐπίσκοπον” of their souls. The office of deacon is nowhere connected to the word “overseer” in these passages or any other portion of Scripture. In short, deacons are not to oversee a church, according to God’s Word.

Matt Smethurst wrote in critique of this model, “When deacons start to function either as leading shepherds over the whole congregation, or as a board of directors overseeing various staff and committees, the Bible’s job description for deacons has become blurred.”³⁸ Deacons who oversee a church are muddying the waters of the church’s polity.

Another critique of this model is from John Hammett, who noted that “leadership itself is not an activity normally associated with *diakonos*. Thus, it seems

³⁸ Matt Smethurst, *Deacons: How They Serve and Strengthen the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 36-37.

likely that deacons are not called to give leadership to the church in the same way as are elders.”³⁹ Hammett also notes that in the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3, there is no mention of deacons needing to manage God’s work or the church, while there is for the office of overseer. Hammett infers from this that “the deacon is not one who exercises oversight of the church as a whole.”⁴⁰ His comment makes sense.

God’s Word gives no indication of the office of deacon overseeing a church. There is no command or example of any deacon doing so in Scripture. Merkle says, “Deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church—a function that belongs to the elders.”⁴¹ Meanwhile, there is ample evidence that the office that should oversee a church is the office of elder/overseer/pastor.

Practical Considerations

Now that a biblical critique of Model 2 has been given, practical considerations are in order. Several will be offered here. Granted, they are informal, but important nonetheless.

First, deacons being the primary leaders of a church is problematic because they are often not the most spiritually qualified to lead. There are many deacons who know God’s Word and serve King Jesus well. But, generally speaking, pastors have more biblical knowledge than deacons. Oftentimes they’ve had more theological training and have spent more time in God’s Word than deacons have. Therefore, when deacons oversee a church, in most cases the people who are leading the church are not the ones who have the most biblical knowledge. When the main leaders of a church are not the ones with the most biblical knowledge and understanding, a church will surely be hamstrung spiritually. This lack of biblical understanding could result in a church being

³⁹ Hammett, *BFBC*, 194.

⁴⁰ Hammett, *BFBC*, 196.

⁴¹ Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 97.

led based on “what we’ve always done” than Scripture alone. This is not meant to be an insult to deacons. Someone doesn’t know what they don’t know. It is a concern for the danger of elevating deacons to higher authority than elders/pastors. However, having godly deacons who function as elders is better than one pastor having no accountability.

Another practical consideration was brought out by Matt Smethurst. He posed, “When deacons function as elders, who will function as deacons? In such arrangements, the congregation misses out on the blessing of *both* offices as delineated in God’s Word.”⁴² While I am not willing to say that the deacons at LHBC have failed at both deaconing and eldering, it is likely that their quasi-elder role has limited them from overseeing or serving at their highest potential, to no fault of their own.

A third practical consideration is that of men who have declined to serve as deacons because of the elder-like nature of the role at LHBC, or because they have disagreed with the role of deacon at LHBC having spiritual oversight over the congregation. One man who is currently in a process to consider becoming an elder/pastor stated that he had declined becoming a deacon in the past because he did not see the church’s current authority-level of the deacons as being biblical. Another deacon who has served for several years attested to me that he has had men turn him down to serve when he asked them because of the weightiness of the spiritual nature of the role. Granted, there is a spiritual nature to the office of deacon, but it is not the same level of weight as the office of elder/pastor.

My last consideration is the possible connection between deacons who exercise oversight and a lack of a personal commitment from pastors to disciple other men in their church to the pastorate over a long period of time. Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” Timothy was told to entrust what Paul gave him to

⁴² Smethurst, *Deacons*, 81.

others, who will do the same. Perhaps part of the reason some churches are led by deacons instead of elders is because pastor-elders have not done their part to empower other men to also become pastor-elders. Deacons, in these instances, become leaders over time because no one has sought to intentionally be used of God to raise up other men into the office of elder/pastor. This polity problem may, in part, be a discipleship problem.

Concluding this section, Model 2 is one where deacons exercise oversight. This is an over-reach from the biblical expectation of deacons. It is seen in many different churches, but primarily of the Baptist variety. Scripture in no way entrusts oversight of a church to deacons.

Model 3: Elders With Authority Only

Finally, Model 3 is to be explained and understood. This final model is one where a church is led by a plurality of elders, technically speaking, but the elders fail to function as pastors. There are some churches who say they have elders, but the elders' main purpose is to function as a board, not to collectively shepherd a church. Robert Thune describes this model. He said, "The elders are not seen as pastors, but rather as a sort of 'governing board' whose job is to keep the pastors in check and provide a system of checks and balances (lest the ministry staff or pastors have too much power)."⁴³ Related to this, Alex Strauch said, "Many Christians don't expect church elders to teach the Scriptures or be involved pastorally in the lives of their people, although their own Bibles teach exactly that."⁴⁴

There are examples of this model both in antiquity and modern times. It is probably the model that, while still over-reaching, is the closest to being biblical compared to Model 1 and Model 2. Several examples will be pointed out, followed by a

⁴³ Robert Thune, *Gospel Eldership: Equipping a New Generation of Servant Leaders* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 28.

⁴⁴ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 11.

biblical critique of this model and some practical considerations.

Overview and Examples

This model likely originates from Reformed churches that see a distinction between types of elders. They see 1 Timothy 5:17 showing some elders who labor in preaching and teaching, and others who do not. That has resulted in some elders being called “teaching elders” and others being called “ruling elders.” While some churches employ both of those terms, other churches seem to have the same model but with a tweaked nomenclature. That tweak is by calling teaching elders “pastors” and ruling elders simply “elders.”

John Calvin saw a distinction between kinds of elders. He said, commenting on 1 Timothy 5:17:

We may learn from this, that there were at that time two kinds of elders; for all were not ordained to teach. The words plainly mean, that there were some who ‘ruled well’ and honorably, but who did not hold the office of teachers. And, indeed, there were chosen from among the people men of worth and of good character, who, united with the pastors in a common council and authority administered the discipline of the Church, and were a kind of censors for the correction of morals.⁴⁵

For Calvin, some elders “were not ordained to teach.” He held to a fourfold office of pastor, teacher, elder, and deacon, according to Timothy George.⁴⁶ Calvin obviously thought there was an office of teacher, according to the above block quote. The quote also reveals an understanding of one kind of elder who was also called “pastor” and another kind of elder who was not, evidently, called “pastor.”

Edmund Clowney, the first President of Westminster Theological Seminary, believed that “among the elders who rule in the church, there are some who also labour in

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary on Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), accessed June 15, 2024, <https://ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/calcom43/cache/calcom43.pdf>, 109.

⁴⁶ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 248.

the Word and in teaching.”⁴⁷ He continues, “The gift of teaching distinguishes pastors and teachers from other church elders with whom they share ruling authority in the church.”⁴⁸ For Clowney, and other Presbyterians, all elders “rule” in the church, while some elders teach.

Other church traditions that are near in proximity to LHBC are Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC), Christian Reformed Churches (CRC), and United Reformed Churches (URC). These all stem from Reformed families who immigrated from the Netherlands. Many of our Reformed brothers and sisters from these denominations are influential in “The Region,” as northwest Indiana is affectionately called. Some of the most faithful people at LHBC grew up in one of these three denominations.

All three of these Dutch-founded denominations claim to believe in the *Belgic Confession*, among others. Part of the *Belgic Confession* reveals an understanding of a three-fold office in the local church: ministers, elders, and deacons. The “minister” is the one who is the main preacher for the congregation.

Article 31 of the *Belgic Confession* reads, “We believe, that the ministers of God's Word, and the elders and deacons, ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the Church.”⁴⁹ Note the threefold office of “ministers of God’s Word, and the elders and deacons.” There is an obvious similarity between the *Belgic Confession* and the views of Calvin and Clowney. However, the CRC, PRC, and URC denominations don’t draw a distinction between types of elders, but instead believe elders are a completely different office from “ministers.”

The view of having distinctions between types of elders (teaching and ruling) and the view of a “minister of the word” being an office in the church as distinct from the

⁴⁷ Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 1995), 212.

⁴⁸ Clowney, *The Church*, 212.

⁴⁹ “The Belgic Confession of Faith,” accessed November 8, 2024, <http://www.apuritansmind.com/creeds-and-confessions/the-belgic-confession-circa-1561-a-d/>.

elders both lend themselves to having some elders who are not expected to shepherd the sheep. Having elders who essentially function as a board is also a common practice in Presbyterian and Reformed churches. But is the practice biblical? Is there such a thing, biblically speaking, as elders who don't help shepherd a congregation by God's Word in at least informal ways? That question is considered and answered in the following section.

Biblical Critique

There are some churches that have elders who function as a board of overseers to hold pastors accountable and set the direction of the church. This is more obvious in some churches than others. As shown above, the polity of some churches draws a distinction between "ruling elders" and "teaching elders." Still, others have one separate office entirely called "minister of the Word," whose main job is preaching, while a group of elders function as a board of overseers.

Addressing the latter practice, there is no office in the NT called "minister of the Word." There are only two offices in local churches taught in the NT: deacon and pastor/elder/overseer. Since chapter two has already addressed that topic, the rest of this section will only answer whether it's biblical for only some elders to shepherd (or pastor) the congregation.

As stated above, I suspect that elders who don't shepherd stems from an over-application of 1 Timothy 5:17. This verse in Timothy makes a distinction between elders. It reads, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17). Consideration of this verse in detail is worthwhile.

The verse appears to imply there are some elders who "rule well" and some who do not. Those who rule well should receive "double honor," while it is assumed that those who don't rule well should only be given single honor. However, the context shows

that the “double honor” is more likely comparing the amount of honor to be received by elders with the honor to be given to widows, as instructed in 1 Timothy 5:3. There it says, “Honor widows who are truly widows” (1 Tim 5:3). In other words, honor widows, but give double honor to elders who rule well. No mention is made to any elders who do not rule well.

The next phrase in 1 Timothy 5:17 is necessary to consider. Again, the text says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching and teaching*” (1 Tim 5:17, emphasis mine). The italicized portion shows who should especially be honored more than widows—those who labor in preaching and teaching. There were some elders in Timothy’s church who labored in preaching and teaching and some who did not. Timothy was to instruct the church to give more honor to elders than to widows. This honor was to extend to all the elders. But it was to particularly, or especially, be shown to the elders who labored in preaching and teaching.

While there is a distinction among elders who labor in preaching and those who do not, this verse does not justify some elders only functioning as a board of overseers without sharing in the shepherding of a congregation. Yes, some elders labor at preaching and teaching, but all elders are called to shepherd the sheep. First Peter 5:1–2 instructs the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” No distinction is made among the elders by Peter. All the elders are to shepherd/pastor the flock. Paul instructed the Ephesian elders “to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28b, NASB).

But are pastors to be teachers? Of course! Notice the connection between pastoring and teaching in Ephesians 4:11. It reads, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” The connection between shepherds (pastors) and teachers is lost in English. David Mathis notes that

“Grammatically, ‘shepherds’ and ‘teachers’ are not two groups but one.”⁵⁰ To be a shepherd is to be a teacher. When God’s Word instructs elders to shepherd, it is instructing them to shepherd *by teaching*. After all, “the Lord is [their] shepherd” (Psalm 23:1a). He has the words of eternal life. It is impossible to be under-shepherds without feeding the sheep the words of life from the Chief Shepherd. That is why one of the qualifications of overseers/elders is “able to teach” (1 Tim 3:2). Mathis said, “What Christian pastors offer, most fundamentally, is not their cosmopolitan and interdisciplinary brilliance, ability to entertain masses, or executive facility. They are stewards and publicists of God’s very words.”⁵¹

Therefore, every elder is to be a teacher of God’s Word in some capacity. The purpose of this teaching is to help shepherd the sheep alongside the rest of the pastoral team. Certainly, some elders “labor” in this preaching and teaching. Those elders are especially worthy of more honor than widows. But all the elders are to shepherd by teaching, either in Sunday School, Bible electives, behind the pulpit, or over a hospital bed. Or, to put it negatively, “the church-board concept of eldership is irreconcilable with the New Testament teaching on eldership.”⁵²

Practical Considerations

Now that an overview and biblical critique of model 3 has been given, practical considerations are in order. Several will be noted.

The first practical consideration is to consider how every pastor-elder at LHBC will share in the shepherding of the sheep. How will they each be part of the teaching ministry? It will be important for every pastor-elder to preach at least one sermon every year, but preferably two. This will communicate their Scriptural authority in a public

⁵⁰ Mathis, *Workers For Your Joy*, 74n.

⁵¹ Mathis, *Workers For Your Joy*, 74.

⁵² Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 11.

way. Next, every pastor-elder should also teach some kind of Bible class or small group on a semi-regular basis. Lastly, every elder should be regularly praying for the members and regular attenders at Lake Hills and contacting some of them every week to share a verse of encouragement or admonishment. It will be important for us to develop a system whereby no soul is left out of this process or forgotten. Elders should be trained and equipped to perform weddings, conduct funerals, baptize new converts, lead meetings, and oversee worship services. Lord willing, it will become normal over time for LHBC to see various members of the pastoral team performing functions that have traditionally been attributed to the role of Senior Pastor.

Another practical consideration is how to communicate this change to the people of LH who grew up in the Reformed tradition. A small percentage (I estimate less than 20 percent) of members and attenders grew up Reformed. As noted above, they had elders, but they were board elders. I doubt my Dutch Reformed-raised saints saw their elders on the same level of authority as the “minister.” It may be a challenge for them to see every elder as having the same authority as the Senior Pastor. It may also be a challenge for them to see elders as the same office as pastor. Reformed traditions die hard, as evidenced by many splits among the Dutch Reformed denominations in this region.

The penultimate consideration is what to call various pastors at Lake Hills or any other church that has plural eldership. Every elder is a pastor is an overseer. They all share the same authority as they collectively shepherd a church. But not every elder has the same giftings. And as 1 Timothy 5:17 teaches, some pastors labor at preaching and teaching while other pastors preach and teach but without laboring in it. Alex Strauch’s current church calls every pastor or elder “pastor-elder.” Calling the elders who are employed by the church “pastor” and those who are not employed “elder” draws a distinction where none exists, except for the fact those staff elders are “especially” worthy of double honor (financial compensation). But wouldn’t that cause some members

to put more authority in those called “pastors” over those called “elders”? I think so. And considering the tendency of LHBC to elevate the Senior Pastor in their minds and in practice, in our context, it seems best to call every elder “pastor.”

My final practical consideration is what to communicate if people ask the question, “If all the elders are pastors, then why are we paying some and not others?” This is a fair question. The short answer is that if the pastors who are currently employed by the church are not laboring in a way that deserves financial remuneration, then they either should receive less or shouldn’t be paid (myself included)! The longer answer is to point back to 1 Timothy 5:17. There should be a marked difference in the amount of time and energy spent between the elders who are being “honored” financially and those who are not. Otherwise, the elders who are not being honored in that way will be insulted (whether or not they acknowledge it) and the church will lose trust in the entire pastoral team.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to disclose three models of leadership in local churches that are commonly practiced but need correction. The three models were (1) one pastor with excessive authority, (2) deacons who exercise oversight, and (3) elders who do not shepherd. Each model was chosen because at least some the people of LH are familiar with them or have been influenced by them.

When one pastor has excessive authority, he not only functions in an unbiblical pattern, he can also tend to put himself in the place of Jesus, who is the only head of the church. The first section in chapter 3 addressed this. Leaders of pastoral teams are appropriate, but every pastor-elder should function in humble submission to the leading of King Jesus in the team and recognize the limited and temporary nature of his role.

Regarding the second model, there is no example or instruction in all of Scripture for those serving in the office of deacon to oversee a local church. For deacons

to do so is a contradiction in terms, since there is another office called “overseer.” Deacons at LHBC need to seek the Lord about whether He is leading them to help pastor the sheep or assist the pastor-elders by taking items off their plate to enable them to oversee and shepherd the sheep more effectively.

Lastly, the model of elders who only serve as a board of overseers should be avoided at LHBC, if shared pastoral oversight is to be embraced in time. Every elder is called to help shepherd the sheep, and this necessarily includes teaching God’s Word and being involved in the lives of the sheep while praying with and for them. There are no ivory towers full of conference tables for any elder—whether he labors at preaching or teaching or not. There is only the Word and prayer, and the Chief Shepherd calls each member of the pastoral team to share in this glorious effort.

CHAPTER 4

DETAILS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

Describing the project’s particulars will be helpful for the reader. In section one, I share some context around the larger effort of leading LHBC to embrace elders. Section two explains how I prepared the congregation for the project. Section three details the content of the five sermons that make up the project. To conclude the chapter, section four shares what I did after the project to gather more data and follow up to the congregation.

Section 1: The Larger Effort Around the Ministry Project

My ministry project took place within the context of a larger effort to lead LHBC to embrace shared pastoral oversight. That larger effort is shared in this section in hopes of helping someone else see how I went about leading the church to not just learn more about a plurality of elders but embrace it.

I was very upfront with the search team and deacons of the church before I agreed to serve as pastor that I wanted to pursue elders at Lake Hills. The Lord had gone before me as many people had either already been discussing that topic or had come from Reformed churches that had elders. The search team and deacons agreed they would consider it. What “consider it” meant was unclear to all of us.

We began by reading and discussing a book called *Deacons* by Matt Smethurst—that is, the deacons, YP, and I. I typed up discussion questions and gave them to the team at least a few days before the deacons’ meetings. Reading and discussing that book took about a year of meeting once per month. The next year (with some of the same deacons but a few differences) we read and discussed *Why Elders?* by Benjamin Merkle.

I was learning and doing my best to lead the deacons to see what Scripture says.

The main barrier to the deacons in understanding plurality of elders was that they didn't understand that an elder *is* a pastor. Even among some of the men who had been in churches with elders, there was a disconnect in their minds regarding the biblical teaching that pastoring is what elders do. Some of them came from an IFB background that exalts *the* pastor to a position that is unattainable in their minds, which meant they could never see themselves as a pastor. They were more inclined to think they could be an elder, but because a pastor was so elevated in their minds, they couldn't imagine themselves being a pastor. Over time, several of the deacons came to see that pastor = elder = overseer in the NT. This meant some of the churches in our area might be functioning unbiblically, clarifying to some of the deacons that God was not calling them to help shepherd the sheep. For at least one deacon, it wasn't until I preached/taught about the topic (which is what my project ultimately turned out to be—a sermon series) that he finally understood that pastoring is (part of) what elders do.

Another help to the deacons, youth pastor, and me was Biblical Eldership Ministries, which is primarily the work of Alexander Strauch. Strauch's book *Biblical Eldership* is extremely thorough and is related to his ministry. He was readily available to me to answer questions, emails, text messages, and even to have a zoom meeting one Saturday morning with all our deacons. It was helpful for the deacons to hear from someone who has studied about elders more than I had. I also suspect the fact that Strauch was older than them had some sway in their minds. Strauch sent us several books for free. (We ended up buying 100 copies of the abridged version of *Biblical Eldership* to offer anyone in our church who wants one.)

After reading *Why Elders?* and talking with Dr. Strauch, I took a suggestion from the Biblical Eldership website on how to approach this topic with a church and pursue embracing a plurality of elders. Not everything the website suggested is what I did, but for the most part, I tweaked the plan the website suggested and presented it to the

deacons. That plan is called “Plan to Embrace Shared Pastoral Oversight at LHBC” and is available in APPENDIX 1. The deacons made a couple of suggestions to the plan and voted unanimously to empower me to act on the plan.

The plan has two simultaneous threads. The first thread is called “Congregational Involvement.” It includes my sermon series (called “teaching” on APPENDIX 1), a Transition Team, and opportunities for the congregation to provide feedback and learn what the Transition Team works on. Eventually, when all is said and done, and assuming the church continues to receive the entire plan well, the church will vote on a document prepared by the Transition Team that will replace the relevant portions of our current church constitution. Once done, that will prepare the church to identify and embrace some men to start serving as lay pastor-elders.

The second thread of the plan is a four-step process for equipping men to start serving as elder-pastors at LHBC. That four-step process, called “Pastor-Elder Development Track,” is APPENDIX 2. The Youth Pastor and I, at the suggestion of some of the deacons, prayerfully invited eight men to take Step 1 of the development track. Six of the men agreed to take Step 1. Those men, the YP, and I met for 10 sessions to discuss *Gospel Eldership* by Robert Thune and pray together about whether they believe the Lord wants them to help shepherd the sheep at LHBC. All the men completed a post interview to give them a chance to share reflections and whether or they wanted to move to Step 2. The goal is for the church to vote on the new portion of the LHBC constitution and then have some men ready to be observed and considered for eldership. Lord willing, that is what we will accomplish together.

Section 2: Preparation

The actual ministry project was a teaching/preaching series called, “Who Leads the Church?” The sermon series focused on increasing the understanding of the people of LHBC of what the Scripture teaches about shared pastoral oversight. Those

sermons are found in APPENDIXES 5–9.

In chapter 1, I stated that my second goal was “to develop a curriculum that teaches the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight.” After submitting chapter 1 of this project, I continued conversations with my staff about how to best teach LHBC about this important topic. They pressed me on the need to get as many people as possible to learn what I had to teach. We weighed different options on how to teach the content, but in the end settled on it being important enough that I needed to teach it on Sunday mornings during each of our main two gatherings. Because of this, what I ended up developing was more like a sermon series than a curriculum.

To increase the church’s understanding of shared pastoral oversight (SPO), I first needed to determine the level of understanding they had before I ever taught about it. To accomplish that, I created a pre-survey. The pre-survey is available in APPENDIX 3.

The pre-survey contained thirteen questions. Each question used the Likert scale. To solicit responses, I asked the Lord for one hundred responses. In addition to prayer, I mentioned the survey from the pulpit a few times, wrote about it in “The Weekly,” our church’s email newsletter, and promoted it on social media. I provided two ways for people to fill out the survey—online and on paper. I used Google Forms for the online survey, then exported it to print it. Paper surveys were encouraged to be turned in at a visible location in the main foyer of the church. Once turned in, I transferred the paper survey answers onto the digital version. A small portion of the surveys were invalid because they either didn’t have a name or weren’t filled out entirely. There were four responders who didn’t meet the criteria of attending at least three Sundays each month. One hundred four people successfully completed the pre-survey. With a little over three hundred people attending each week, and with around fifty of those being children, 104 responses accounts for around forty percent of the regular attenders of LHBC.

In addition to the pre-survey, I also promoted the teaching series through word of mouth, announcements, social media, and “The Weekly” over a period of four weeks.

There seemed to be a significant amount of excitement about the series. Many of the people had been having conversations about these topics before my arrival, and it seemed to me that they were very receptive to learning about it.

Section 3: Implementation

The project was executed similarly to most of my sermon series. It was a five-week series titled “Who Leads the Church?” The nature of the teaching was topical.

Week one was prepared from February 18–22 and was titled, “Why Biblical Polity Matters” (APPENDIX 5). My purpose was to help the church understand the importance of the topic. While not as important as the gospel and other first-tier issues, biblical polity does matter. I preached the message on February 23 at 8:30 AM and 11 AM. It was well received. After the message, I encouraged anyone who had any questions to come talk to me in the auditorium. Three people came. Two of them were affirming, and another shared a reflection that was neither positive nor negative.

The second week’s message was prepared from February 25–March 1. Its title was, “Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 1)” (APPENDIX 6). In it, I began to establish a pattern of an outline I would use to teach about each office. The outline contains four sections: (1) the name of the office, (2) the number of officers, (3) the qualifications of the officers, and (4) the responsibilities of the officers. On March 2, Sunday, I preached/taught the first two sections for the first office of pastor-elder, sharing about the name of the first office and number of officers in each church. The message was preached at 8:30 AM and 11 AM. I sought to show the saints of LHBC that God’s Word uses three terms to refer to the first office—overseer, elder, and pastor. I also sought to show that the pattern in the NT is for every local church to be led by a group of men serving in this first office.

The message was, again, well received. I do not remember any specific conversations about the message on that Sunday. The third week’s response was more

memorable.

Speaking of week three, I prepared it from March 11–15. Originally, I planned to preach it a week prior, but my wife’s grandfather passed away and we needed to make an unexpected trip to Arkansas to be with her family. Thankfully, one of our deacons, who is training to become a pastor-elder at LH, preached in my stead. Perhaps God used the timing of my wife’s grandfather’s death to show the importance of having multiple men who can help shepherd the sheep!

The title of the message for week three was, “Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 2)” (APPENDIX 7). In it, I taught about the qualifications for the first office. I summarized the qualifications into one sentence, then expounded on that sentence in the message. The sentence was “Men who are above reproach, hold to sound doctrine, and can teach sound doctrine.” Like the first two messages, I preached this message at 8:30 and 11 AM. The date of the messages was March 16, 2025.

Like the first two, the message seemed to be accepted well by the congregation. I anticipated a little more conversation about it because of how intentional I was to point out that only qualified men should serve in this first office.¹ By and large I know that the people of LHBC are complementarian, but I thought it important to be clear about this office being only for qualified men considering the soft egalitarianism that had been present. Not surprisingly, one woman wanted to talk with me after the sermon regarding the office only being reserved for men. I received her comment well and prayed with her and her husband. Either she or I mentioned that we should talk more about women in ministry. The next week I reached out to meet with her and her husband. We talked for a few hours. It turns out she is not as egalitarian as I first supposed.

In week four I wanted to be more practical about what the Scripture says the

¹ Before my arrival, there was an openly egalitarian woman leading a Life Group and two other ministries.

relationship should be like between the men in the first office and a congregation. The main questions I was getting from the sermons was about the relationship between paid pastors and potential non-paid pastors. My emphasis on equal authority amongst the elders was probably the newest truth to them. First Timothy 4:17, which teaches about the elders who “rule well,” was a feature of this fourth message.

I prepared the message from March 18–22 and preached it on March 23, 2025 at the 8:30 and 11 AM services. The title of the message was “Pastor-Elders and a Church: Defining the Relationship” (APPENDIX 8). This may have been one of the most helpful messages in the series. In it, I shared six responsibilities of men in the first office and six responsibilities a church has to her pastor-elders.

The final week was prepared from March 25–29 and was preached on March 30, 2025. This final message was only preached once at a service at 11 AM. Every fifth Sunday of a month, we have what we call “Pack the House” Sunday. On that Sunday we only have one service, asking everyone from the 8:30 service to join the 11 AM service. We also welcomed seventeen new members into the church on that day. Hence, I only preached the fifth message in the series one time that Sunday.

The title of the message was simply “Deacons” (APPENDIX 9). I compiled the four sections from the first office into one message about deacons, discussing the name of the office, the number of officers, the qualifications, and the responsibilities of the office, utilizing various passages of Scripture to accomplish this goal. The topic of the role of women came out more prominently in this message. I came down softly on the position of 1 Timothy 3:11 referring to the wives of deacons, but emphasized that those wives probably participated in the serving ministry of their husbands. I had two conversations about that point after the sermon. One was a question. A man wanted to know if a wife of a deacon is serving with her husband, and then her husband dies, could she continue serving. I told him I wasn’t sure. Another question was wanting me to clarify if I thought women could be deacons. In the sermon, I emphasized that I don’t think we should see

churches who have women deacons as enemies, but that I don't find that argument as most convincing.

It is likely challenging for LHBC to hear her pastor preach in such a way that is not demonstrably black and white on every issue. Many of them grew up in the IFB movement where doctrinal clarity and separatism were emphasized. Hearing her pastor say that churches who have women deacons are not necessarily enemies could have been somewhat shocking to some of them. But I'm confident that clear heads will prevail, and the intent of my point will be received over time. By in large, the final message was also well-received.

Section 3: Content Overview

My project was comprised of five sermons preached on Sunday mornings at Lake Hills. The title of the first sermon was, "Why Biblical Polity Matters." The second sermon was called, "Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 1)." The third was, "Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 2)." The fourth sermon title was, "Pastor-Elders and a Church: Defining the Relationship." The fifth and final sermon was called, "Deacons." What follows in this section is a brief overview of the content of each of these sermons. Each sermon can be found in their entirety in the Appendix.

Sermon One: "Why Biblical Polity Matters"

In the first sermon, I wanted to give the church several biblical reasons why the topic of polity matters. *Polity* was a word most of the people at LHBC had never heard. But I wanted them to see the importance of biblical polity and how the leadership structure of a church should function. Therefore, to start the series (and project), I gave them four reasons why it's important for a church to have a biblical polity.

To start the first sermon, I shared the illustration of a trellis and a vine. Just as a vine needs structure to grow, so a church needs structure to grow. I then segued into the

concept of polity by saying, “The fancy word for how a church should be structured is polity.” I then gave a brief overview of how I see Lake Hills currently functioning: Senior pastor-led, deacon-overseen and served, congregationally-governed. Then I laid all my cards on the table right at the beginning and told them what I see Scripture teach about polity—shared pastoral oversight, deacon-served, congregationally-governed.

The reasons I gave for why biblical polity matters are, (1) because God has spoken about it. Although the word “polity” is not mentioned in Scripture, issues related to polity are mentioned frequently. Some passages that talk about things related to polity are Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 5, Matthew 18, 1 Timothy 3, Acts 6, Titus 1, 1 Timothy 5:17, 19, among many others. If God has spoken about it, then it should matter to us.

Secondly (2), biblical polity matters because “it better enables us to affirm God’s work in some.” I used Acts 20:17–18, 28 to show that the Holy Spirit makes men overseers. I used Acts 6:2–3 to show that men “full of the Spirit” were to be chosen to be the alpha version of deacons. I then stated that I believe the Holy Spirit is empowering some men in our church to serve in these ways but that our polity prohibits them from serving.

The third reason biblical polity matters is because (3) “it helps protect a church from pastoral abuse.” I cited Jude 1:12 to show the reality that there are “shepherds feeding themselves” in churches. I then used Rehoboam to show that when one leader has unbridled authority, he doesn’t have to listen to advice. I then used more modern examples and research on pastors who abused others having a common characteristic of not being held accountable. I then concluded the section by noting that while having elders doesn’t guarantee a pastor will not abuse anyone, it does logically make it less likely.

The fourth and final reason I gave as to why biblical polity matters was (4) “it impacts the sheep Jesus died for.” I pointed to John 10:11, 14–15 to note how Jesus is the good shepherd and knows His own sheep. I then pointed out how, logically, polity

impacts people. And since the people impacted by polity are sheep—and *Jesus*’ sheep—it matters very much whether the polity is biblical and healthy. Surely Jesus cares about the structures around His sheep!

To conclude the sermon, I talked about how human pastor-elders will fail the sheep from time to time. Then I talked about how Jesus never will fail them, pointing to Psalm 23 to encourage them with how Jesus shepherds their souls.

Sermon Two: “Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 1)”

The sermon began by rehashing how I see our church currently functioning in her polity. I then talked about how there are two offices in a local church: pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. I pointed out that I would talk about each office in four sections (1) the name of the office, (2) the number of officers, (3) the qualifications of the officers, and (4) the responsibilities of the officers.

Then I began the first main section of the sermon, “The Name of the Office.” I showed them 1 Timothy 3:1, Acts 20:28, and Philippians 1:1 to define and point out the word “overseer” as one of the names for the first office. Then I did the same thing for “elder,” using Titus 1:5–7 and Acts 20:17–18, 28. Then I did the same thing for “pastor,” using John 21:16 and 1 Peter 5:1–2. I ended this section by reiterating that in Scripture pastor = elder = overseer, pointing out each of the nuances from each term. Then I tried to persuade them that they need a relationship with this kind of person in their life.

The next main section of the sermon was called “The Number of First Officers.” There were two subpoints: (1) “Churches in the New Testament had shared pastoral oversight” and (2) “Some commands only make sense in the context of shared pastoral oversight.” To support the first subpoint, I pointed to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch from Acts 14:21–23 and Ephesus in Acts 20:17. In support of the second subpoint, Hebrews 13:17 and James 5:14 were given. Hebrews 13:17 tells one group of Christians to obey a group of leaders. Those leaders were those who were “keeping watch

over” their souls (overseeing). James 5:14 tells the sick to call a group of these first officers to pray over them, anointing them with oil, for their healing. The (sub)point I was making was that Christians cannot obey these verses if they only have one pastor-elder. Therefore, the New Testament shows by example and implication that every church should have multiple pastor-elders.

To conclude the sermon, I pointed to Jesus, the true leader of His church. He is the chief shepherd (1 Pet 5:4), the “overseer of your souls” (1 Pet 2:25). He promised He would build His church (Mat 16:18). I then asked the saints, “Why wouldn’t you want more than one man watching out for your soul?”

Sermon Three: “Overseers, Elders, Pastors (Part 2)”

Sermon three began with a short poll about who knew the qualifications to become President of the United States. Then it segued into the qualifications to become a pastor-elder in a local church. I summarized the qualifications found in various passages of Scripture into one sentence that I then broke down. Those who are qualified to serve in the first office are, “Men who are above reproach, hold to sound doctrine, and can teach sound doctrine.”

The first part of the sermon was about how the first office is limited to men. I pointed to the male pronouns in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and the restriction given to women in 1 Timothy 2:12–13. Since pastor-elders are to teach and exercise authority, and since women are not to teach or exercise authority, I concluded that women are not to serve as pastor-elder. I “pumped the brakes” a bit near the end of this section to help people not over-apply this principle and keep women from doing things like leading singing or reading Scripture, which I believe is a stretch of 1 Timothy 2:12–13

In the next section of the sermon, I went through each qualification in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 to give a brief overview of them. I then moved to section three and pointed to Titus 1:9 about how elders “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.”

Elders must know Scripture very well. They must know the gospel well also—well enough so that they can discern error when they see or read it.

Finally, I shared the final qualification which is found in Titus 1:9 and 1 Timothy 3:2. Titus described it as “give instruction in sound doctrine” and Timothy simply says overseers must be “able to teach.” Put together, elders must know God’s Word well enough to instruct people the Word and teach people the Word of God in various settings.

To end this sermon, I used the illustration of a turtle on a fencepost. The illustration simply says that if you find a turtle on a fencepost, you can be sure it didn’t get there by itself. The same is true for those qualified to be pastor-elders. Indeed, even the apostle Paul said, “our sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor 3:5). It was important to me to remind them of Jesus, who is truly the only one perfectly qualified and the only one who can make men qualified.

Sermon Four: “Pastor-Elders and a Church: Defining the Relationship”

After sermon three, several people gave me questions about how a group of pastors would work in a church. One person even mentioned that it seemed like I had just preached myself out of a job. Focusing on the responsibilities of pastor-elders was important, as well as showing the church the responsibilities they have to their pastors. Hence, this fourth sermon.

I began the message by telling them a story about how Lynsey and I first got together when we had a DTR—a conversation that Defined The Relationship. I leveraged that story to talk about how they needed to understand the relationship between them and their elder-pastors. The sermon contained two sections (1) “Pastor-Elders to a Church” and (2) “A Church to Her Pastor-Elders.”

Section one listed and explained the responsibilities that overseers are to provide a local church. There are six: (1) prayer (Acts 6:4; James 5:14), (2) leadership (1

Timothy 5:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:13), (3) teaching (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9, 1 Timothy 5:17), (4) oversight (Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:1–2, Acts 20:28), (5) godly examples (1 Peter 5:2–3), and (6) equipping (Ephesians 4:11–12). Each responsibility was supported from Scripture and applied practically to the life of the church.

Section two listed and explained the responsibilities that a local church has to her elders. They are to (1) “observe and imitate” (taken from Hebrews 13:7), (2) “obey and submit” (taken from Hebrews 13:17), (3) “lovingly respect” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13), (4) “compensate (some)” (1 Timothy 5:17–18), (5) “hold accountable” (1 Timothy 5:19), and (6) “pray for” (Romans 15:30).

To conclude the sermon, I used the illustration of a couple dancing in a ballroom. I wanted to emphasize the beauty of the dance as one lead and the partner followed, all to the music of a master conductor. This is an illustration of pastor-elders and a church. The pastor-elders listen to the Spirit according to the Word and lead the church. All the while the church also listens to the Spirit according to the Word and follows the lead of the pastor-elders.

Sermon Five: “Deacons”

The final sermon in the series (and project) was about deacons. I combined the main points from the sermons about the first office for this sermon and spoke about the (1) name, (2) number, (3) qualifications, and (4) responsibilities of deacons. Since the Scripture says much less about deacons than it does about pastor-overseer-elders, I decided to only spend one sermon on deacons.

Section one was about the name of the second office. I defined *diakonos* for them and showed them several examples of the usage of the word outside of it being referred to as an office. First Corinthians 3:5 uses the word to describe Apollos and Paul. Romans 16:1 uses it to describe Phoebe—a servant. I then noted its use in 1 Timothy 3:8, one of only two times in Scripture the word is used to refer to an office.

Section two was about the number of deacons that a church should have. This section was important because churches often have written into their constitutions a certain number of deacons their church should have. (Several people asked about how many pastor-elders we should have—as if God’s Word prescribes a certain number!) Acts 6:1–3, as the “origin story” of deacons, described the church as finding seven men. I pointed this out but noted that the Scripture doesn’t prescribe any number of deacons for each church either in Acts 6 or anywhere else. I concluded by saying, “A church should have as many deacons as she needs, if they are qualified.”

Then I turned to the qualifications of deacons found in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Like the section in a previous sermon on the qualifications for pastors, I mentioned each qualification and briefly described them. The one distinction is that I gave a brief aside as to whether verse 11 is referring to women deacons or the wives of deacons. I softly landed on the verse describing the wives of deacons and implied that because of these qualifications, the Scripture is probably implying that the wives of deacons are to serve alongside their husbands. After that section, I returned to the list of qualifications for deacons.

Finally, the fourth section was about the responsibilities of deacons. First Timothy 3:13 points to “those who *serve well* as deacons” (my emphasis). I used this and Acts 6:1–3 to show that deacons are to serve. The exact words I gave were, “Deacons serve practical needs, freeing pastor-elders to focus on their role.”

To conclude the sermon, I pointed out how no one measures up to these qualifications, citing Romans 3:10. I then reminded them that no one naturally wants to be a servant (deacon) to begin with, but would rather be served. Then I urged them to remember Jesus, the true servant, who “came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Section 4: After the Project

After the project ended, I took two specific actions. First, I purchased 100 copies of the abridged version of Alex Strauch's *Biblical Eldership* to make available to the congregation. These copies were placed in prime locations for people to find. We also communicated to the church that they could get a free copy of that book if they wanted to learn and read more about the topic before moving forward. To the point of this writing, most of those books have been taken.

Secondly, I prepared a post-survey for those who listened to the sermons and took the pre-survey. Most of the questions in the post-survey are identical to the pre-survey. My purpose was to track the changes that occurred in the understanding of the congregation through the teaching of the sermon series. Eighty people filled out the post-survey, by God's grace. The post-survey was captured online via Google forms and was also made available via paper. Since I had the names of those who filled out the pre-survey, I was able to directly contact those people and send them the post-survey electronically. I also posted on my Facebook account and the Facebook account for the church to remind people to fill out the post-survey. Gathering this post-survey enabled me to compile data to track the effectiveness of the project.

Unrelated to this project, but related to my larger efforts to lead the church to embrace shared pastoral oversight, I went on a "Sunday School tour" to share the plan our deacons approved to have the church consider embracing plural elders. I also recorded a video explaining the plan and made it available to every Life Group to view and discuss. That plan, mentioned earlier, can be found in APPENDIX 1. Since it is not related to this project, I will not share those details, but for any who are interested, I hope the plan can be helpful.

Conclusion

This chapter has served to overview and detail the project of increasing understanding of shared pastoral oversight at Lake Hills Baptist Church. In it, I shared the

larger context of my efforts to not just increase understanding, but give the church the best opportunity to embrace shared pastoral oversight. Then I wrote of my efforts to prepare the congregation for the project by giving them a pre-survey. The details of the project's content came next, followed by how I followed up to gather post-survey content. All that is lacking at this point is an evaluation of the project, which is found in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

This evaluation follows the standard outline provided. That outline includes seven sections: (1) an evaluation of the project's purpose; (2) an evaluation of the project's goals; (3) the strengths of the project; (4) the weaknesses of the project; (5) a section on what I would do differently; (6) some theological reflections; and (7) personal reflections, and a short conclusion. Each of these points will now be considered.

Evaluation of the Project's Purpose

The stated purpose of this project from chapter one was, "To increase the understanding of LHBC of the biblical teaching of shared pastoral oversight." As I will discuss later in this chapter, the purpose of the project was likely not articulated most accurately based on the type of research conducted. Unbeknownst to this author, using the Reichert Scale is more conducive to grading *attitudes* toward a topic than *understanding* of a topic. After discovering this insight, my advisor was contacted to determine whether the purpose of the project should be changed. Instead of changing the purpose of the project, it was agreed upon to keep the original purpose intact but write about this discovery in chapter five.

The original purpose was noble, but was the purpose met through the project bearing in mind the likely misuse of research? The data reported shows a positive difference in the pre and post survey results. Since the intended purpose was to change attitudes and not "increase understanding," the project was successful. Two of the three goals were met. Semantics notwithstanding, the people of Lake Hills better understand (or are more receptive toward) the biblical teaching of shared pastoral oversight, and the

cause was the teaching of this project. Praise be to the Lord!

Evaluation of the Project's Goals

This project sought to meet three goals: (1) to assess the church's understanding of the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight; (2) to develop a curriculum that teaches the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight; and (3) to teach Lake Hills Baptist Church by implementing the curriculum in a large group setting. Each of these goals will be discussed and evaluated.

Goal 1: Assess LHBC's Understanding of Shared Pastoral Oversight

The first goal was to assess the church's understanding of shared pastoral oversight. A pre-survey was developed to accomplish this goal. With 103 responses to the thirteen-question pre-survey, roughly forty percent of the number of regularly attending adults participated. One of the first questions asked on the survey was, "Do you attend a Sunday morning worship service at Lake Hills Baptist Church in Schererville, Indiana at least three Sundays each month?" Those who selected "no" were not included in the survey results. This process served to ensure that those who participated in the project regularly attend.

The pre-survey revealed varied understandings of who should lead a church. Question 11, which stated, "Every local church should be led by a group of qualified men called 'elders,' 'pastors,' or 'overseers,'" was one that 81.8 percent of the people of LHBC responded to with either "agree" or "strongly agree." But in response to, "Deacons should be the main leaders of local churches" (question 8), only 53.9 percent said they either "disagree" or "strongly disagree." Along that same vein, 31.5 percent of responders said they either "agree somewhat," "agree," or "strongly agree" that "deacons should have authority over pastors in local churches." While the church claimed to believe overwhelmingly in shared pastoral oversight, or a plurality of elders, when asked about

the authority of deacons, the responses revealed a lack of consistency.

The pre-survey revealed a lack of understanding about the term “elder.” Question 10 stated, “an ‘elder’ should be the same office in a local church as a ‘pastor.’” Only 40.4 percent of people replied with either “agree” or “strongly agree.” I suspect the reasons for this lack of understanding were (1) the lack of the use of the term in most Baptist circles in our region and (2) the discrepancy implied by some churches in our area who call some “pastor” and others “elder.”

With 103 people responding to the pre-survey and all of them attending at least three Sundays each month, I see the first goal of assessing the church’s understanding of shared pastoral oversight being a success. Their understanding was assessed. The assessment showed significant room for growth specifically in the justification of synonymous usage of the terms “pastor” and “elder” and in “deacon” being a second office and not one of oversight.

Goal 2: Develop a Curriculum That Teaches the Biblical Practice of Shared Pastoral Oversight

The second goal was to develop a curriculum that teaches the biblical practice of shared pastoral oversight. As I stated in chapter 4, what began as a curriculum turned into a sermon series. The sermon series explicated various passages all related to the topic of elders and pastors. Each of the sermons are included in the appendix and were discussed more thoroughly in chapter four.

Some may think the difference between a curriculum and a sermon series is semantics. But in my context, what the pastor preaches behind the pulpit is seen by some as law. I suspect my choice to preach about this topic carried more force or weight behind what I was saying than it would have if I had taught it several times in various smaller groups.

Earlier in this project, I stated that I would have a panel of pastors or

theologians evaluate the content of curriculum I would teach. However, due to the project turning into a sermon series instead of a class, I did not have anyone assess the quality of the content of my sermons before I preached each message in this series. Therefore, the content of the sermon series was not deemed credible by an external panel of pastors and theologians. It is my assessment that since the content I preached was not graded, the second goal was not met with as much credibility as I anticipated.

Goal 3: Teach LHBC By Implementing the Curriculum in a Large Group Setting

The third goal was to teach LHBC about shared pastoral oversight by implementing the curriculum I created. Because the project ended up being a sermon series instead of a curriculum, the sermon series was taught over five weeks to the people of Lake Hills on Sunday mornings at the 8:30 AM and 11 AM services.

The measure for the third goal included a post-survey, and the goal was met when a t-test for dependent samples demonstrated a positive, statistically significant difference between pre and post-teaching survey scores: $t_{(74)} = -6.275, p < .0001$. The T-Test is available in APPENDIX 4.

A t-test was also run for each of the 13 questions. The question that showed the most significant change was question 8 which read, “Deacons should be the main leaders of local churches.” With a t Stat of -6.392, the people of Lake Hills now know that statement to be biblically unfounded. Lake Hills Baptist also better understands that the statement in question 7 of “deacons should have authority over pastors in local churches” is also biblically unfounded (with a t Stat of -4.887). In summary, every question showed a statistically significant difference between pre and post-teaching survey scores with a range between $t_{(74)} = -1.435, p < .0001$ and $t_{(74)} = -6.392, p < .0001$. Considering this data, the third goal can be considered a success.

Strengths of the Project

Next, the strengths of this project are to be noted. This project contained five strengths: (1) the timing of the project in the life of the church; (2) the participation and excitement level of the congregation; (3) the long-term impact on the author; (4) the long-term impact on the congregation; and (5) the simple reliance on God's Word. Each of these strengths will be discussed in what follows.

The Timing of the Project in the Life of the Church

The timing of this project was a strength and a credit to our sovereign God. Mother's Day in 2025 marked two years of my being the Lead Pastor at Lake Hills. When my wife and I were looking for a church to serve, one stipulation I had was that the church either needed to have elders or be willing to consider pursuing elders. Upon candidating, I made it clear that I believed every local church should be led by a plurality of elders. The search team and deacons of LHBC (at the time) all agreed they would be willing to consider elders.

After making that belief known, I began to hear from several people how thankful they were that I believe the Bible teaches plural elders. One deacon had even purchased the book titled *Deacons* by Matt Smethurst and distributed it to several other deacons before my coming. Little did that deacon know that *Deacons* was the first book I wanted to read with the deacons as we considered this change.

No one is deserving of any credit for the groundwork that was laid before my arrival other than God. People in this church had already been talking and asking why they didn't have elders. At least one deacon had been having a desire to serve as a pastor-elder, and another was already acting as a lay-pastor even though he didn't have a fully biblical grasp of the concept. There were many who had never experienced shared pastoral oversight, and there was learning to be had, but the people of Lake Hills were already open to the idea before I ever arrived. This openness (and even hunger) for a

plurality of elders resulted in the people being open and even eager to listen to the sermon series related to this project.

The Participation and Excitement Level of the Congregation

Another strength of this project was the participation and excitement level of the congregation. Lake Hills “leaned in” during the sermon series. Granted, they usually listen to preaching very well. But during this series, they seemed especially engaged. Also, they participated well in the surveys. With an average attendance at three hundred including children, I was thrilled and thankful to have over one hundred people complete the pre-survey and eighty complete the post-survey.

In addition to their participation, the people were excited about the topic. The Lord had gone before me and had prepared them by making several understand the importance of shared pastoral oversight. Some Sunday School classes had open conversations about the topic before my arrival. Some deacons had already believed the practice to be biblical. I had several conversations, anecdotally, with people who expressed excitement about the sermon series. To God be the glory!

Long-Term Impact on the Author

The third strength of the project is, what I believe will be the long-term impact on the author. My ministry will never be the same after this project. Having been raised in the Free Will Baptist denomination, I have never been part of a church that had a plurality of elders. I came to this conclusion on my own over several years of study. The project solidified and clarified the practice in my heart and mind.

This project was not just something I needed to do to complete a degree. It was something I am personally invested in and am practicing in my life and ministry. More specifically, I candidated at Lake Hills, in part, on the importance of having a plurality of elders. The search team, deacons, staff, and congregation were well aware of my view on

the matter and how I wanted to pursue it. Consequently, this project had a lot riding on it for my ministry here.

Now I cannot imagine doing pastoral ministry without a team of pastors or seeking to raise up a team of pastors. It seems to be going very well thus far, for which I am grateful. Perhaps the Lord will allow us to spend a long ministry here and use me to help raise up many other pastors. But even if it is not here in NW Indiana, I hope and pray the Lord will allow me to be part of a pastoral team and raise up other pastors for the rest of my life.

Long-Term Impact on the Church

The penultimate strength of the project is the potential for long-term impact on the church. As is the case for the author, Lake Hills Baptist Church will also not be the same after this project. This project is a subset of a much larger effort for the church to not just better understand biblical eldership, but embrace it. Without the teaching aspect (i.e. this project), it is possible that the church would have embraced eldership, but less likely.

I am currently praying about who to invite to be part of a “transition team,” a group of members/leaders who will propose a rewrite to relevant portions of our constitution related to deacons and pastors. The church will have opportunity to review this document, make suggestions, and once it is revised, vote on whether to accept the changes. The acceptance of that document will set us on course to embrace shared pastoral oversight.

In addition to the transition team, at the time of this writing, three men are working through an ordination process and meeting with the staff pastors two Sundays/month for prayer, discussion of *Workers for Your Joy* by David Mathis, and personal encouragement and community building. I hope that by the time the church votes to accept the changes to the constitution, these three men will be ready to be

considered by the church as lay-pastor-elders.

Additionally, we will be inviting a young man to be a pastoral apprentice for a year starting August 2025. In exchange for him working at the church, we are providing him a full ride scholarship at Moody Bible College, to be reassessed each year. He will be participating in the pastor/elder training as well. The milieu of our church encouraged this endeavor—the same milieu that accepted this project.

Lastly, the project has led me to embrace raising up other pastors as a continual personal mission. Already I have one other man who I am working with in hopes of him pursuing pastoral ministry at Lake Hills. The project was helpful in countless ways, and Lake Hills will not be the same again.

Simple Reliance on God's Word

Finally, this project's simple reliance on God's Word was a strength. God's Word hardens or softens. It always results in God's purposes being established. By God's grace, LHBC is receptive to God's Word. In my experience, God's Word is clearly explained and faithfully applied, they accept it.

My goal in teaching the project was to make God's Word clear and let God do the convincing. Several times I was asked why I wanted to make the change of embracing SPO. My response was simple and consistent: because God's Word teaches it. What appears to be the result is that God convinced people.

What a privilege it is to have God's Word and to be able to teach it simply and trust Him to do what He will with it! And what an honor it is when a dear group of people receive it with humility and obey it. God's Word is effective. Relying on it was a strength of this project because reliance on it allowed God to make the project effective.

Weaknesses of the Project

Every manmade project has weaknesses. This project is no exception. Surely there are countless weaknesses of this project of which this author is unaware. There may

also be some weaknesses that are being willfully ignored. But the weaknesses of this project according to the author are as follows: (1) ignorance about how to conduct the research, and (2) the difference in participation level between pre-surveys and post-surveys.

Ignorance About How to Conduct the Research

The first weakness to be made aware of is ignorance about what kind of research to use to accomplish the goal of the project. Although I did take the writing courses as required in the degree program, I took a break from my coursework due to a change in ministry context near the beginning of the project. Perhaps that break was a major cause of my ignorance about how to conduct the research needed for my project. Regardless, I was unaware about the error in my research until after I implemented the project.

I knew I wanted to help the church better understand shared pastoral oversight, or a plurality of elders. One of my main goals, therefore, was to “increase understanding of shared pastoral oversight.” What I learned after my research is that the Likert scale is not the best type of research model to use for this goal. Dr. Harrod, in a personal email conversation, said, “If you are measuring *understanding*, any response between the highest and lowest response possibilities (1 or 6) doesn't really matter. If you used survey responses options of Agree/Disagree, you probably measured ‘attitude’ rather than ‘understanding.’”¹ Dr. Harrod’s clarifications mean that my surveys measured attitude instead of understanding. I hope this error in nomenclature does not invalidate the legitimacy of my findings.

I’m not sure what I could have done differently to avoid this. But still, my ignorance of research methods was a weakness. Knowing these things beforehand would

¹ Dr. Joseph Harrod, email, May 30, 2025.

have sharpened my research and made my findings more legitimate.

Difference in Participation Level Between Pre-Surveys and Post-Surveys

Another weakness of the project was the difference in participation levels between the pre-survey and the post-survey. Over one hundred people participated in the pre-survey. I used an electronic version of the survey and a paper copy to capture that many entries. It was not difficult to get that much participation due to the excitement level among the people.

However, it was more difficult to get the same people who filled out the pre-survey to fill out a post-survey. I had to contact the individuals personally, which was more time consuming, and then remind them again to get up to eighty responses. I suspect the reason it was more difficult to capture post-survey responses than pre-survey responses was due to diminishing excitement as the sermon series ended. Another explanation for the disparity may have been a lack of understanding on behalf of the church in needing to take the same survey twice. The result of this challenge was a twenty percent loss in participation between the pre and post-surveys. Would there be a significant difference in results if those twenty people filled out the post-survey? Due to exceptional participation of a large sample size, I do not believe the outcome would be significantly affected. Nevertheless, I take this difference in participation between surveys to be a notable weakness of the project.

What I Would Do Differently

This section regards any changes I would make to the project were I to do it all over again. In short, I'm happy with the results of the project and the impact it has had on me and LHBC. The research and implementation has been a good challenge, and I can see the positive benefits in several ways. At the same time, I would do a few things differently if I were to do the same project again. Those things are threefold: (1) learn

more about what kind of research would best suit my goal, (2) consider adding one additional sermon to clarify the role of the congregation in plural eldership, and (3) better consider how to ensure the same number of pre-survey responders also complete the post-survey. Each of these will be discussed in order.

First, I would learn more about the research portion of the project before the implementation phase. I had only a vague idea of what a t-test was before it was time to write chapter four. This was probably the case because when I took the course that explained t-tests, as I stated earlier, I was in a different ministry context and was planning on doing an entirely different project which included interview-based results and not quantitative data. Perhaps I can credit that challenge to my changing ministry contexts. But if I were to do it again, I would look more into t-tests and which kind of research questions to conduct before implementing the project. I suspect this would have empowered me to know that what I was seeking to change was “attitudes” and not “understanding,” as Dr. Harrod pointed out to me, referenced earlier.

Secondly, I would consider adding one more sermon to the series that addressed more pointedly the role of the members in a church. I did speak to that responsibility in a sermon, but it was not the focal point. If I had a sermon (or perhaps two) that was expressly focused on congregational government, then the outline of “shared pastoral authority, deacon-served, and congregationally ruled” would have been more well-rounded in the minds of the church. This “weakness” is shared as a result of my hearing from one person who wanted to know more about the role of the congregation in biblical polity.

The last thing I would do differently is think more carefully about how to secure the post-interview response from each research participant. I would make it a point to communicate to everyone taking the pre-survey that in order for their response to be valid, they would also need to take the post-survey. I would be surprised if any participants understood the need to take both surveys for their responses to be counted.

Coming up with a more effective way to communicate about the importance of taking both the pre and post-surveys may have improved the twenty percent loss in participation from pre to post-survey.

Theological Reflections

Continuing along the theme of reflection, some theological reflections are now warranted. The first reflection is a surprise I experienced when studying the project. The second is a reflection on the potential connection between the Trinity and God's desire for a plurality of elders in local churches. The third reflection is about a connection between a church's trust in the authority of God's Word and her willingness to embrace change that's biblically rooted.

My first reflection is that I was surprised about something in this project. That is, I was not planning on having my understanding of elders changed by this project. Before the project, I thought a church having elders was biblical, but it was not until I came across *Biblical Eldership* by Alex Strauch that I came to see every pastor as having the same office as an elder and vice-versa. Reformed churches in our area draw a distinction between elders and pastors. I now find that to be a false distinction, or a distinction without a difference. Either way, I'm grateful to have settled where I have. The most biblical way to approach the topic is to equate elder with pastor. Therefore, it is best to avoid drawing a distinction in the minds of the congregation by calling some "pastor" and others "elder." Going into the project, I did not anticipate calling every elder "pastor."

Another theological reflection is the connection between a plurality of elders as a model for the kind of biblical community desired in a local church and its likely source in the Trinity. I hope for the pastoral team at Lake Hills to become a model of the kind of godly, gospel-focused community that our entire church can emulate. May it be so. And what is the source of that need for community? Could it be the three-in-one-ness of the

Godhead? Sang Hyun Lee, a significant scholar on Jonathan Edwards, said, “For Edwards, what God does in relation to the world is fundamentally grounded in and thus inextricably related to what God is within himself.”² If Lee’s claim of Edwards’ theology is correct, Jonathan Edwards might point to God’s triune nature as a basis for humanity’s need for community. A reflection, or perhaps a theory, is that the community of God in three persons is reflected in His desire for local churches to be led by a community of men who are being renewed into the image of the Son. The three-in-oneness of God may be the source of His desire for every local church to be led by a plurality.

Lastly, I see a connection between a church’s reverence and trust in the Word of God and her embrace of changes in polity. If LHBC did not revere God’s Word as the highest authority in the life of our church, it is doubtful she would accept the changes in polity I have been proposing through this project. Granted, some have wanted to know the practical reasons for the changes, which is understandable. But the bottom line is “What does God’s Word say?” That question has been a bedrock for this entire project and the changes I’m leading at Lake Hills. Praise the Lord for their trust in the sufficiency of God’s Word.

Personal Reflections

The last major section of this chapter is devoted to personal reflections. I have several, which I hope are encouraging and helpful. They are shared in no particular order.

First, what a privilege it is to have the opportunity to study in this capacity! Out of the billions of people in the world, I have been chosen by God to receive His salvation in Christ. And not only that, but I have had the opportunity to attend an undergraduate institution (Welch College, Gallatin, TN) that instilled in me a love for God, theology, and ministry. Also, I was given the opportunity to study long-distance at

² Jonathan Edwards, *Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), EBSCOhost, 33.

SBTS for over ninety credit hours of Bible, theology, and ministry courses over several years. Additionally, I had the chance to study even more at Southern to receive the Doctor of Ministry degree and apply much of that learning to a local church full of wonderful, godly people. How many people in the world can say they have received the amount and quality of Bible instruction I have received? If God's Word is more to be desired than gold, then I am one of the wealthiest people in the world.

Secondly, how blessed am I to have my wife, Lynsey! She is not only beautiful, but increasingly godly. She knows me like no one else, understands me, respects my leadership, and supports me. As I end my education, she is to be praised and lauded for her worth that is far above rubies.

Next, I reflect on the blessing it has been to study at Southern Seminary. During my MDiv, I remember sitting in various courses on multiple different occasions and feeling the pleasure of God in my heart and spirit. Our God reassured my heart and mind in those moments by letting me know that I was exactly where I needed to be and was doing exactly what He wanted me to. My response in those moments was simply, "Thank you, Lord." I am truly honored to have had the privilege of studying at SBTS and consider it a gift from God.

Additionally, I am finding that practicing shared pastoral oversight is helping sanctify me. Let me describe in a bit more detail. Lake Hills has roots in the GARBC, which is a cousin of sorts to independent Baptist churches. One mark of IFB-type churches is a high regard to the office of Senior Pastor. Since I understand the importance of shared pastoral oversight, and as I've tried to defend the biblical nature of shared pastoral oversight, I have been seeking to give over some of the authority or "power" that has existed in my chair to other pastors. The YP, who has faithfully served in this church for twenty-five years, has deference ingrained in the ethos of his ministry. But the new Pastor of Music and Young Adults, which we hired since the start of this project, does not come from the IFB background. His previous church was one where the Lead Pastor left

and the church had to decide whether he or the Student Pastor would become the new LP. I mention this to show that our Pastor of Music and Young Adults is not used to total deference to the LP, which is good. There have been times when my understanding and embrace of SPO has forced me to listen better to the other pastors, and at times defer to them and the oversight the Lord has entrusted to them. God has used this to help show me the difference between a Scriptural command and my own personal preference. Thanks be to God that He has helped me die to myself in some areas through this process.

My next reflection is on the temporal nature of pastoral ministry. This project was years in the making. Having come from a single pastor/deacon model, it took several years for me to become convinced that plural eldership is biblical. After all of that time of study, even still, the project is just a small part of a larger effort to help LHBC embrace SPO, which has much longer to go before its completion. Meanwhile, what remains of my hair is increasingly gray. I am now middle-aged, and our oldest daughter is in the youth group. With these realities is a reminder of how temporary and brief my ministry will be when all is said and done. Not before long someone will take my place. God will raise up someone else, and by God's grace, I will be with Christ.

Lord willing, I will have decades left of ministry. But with about half of my life now lived, the brevity of my ministry and life in light of the vastness of the kingdom and eternity has a sobering effect on me. Before I started full time vocational ministry, I was so eager and hopeful to make a significant impact for Christ. Now after having spent years and thousands of dollars pursuing education, along with the years I have spent pursuing and completing this project, I am realizing how little I am able to accomplish. The world is a massive place. Jesus has countless servants He is using to spread His glory. Soon I will be forgotten by everyone who is left. While what He is doing through and in me is not insignificant, and while it is perhaps more than others, it is small. And yet, God reigns and I am content.

Conclusion

This project has sought to increase Lake Hills Baptist Church's understanding of shared pastoral oversight, or a plurality of elders. Chapter five evaluated the entire project. This evaluation included the project's purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. The chapter also communicated what I would do differently before giving theological reflections and personal reflections.

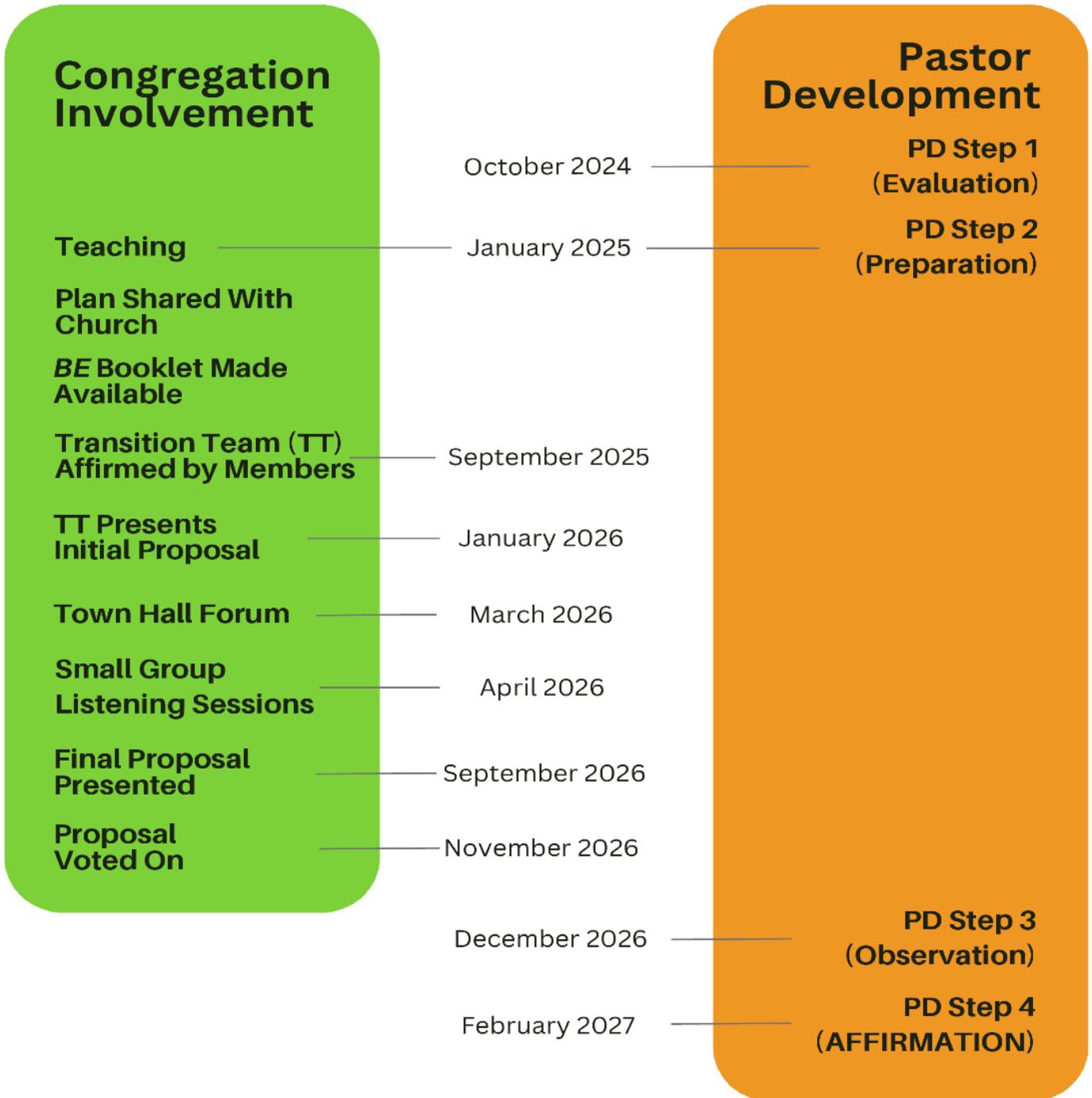
The New Testament contains convincing support that every local church should pursue having a plurality of elders. Various types of churches in the region surrounding Lake Hills have had an impact on her understanding of pastoral authority and the nature of pastoral ministry. But these influences do not pose an insurmountable problem to local churches who accept God's Word as their highest authority. The response of LHBC to this author's humble attempts to make this topic in God's Word clear gives evidence that attitudes toward shared pastoral oversight can change. *Soli Deo gloria!*

APPENDIX 1

PLAN TO EMBRACE SHARED PASTORAL OVERSIGHT AT LHBC

What follows is an overview of a plan for our church to embrace SPO. It is a larger goal than this DMin project. The DMin project is part of the plan. Readers may find it helpful to better understand the broader context of how LHBC is not just learning about about SPO, but seeking to embrace it.

PLAN TO EMBRACE SHARED PASTORAL OVERSIGHT AT LHBC



APPENDIX 2

PASTOR-ELDER DEVELOPMENT TRACK

In conjunction with the congregation of LHBC learning about Shared Pastoral Oversight, several men began a process of training to become pastor-elders. That process is explained in the “Pastor-Elder Development Track,” which follows. Like APPENDIX 1, this material is shared in order to enable the reader to better understand the larger process of LHBC’s embrace of SPO.

Overview

This Pastor/Elder Development Track describes a plan for the development and affirmation of pastor-elders to join the pastoral team to help oversee and shepherd the sheep at LHBC.

Special thanks to the “Elder Development Program: A Comprehensive Guideline” from the Biblical Eldership ministry, from which much of the information in this track was taken.

I plan for this development track to function like a funnel. More men will begin the track than finish it. That is okay. Part of the purpose is to help men determine whether the Lord is calling them to serve as an under-shepherd.

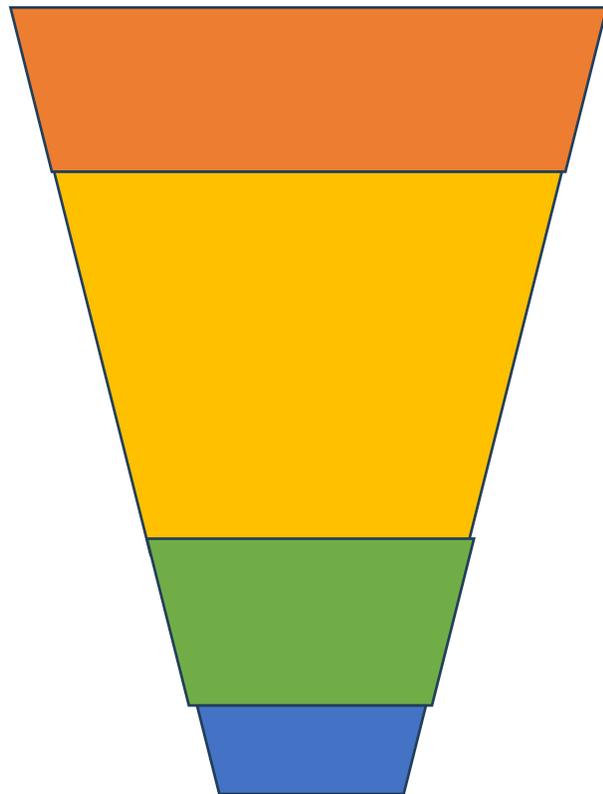
The track has four steps: (1) Evaluation, (2) Preparation, (3) Observation, and (4) Affirmation, as shown in the following illustration:

Step 1: Evaluation

Step 2: Preparation

Step 3: Observation

Step 4: Affirmation



Step 1: Evaluation (2-3 months)

A. *Gospel Eldership* book discussion and prayer

Many potential candidates will be identified and invited by current pastors to meet every-other-week for discussion of *Gospel Eldership* book and prayer. The purpose is for men to grow personally but also prayerfully consider God's calling of them serving as a pastor/elder. Candidates commit to these 10 weeks but aren't required to move to letter B or Step 2.

B. Pre-Candidate Evaluation

- Personal Testimony
- Interview with current Pastors
- Prayer
- Recommendation of next steps

Willing candidates write personal testimony and are interviewed with the current pastors. They spend a few weeks in prayer and fasting for the Lord's confirmation/guidance. The pastors will then recommend whether the candidate moves on to step 2 or an alternate next step. The Pre-Candidate Evaluation can happen at any time during the 10 weeks or afterward.

Step 2: Preparation (6-9 months)

A. Personal Plan

Approved candidate/s determines Bible reading, prayer, prayer partners, family, financial, evangelistic plan and presents to pastors for approval.

B. Every Other Week Meetings Begin

- *Workers For Your Joy* book discussion and fellowship
- Prayer
- Pastoral Preparation Test (PPT)
- Practicum Training (teaching, counseling, visiting the sick, preaching, etc., tailored to individual)

Approved candidates will meet every other week with pastors. The every-other-week meeting will include a book discussion, prayer, and discussion of any questions the candidate has on his PPT or practicum training. The PPT is a thorough, self-paced, written test of key doctrines and contemporary issues. The practicum

training will occur at various times throughout the week and will be done with the supervision of a pastor.

C. PPT Defense and Practicum Training Evaluation

Candidates complete and turn in their PPT and write a 2–3-page assessment of their Practicum Training. Then they meet with pastors to discuss.

D. Recommendation of next steps

Step 3: Observation (no less than 2 months)

A. Congregational Involvement

Men who have completed step 2 and who wish to serve as pastor/elder at LHBC will be presented by the pastors to the entire congregation for a period of observation. The congregation will be encouraged to pray about whether the Lord would have the candidate/s serve as pastors/elders. The congregation will be encouraged to observe the life of the candidate over the next two months and share any positive or negative observations with current pastors and candidate.

Additionally, current pastors will select three members of the congregation to prepare a Congregation Feedback Form for candidate. Candidate will select one member of the congregation (who is of no familial relation) to prepare the same form. Forms will be completed and turned in to the pastors.

B. Final Recommendation

Pastors will prayerfully consider the results of the Congregational Feedback Form and make a final recommendation to the candidate for serving as a pastor/elder or otherwise.

Step 4: Affirmation

A. Vote by Members

Candidate/s will be voted on by members of LHBC.

B. Ordination Service

A special service of commitment and laying on of hands will take place to commit the ministry of the candidate to King Jesus at LHBC and ask for His blessings.

APPENDIX 3
PRE-SURVEY

The following instrument was used to determine a baseline for LHBC's understanding of SPO. It was given before the five-part sermon series on the topic. It was made available in paper format and online. The survey uses a Likert scale to gauge how much each participant agrees with Scripture's teaching on SPO.

Who Leads a Church Pre-Survey

Agreement to Participate

The research in which you are about to participate is being conducted by Jacob Riggs for the purpose of collecting data for a ministry project at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Any information you provide will be held strictly confidential, and at no time will your name be reported or identified with your responses. Participation is strictly voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any time. By completion of this survey, you are giving informed consent for the use of your responses in this project.

1. Name _____

2. Are you a member of Lake Hills Baptist Church in Schererville, Indiana? (Mark only one)

- Yes
- No

3. Do you attend a Sunday morning worship service at Lake Hills Baptist Church in Schererville, Indiana at least three Sundays each month?

- Yes
- No

The scale is as follows:

SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, DS = Disagree Somewhat,
AS = Agree Somewhat, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree.

#	Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
1	The Bible contains clear instruction about who should lead local churches						
2	I understand what the Bible says about who should lead local churches.						
3	I understand what the Bible says about the role of a Pastor.						
4	I understand what the Bible says about the role of an Elder.						
5	I understand what the Bible says about the role of a Deacon.						
6	I understand what the Bible says about who should be a Pastor, Elder, or Deacon.						

#	Question	SD	D	DS	AS	A	SA
7	Deacons should have authority over pastors in local churches.						
8	Deacons should be the main leaders of local churches.						
9	The Senior (or “Lead”) Pastor should have the final say when leadership disagrees.						
10	An “elder” should be the same office in a local church as a “pastor.”						
11	Every local church should be led by a group of qualified men called “elders,” “pastors,” or “overseers.”						
12	There should be two offices in local churches: deacon and pastor/elder/overseer.						
13	In addition to care from other members, every member of Lake Hills Baptist church should receive regular spiritual care (prayer, counsel, encouragement, instruction, etc.) from a pastor.						

APPENDIX 4
T-TEST RESULTS

T-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means		
	<i>Pre-Test Total</i>	<i>Post-Test Total</i>
Mean	57.56	64.05333333
Variance	58.54702703	77.10522523
Observations	75	75
Pearson Correlation	0.411863217	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	74	
t stat	-6.275098984	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.00000001067771	
t Critical one-tail	1.665706893	
P(T<=t) two-tail	0.00000002135541	
t Critical two-tail	1.992543495	

APPENDIX 5

SERMON 1: “WHY BIBLICAL POLITY MATTERS”

Introduction

Illustrate: Trellis and the Vine

Several years ago, I read a book called *The Trellis and the Vine*. It turns out that book has been one of the most influential books I’ve read for ministry outside of Scripture. The title of the book is an illustration of a church.

Have you ever seen a vine growing on a trellis? Here’s a picture of what one looks like.

The trellis is the structure that the vine grows on. The trellis represents the structures in a local church—small group programs, church government, etc. The vine represents the work of the Spirit of God through His Word to grow God’s people.

The series of sermons I’m starting today is about the trellis—how a local church should be structured. The fancy word for how a church should be structured or governed is called a church’s “polity.”

Polity—how a church is governed

I’m not much for trying to be slick. I prefer to be lovingly upfront with you. Because of that, let me tell you what I think the Scripture teaches about how a church should be governed and how I see our church being a little bit off from that.

What I see Lake Hills doing today is this:

Senior Pastor led, deacon overseen and served, congregationally governed

What I see the Scripture teach is this:

Shared pastoral oversight, deacon served, congregationally governed

I just pried open a can of worms, which means there are all kinds of thoughts and questions going through your minds. Scoop those worms back in for now, hold your hand over the top of the can, and let them breathe for this sermon.

Set up

Before we get into the specifics of elders and deacons and all the fun stuff, I think it important to talk about why this topic matters. Why does biblical polity matter? Today, I have four reasons in response to that question.

1. Because God has spoken about it.

Places polity is spoken about in Scripture:

- Ekklesia--114 times
- *Presbeut*--20 times used refers to elders in churches--Jerusalem, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Ephesus, Crete, and others.
- Ephesians 4--Jesus gave pastors-teachers
- 1 Peter 5 peter addresses elders
- Matthew 18 and 1 Cor 5 churches are given instruction about how to handle someone who claims to know Jesus but lives in open, unrepentant sin
- 1 Tim 3 we're given qualifications for deacons and overseers
- Titus 1--qual for elders
- Several passages tell pastor/elders what they're supposed to do in their service to the Lord
- Acts 6 shows us how and why the early church instituted deacons
- Several places in Acts show us how elders of local churches played a part in exercising authority in their churches
- 1 Timothy 5:17 tells churches what to do about paying elders
- 1 Tim 5:19 says what to do if a member of a church believes an elder should be corrected for sin

God has spoken about how He wants a local church to function.

There are going to be verses I point out to you in this sermon series that are going to be different than what your church experience has been like. I pray that our first response to anything you hear that sounds different will be to lower our heads again into the Word of God to check it again and see if what I'm saying is what God said.

God's Word

Remember what Isaiah said about God's Word in Isaiah 40:8:

Isaiah 40:8

The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

Again, in Isaiah, this time in chapter 55:10–11:

Isaiah 55:10–11

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Remember also Deuteronomy 8:3 which says,

Deuteronomy 8:3b

“. . . man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

Sum and Turn

Biblical polity is not the most important thing to get right in the Bible. The gospel is more important. The inspiration of Scripture, the deity of Jesus, salvation by grace through faith, the literal death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are some things that are more important than this sermon series. But God has still said something about it. And if He has spoken, we ought to listen.

That leads me to my second reason it’s important to have a biblical polity.

2. Because it better enables us to affirm God’s work in some.

Story: Robert Picirilli

A man I look up to that God used in my life when we were Free Will Baptists is named Dr. Robert Picirilli (“Dr. Pic” is what he is affectionately known as). He is one of the most influential theologians of the movement, and he just so happened to be in the church where I was a part-time worship leader.

You should know that Free Will Baptist churches have a polity that functions a lot like ours. There’s always a pastor, with deacons who essentially are a board to help the pastor but also keep him in check, if we’re being honest. They don’t have space, practically speaking, for someone to be called an elder or lay pastor. It’s just not a common thing at all.

But the thing about Dr. Pic is that he regularly taught God’s Word in a SS class. He knows God’s Word better than anyone, perhaps, in the whole church. He literally wrote the commentaries his pastor would reference. He taught Greek for something like 20 or 30 years at the denomination’s Bible college. He would visit members of his SS class in the hospital and pray with them. The pastor would ask Dr. Pic’s counsel and advice on various issues as would many other people. He had an obvious concern for the lost in the

community. He was a faithful husband and father, who his five daughters continue to adore.

But the church never recognized Dr. Pic for what he was, biblically—a pastor/elder. Why? Perhaps part of the reason was because it wasn't in their polity.

What might have happened if that church had a more biblical polity? How might God have used Dr. Pic in even greater ways?

A biblical polity doesn't cause the vine grow, but it does enable it to grow well.

Explain

Let's look at three Scriptures in this section. Each one applies to a different group of people. One is for pastor-elders, another for deacons, and the last is for Christians who are physically sick. I want to show you God's role in the lives of these people and how having a biblical polity could help us get on board with what God is doing in the lives of some.

A. Pastor/Elders

Acts 20:17–18, 28

“¹⁷Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸And when they came to him, he said to them . . . ²⁸Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

Paul is talking to the elders of the church in Ephesus here. *Elders* is a title referring to the main leaders of a church. In verse 28 he tells the elders to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock. (That's shepherding, or pastoring.) He then said the Holy Spirit had made them overseers of that flock.

I'll probably spend more time in this verse in another sermon in the future, but for now, notice who Paul claimed made the elders “overseers”—the Holy Spirit. Yes, it's the Holy Spirit who makes men overseers of a church. What is an overseer? It's an elder-pastor.

Apply

There are men in our church right now that are already doing things pastor-elders do and seem to me to be biblically qualified to be elder-pastors, but aren't recognized by our church as such. Why? I submit that, in part, it's because of our polity.

B. Deacons

Acts 6:2–3

“And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.’

Notice that they looked for men who were “full of the Spirit.” The Spirit worked in the hearts of some of those men so that it was evident to the church that they were spirit-filled men.

Having a biblical polity whereby a church looks for men full of the Spirit so that they can serve, taking things off the plate of the pastor-elders, gives us an opportunity to be a part of what God is doing in their lives.

Apply

Our deacons currently do some things that are, biblically, deacon-type things and some things that are pastoral things. Meanwhile, we have some men in our church who aren’t recognized as deacons who are doing the deacon-like things just because they want to. If we had a more biblical polity, what might God do through those men if the church was able to affirm them as deacons? Who else might God raise up to serve that isn’t even on our radar?

C. The Sick

James 5:14

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

Notice what the sick person is to do—call for the “elders of the church.” That’s plural elders of one church. Having elders in one church enables people to do this! God might want to heal some of you from sickness. His Word gives you instruction for what to do. Having a biblical practice of multiple elders enables us to get in line with what God could do in the lives of the sick.

Apply

If the polity of a church makes it harder for that church to recognize and affirm what the Holy Spirit is doing in people, then that church should take another look at Scripture to confirm whether her polity is biblical.

The Lord is working in people to empower them to meet the needs of His people—both physical and spiritual. A more biblical polity would better enable us as a church to recognize, affirm, and empower those people to do what God is calling them to do.

Biblical polity matters. It helps us, as a church, affirm what God is doing in the lives of some.

Turn

I have two more reason why biblical polity matters.

Why does biblical polity matter?

3. Because it helps protect a church from pastoral abuse

The sad reality is there are pastors, deacons, and other leaders in churches who abuse the sheep.

The book of Jude was written not by the Beatles, but by the brother of James and Jesus because there were some false teachers in his day who needed to be identified and dealt with. Notice what Jude called these false teachers in verse 12 of Jude 1:

Jude 1:12

“These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted;”

The word “shepherd” is the same word for “pastor.” The false teachers were “shepherds feeding themselves.”

The sad reality is there are still shepherds who feed themselves on the sheep. Some men (and women) claiming to be shepherds for Jesus are wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing. They care nothing for the sheep and are intent on using the sheep to meet their own needs and desires.

Real Shepherds Who Fall Into Sin

In addition to this, there are some shepherds who are real Christians, but fall into sin. There is a doctrine you might not be aware of that’s important here. It’s called the depravity of man. It’s the doctrine that teaches that people are fallen and sinful—even as Christians, and even as pastor-elders. Faithful pastor are tempted just as much, if not more, than anyone else. Having unchecked authority and power is dangerous for anyone, but it might be even more dangerous for people who are serving God because that’s just the kind of person Satan wants to make fall.

Dear friends, I have no intention of harming or abusing anyone in any way. But for the pastors that fall into sin and do abuse others, I’m sure they’ve said and thought the same things! No matter how much fruit God appears to give me or how much you love me, you need to know that I am capable of unthinkable sin—and the same is true for every pastor-elder.

Illustrate: Rehoboam

In 1 Kings 12, God's people were divided into two—Judah and Israel. Judah had a king by the name of Rehoboam. When Rehoboam first began to reign, the people came to him and asked him to lighten their load. Solomon, Rehoboam's father and king before him, had become a poor leader in his old age and made their work difficult. Rehoboam now had a decision to make. He first called his father's counselors to him to ask their advice. They advised him to listen to the people and lighten their work. Rehoboam then called his friends for their counsel. They said, "bro, they're wusses. Show them who's boss!" Rehoboam rejected the older men's advice and listened to his friends.

This unbridled authority enabled Rehoboam to rule poorly. He didn't have to take the advice because he was the ultimate authority.

A similar situation was that of King David and how he committed adultery and had Uriah killed. Unchecked authority is unwise for anyone except Jesus. And even He was operating with the Father and the Spirit.

"Surely there aren't churches that give one man that much authority."

One well-known pastor wrote this about deacons: "We demand and expect that our deacons be loyal . . . to the pastor . . . loyal to what God is doing through the church and through the pastor" (Jack Hyles).

It's easy to see how this kind of unbridled authority would put a pastor in a position of great temptation to potentially abuse that authority.

Indeed, research shows us that one common denominator in pastoral abuse cases is a lack of accountability.

Examples

In 2009, Diana Garland and Christen Agueta performed a qualitative study on how many first-hand accounts of how Clergy Sexual Misconduct occurred. Their third characteristic of these encounters was "Lack of accountability." They said, "Religious leaders also often have unparalleled lack of accountability for where they spend their time and with whom."

Michael Kruger, in his book *Bully Pulpit*, said, "Case after case of spiritual abuse has shown that it was the lack of any real accountability that allowed the pastor to gain a disproportionate amount of power and then to abuse that power with little or no consequences."

Apply

I am going to be making the claim in another sermon (or two) that God's Word teaches local churches should be led by a group of godly men called elders or pastors.

In addition to the congregation having the ability to make an accusation against a pastor with two or three witness like 1 Timothy 5:19 says, shared pastoral authority seems to be an obvious aid to help prevent cases of pastoral abuse. If there is not one pastor with excessive authority, surely other pastor-elders would be empowered to keep him, and one another, in check. John MacArthur made this claim in *The Master's Plan for the Church*. He said,

“Leadership made up of a plurality of godly men has much to commend. Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual.”

Granted, abuse is still possible by pastors in churches with plural eldership, but in a pastoral team that functioned well, it would be less likely.

Turn

There's one more reason having a biblical polity matters. A biblical polity matters . . .

4. Because it impacts the sheep Jesus died for.

Notice what Jesus said in John 10.

John 10:11, 14–15

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . .
14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Jesus called Himself “the good shepherd.” He compared Himself to a shepherd that cares very much for his sheep. Who are His sheep? They are the people who listen to him—the people who believe in Him and follow Him. He laid down His life for the sheep. He cares very much for them.

Because He cares very much for His sheep, it obviously matters to Him how His sheep are treated right now.

Gospel

Friends who aren't yet following Jesus, don't you recognize how much Jesus cares for His sheep? Do you recognize that the things you're following from this world don't care about you? Sure, they might claim to give you self-expression and freedom. But do those things really give you life? Jesus laid down His life for the sheep. Can you hear His Spirit calling you to follow Him and believe in what He has done for you on the cross? Turn from your wandering and come to the good shepherd.

Turn

Now that Jesus is in heaven after dying on the cross and rising from the dead, He shepherds His people by His Word and Spirit through godly men He has called to be His under-shepherds.

Apply

Systems and structures—polity—matters because it impacts Jesus' sheep. Surely, Jesus cares about the things that will impact His sheep.

The Chief Shepherd

The truth is that even if the polity of our church was perfectly biblical, there's a high likelihood that your pastors will fall short of shepherding you perfectly. But here is the beautiful truth: Jesus never will. He is the good shepherd. He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He restores our souls. He leads us in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will fear no evil because our good shepherd is with us. He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies. He anoints our heads with oil. Our cup overflows.

Conclusion

Why does having a biblical polity matter? It matters (1) because God has spoken about it, (2) because it better enables us to affirm God's work in some, (3) because it helps protect a church from pastoral abuse and (4) because it impacts Jesus' sheep who He loves.

We still have lots to uncover from God's Word about this topic.

Next week, I plan on preaching about the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. My hope is to help you know how to identify who Jesus may be giving you to help serve on a pastor/elder team.

APPENDIX 6

SERMON 2: “ELDERS, OVERSEERS, PASTORS (PART 1)”

Introduction

Today is week 2 of “Who Leads the Church?” Last week I put all my cards on the table at the beginning of the message. In case you didn’t hear that, let me restate it—we’ve got some wonderful, godly men as leaders in our church. You should be so thankful for all of them—pastors and deacons. But in my opinion, we could be more biblical in our polity than we currently are. Polity is just a fancy word meaning how a church is governed.

Here’s how I see our church currently functioning:

Lake Hills Today
Senior Pastor Led
Overseen and Served by Deacons
Governed by the congregation

And here’s what seems most biblical to me:

My View
Shared pastoral oversight
Served by deacons
Governed by the congregation

Set Up

Last week I talked about how I opened a huge can of worms and asked you to hold your hand on top of the can for a week. Today, it’s time to start talking about the worms.

God’s Word tells us about two offices in a local church. Today and next Sunday, I’ll be preaching about the first office. There will be four sections about this first office. Sections 1 and 2 are today and sections 3 and 4 will be next week. In time, I’ll have four sections about the second office. But for today, it’s time to talk about the first office that God has for local churches. We begin with section 1 . . .

Section 1: The Name of the Office

Scripture shows three different names that can be used to refer to this first office. The names are overseer, elder, and pastor. They all refer to the same office.

A. Overseer

We're told about this office of "overseer" five times in the New Testament. Notice four of those with me:

1 Timothy 3:1

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."

The word "overseer" refers to an office in church in this passage. It's also mentioned in Acts 20:28.

Acts 20:28

"Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

Paul was speaking to the elders from the church in Ephesus at this time. He said that the Holy Spirit made them "overseers, to care for the church of God."

Philippians 1:1

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:"

The book of Philippians was from Paul and Timothy and addressed to the saints at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.

Origin of the Word

The original word is the greek episkopos, which was used in work environments to refer to someone who oversaw other employees. (It's a compound word using epi—upon or over and skopon—to look.) A similar word we might use today is a foreman or manager. Paul took that word and applied it to local churches.

The word refers to someone who looks over something or someone. In the context of the passages we looked at, the office is to "look over," or "oversee" God's flock.

While the first word for this office was taken from Greek culture, the second was taken from Jewish culture. It's the word . . .

B. Elder

This word is used many times throughout Scripture, but it means different things in different places. It can sometimes refer to someone who is older in their age. (1 Tim 5:2—refers to older women). Many times, it refers to respected leaders within Jewish communities who were older and acted as judges or advisors. Every time in the Old Testament when you see the word "elder" used, it's referring to these older advisors of

Jewish communities.

But when we move to the New Testament, the term is sometimes referring to those leaders of Jewish communities, but transitions to refer to this first office in a local church. Notice with me, Titus 1:5:

Titus 1:5

“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—”

In Titus, Paul was writing to Titus, a protégé like Timothy. He was to appoint elders in every town like Paul told him to. We see the word “elder” being referred to as leaders in churches in many other places throughout the New Testament.

Why do I say that someone called an “elder” is intended to be the same office as the one called “overseer”? Because of the next few verses in Titus 1. Look there again with me.

Titus 1:5–7

“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 . . . 7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.”

Paul told Titus to appoint elders in every town. He gave some qualifications for who should be an elder, then he switched to a different term—“overseer”—in verse 7. He used the terms interchangeably. An elder is an overseer. An overseer is an elder. They should be the same office in a local church.

One other piece of evidence is Acts 20:28, which I spent some time on last week also. Look there with me:

Acts 20:17–18, 28

“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. 18 And when they came to him, he said to them: . . . 28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

Notice that Paul is speaking to elders of the church in Ephesus. He tells them to pay careful attention to themselves and all the flock. He then says that the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers” in that church. He spoke to the elders and told them that the Spirit had made them overseers.

What is an elder in a local, NT church? An elder is an overseer. What is an overseer? It's an elder.

Turn

Those are the most-used terms for the first office in a local church. But there's another

term that we use more often than those, and it refers to the same office in a local church.

C. Pastor

The term “pastor” is more frequently used in our culture than the terms “elder” or “overseer.” But in the Bible, it’s the term with the least usage and support. “Elder” is used nearly 20 times referring to church leaders, “overseer” is used five times,” and “pastor” is only used three times to refer to this first office. (And two of them are in the verb form of the word.)

Origin of the Word

Like the term “elder,” the term “pastor” also comes from the Old Testament. You say, “I can’t think of one time the word ‘pastor’ is used in the OT, or, depending on your translation, even the New Testament.” You’re right, and that’s because most of the time the word “pastor” is translated as “shepherd.”

Ποιμαίνω—to shepherd, tend, herd

You’re probably familiar with the 23rd Psalm. It says, “The Lord is my shepherd.” It’s just as viable to translate the word “shepherd” as “pastor” there. A shepherd is a pastor. A pastor is a shepherd.

Jesus to Peter

Shepherding is what Jesus told Peter to do because of his love for Jesus in John 21:16:

John 21:16

He said to him a second time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” He said to him, “Tend my sheep.”

The word “tend” is the same Greek word as “shepherd” or “pastor.”

Shepherding for Elders

When it comes to this first office in a church, pastoring, or shepherding, is closely connected with elders and overseers. A few passages show us this. Look with me, first, at 1 Peter 5:1–2:

1 Peter 5:1–2

“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, exercising oversight,”

Who is Peter speaking to? The elders. What does he tell the elders to do in verse 2? “Shepherd the flock of God . . . exercising oversight.”

It would have been just as legitimate to translate the word for “shepherd” as “pastor” here in 1 Peter 5. The elders are to pastor the flock. Part of how they do that is by “exercising oversight.” That’s all three terms used in one place: the elders pastor, exercising

oversight.

There are other passages that help us make the same connection that we don't have time for today. But do you see the connection that God's Word gives us between each of these terms?

Widely Held

Pastors and scholars who hold this view include: Wayne Grudem, John Piper, John Hammett, Tom Schreiner, Al Mohler, Bill Mounce, John MacArthur, even my Arminian friend Dr. Picirilli among many, many others. They all say that an elder is an overseer is a pastor.

Implications:

pastor = elder = overseer

One of the hurdles the deacons and I had in conversation is that some of the men would say, "I think I could be an elder, but I don't think I could be a pastor." But the thing is, pastoring is part of what elders are supposed to do! In Scripture, a pastor is an elder. In Scripture, an elder is a pastor.

Why three terms for one office?

The three titles give us a good hint about who these officers should be and what these officers are supposed to do:

Overseer—looks out for the sheep, charts direction to go if any changes are needed

Elder—respected, has godly wisdom, able to give counsel

Pastor—feeds the sheep with God's Word, protects the sheep from wolves by pointing out false teachers, corrects the sheep with God's Word when they are straying or biting other sheep, binds up wounds with God's Word when the sheep are hurt

Apply

Don't you realize, dear friend, that you need this kind of relationship in your life? Why would any Christian think they can just go it alone without someone looking out for their soul? Why would any Christian not want someone who knows God's Word really well and can provide Godly wisdom and counsel? Why would any Christian not want to be fed spiritually, to be protected from wolves, warned when they're straying, and have their wounds bound up with the salve of God's Word?

Turn

Not only that, why wouldn't you want more than one pastor/elder/overseer? That leads me to my second section for today. It's about "the number of officers."

Section Two: The Number of First Officers

In this second section, I want to give you a biblical basis for a local church to have what I call “shared pastoral oversight.” Other churches call this a “plurality of elders.” But for our context, I think it’s best to call it “shared pastoral oversight.” Or, if you accept these things as a congregation, we might simply call these men the “pastoral team.”

Over time, I’ve become increasingly convinced that every local church should pursue having shared pastoral oversight.

That might sound like a good idea initially to you or it might not, but the bottom line is what God’s Word says.

What does God’s Word tell us about this idea of shared pastoral oversight? I have two things to share with you:

1. Churches in the New Testament had shared pastoral oversight.

Example 1: Lystra, Iconium, Antioch

In case you’re not familiar with what Paul did back then, he would travel around to various cities to tell people about Jesus, make disciples, then go to a different city as the Holy Spirit led and enabled him. A lot of the book of Acts is about his travels.

Paul had been to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch before the events of verses 21-23 happened. Notice what happened when Paul returned to these cities, starting in verse 21.

Acts 14:21–23

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Notice that Paul didn’t appoint one elder for each church, but multiple elders in every church. Therefore, the church in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch each had multiple elders.

Example 2: Ephesus

Acts 20:17

“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.”

We know Paul went to Ephesus back in Acts 18 to tell people about Jesus. He also spent some time there in Acts 19. The book of Ephesians was written to the church Paul founded in Ephesus. Here in Acts 20:17, we learn that Paul had established elders in the

church at Ephesus.

Notice again there wasn't one elder for the church, but elders for the church.

And since pastoring is part of what elders do, we could just as easily say that the church in Ephesus had pastors.

Other Examples

Other churches that had elders were the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). Paul told Titus to appoint elders in every town on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). The city of Philippi had shared oversight according to Philippians 1:1.

Illustration: Shopping for a New Car

Have you ever needed to buy a new car and start noticing the kind of car you're looking to buy all over the place? That happens to us. When we were looking for a Honda CRV, I started to notice every Honda CRV near us. We would say something like, "My goodness, there are Honda CRVs everywhere!"

When you start to notice this idea of shared pastoral oversight or plurality of elders, you start to notice it in a lot of places in the New Testament. It almost makes you think, "Why haven't I ever noticed this before?"

Mark Dever said, "the direct evidence in the New Testament indicates that the common and even expected practice was to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation."

It was so normal for every church to have shared pastoral oversight that I can't find one example of a church in the New Testament that only had one pastor.

The second thing I have to share with you from God's Word about the number of officers in this first office is this:

2. Some commands only make sense in the context of shared pastoral oversight.

Example 1: Hebrews 13:17

Hebrews 13:17

"Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you."

The main instruction in verse 17 is to obey leaders and submit to them. Notice that the writer of Hebrews assumes that his audience has more than one leader. It's not "obey your pastor and submit to him." It's "obey your leaders and submit to them."

How do we know these leaders are this first office of elder/pastor/overseer? Because of what it says these leaders do: "for they are keeping watch over your souls . . ." Do you

see the connection? These leaders are keeping watch—they're overseeing. These leaders are a group of overseers—a group of elders—a group of pastors.

Apply

If a church doesn't have multiple leaders—shared pastoral authority—the members of the church can only obey their leader, submit to him, for he is keeping watch over their souls.

Example 2: James 5:14

James 5:14

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

If pastor = elder = overseer, then the elders are not the deacons. That's the second office that we haven't talked about yet. James isn't telling a sick person to have the pastors and deacons pray over him and anointing him with oil. He's telling the sick person to call for elders—the pastoral team—the overseers—all those men in the first office. It's those spiritual overseers who the sick person is to call.

And notice that James assumes that the church in which the sick person is a part will have multiple elders. “Let him call for the elders” (plural) “of the church” (singular).

I submit to you that while God can still heal people if a sick person calls deacons instead of elders—it's the prayer of faith that God hears and sometimes grants to give physical healing—sick people literally can't obey this verse if their church doesn't have multiple pastor-elders.

Illustration: a Team of Doctors

As you probably know, our middle child, Meredith, has special needs. There is no specific diagnosis for her condition. She's just Meredith and she's awesome. If you have had any kind of serious medical condition, then you know what it's like to not just have one doctor, but a team of doctors.

Not so much now, but at one time, Meredith had a team of professionals to help her. She had a physical medicine rehab help, a neurologist, a physical therapist, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, eye doctor, cardiologist, and behavioral therapists.

Apply

Every church is like a body—the body of Christ. To function as healthy as you can, you don't just need one human doctor. You need a team. If we know this is true for our physical bodies which are temporary, why wouldn't it be true for our souls?

“But who's the leader?”

Who is the leader if a local church is supposed to be led by a group of elder-pastors? Different churches will come to different conclusions on the roles of their pastors. Some use the phrase “lead pastor” to refer to the elder-pastor who does most of the preaching.

There's nothing necessarily wrong with that.

But the Scriptural support is for every local church to have one pastor who is the chief pastor—one chief elder over all the others—one chief overseer over all the other overseers. That person, of course, is supposed to be Jesus.

1 Peter 5:4

“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Every shepherd in our church—whether there's 3 or whatever—are all supposed to be under-shepherds to serve the wishes of the chief Shepherd. How do we do that? With the rod and staff of His words and through His strength and the power of His Spirit.

1 Peter 2:25

“For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

Jesus is the true, chief Overseer. He's the one truly watching out for all of our souls—if we know Him. The group of overseers are supposed to follow the leading of Jesus the Overseer—who always looks out for us in what serves us best.

Matthew 16:18

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Why wouldn't you want this?

Why wouldn't you want to have a group of godly men seeking Jesus and His Word together for the sake of your souls? Why wouldn't you want more than just one guy looking out for your soul?

APPENDIX 7

SERMON 3: “OVERSEERS, ELDERS, PASTORS (PART 2)”

Introduction

Illustration: Qualifications to become President

Do you know whether someone is qualified to be president of the United States? (This is not a joke.) We probably have all kinds of things that come into our minds to answer that question: (1) served in the military, (2) been in politics for certain amount of time, (3) have been successful in various aspects of life, (4) have high character.

But according to the constitution, there are only three: (1) at least 35 years old, (2) a natural-born citizen, and (3) have lived as a U.S. resident at least 14 years. Anyone that meets those qualifications can run for president of the United States.

Apply

What about who can be a pastor-elder? Do you know what the Scripture says about who can serve in that office?

Maybe you have some things in mind like: good with people, great public speaking skills, looks professional, charisma.

It matters who leads.

Review

There are two offices the Bible gives us for a local church. I am in the process of talking about four sections for each office: (1) the name of the office, (2) the number of officers, (3) the qualifications, and (4) the roles.

So far, for this first office, I’ve shared the first two sections already. Two weeks ago, in the first section we saw that the first office has three names: pastor, elder, or overseer. I also shared section 2, pointing out that the number of men in this first office is best to be plural—or what I call “shared pastoral oversight.”

Today, I’ll be sharing section 3: the qualifications for who can be an overseer/elder/pastor.

Qualifications

Timothy and Titus

The main place we turn to when finding these qualifications are 1 Timothy and Titus. Each of them contains lists of qualifications for this first office. The lists are similar but not identical. I agree with several commentators who point out that the lists are probably not exhaustive, but that Paul applies an overarching principle to specific contexts. That's why the lists aren't exactly alike.

There are four main qualifications for this first office. I have summarized them into one sentence, which I will break down for you in this part of the sermon.

Men who are above reproach, hold to sound doctrine, and can teach sound doctrine.

1. Men

Unfortunately, this first word has become debated in churches not that different from ours. I say unfortunately not because I have any vendetta against women or I have a propensity to “Leave it to Beaver” masculinity, but because of how clear God's Word is about this.

All you really must do is notice the pronouns in the qualifications for the office. Notice them in verses 1–7 of 1 Timothy 3:

1 Timothy 3:1–7

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, . . . 4 He 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.”

It's obvious that God's Word assumes that those who serve in this first office be men and not women.

In addition to this, notice 1 Timothy 2, which came right before these qualifications.

1 Timothy 2:12–13

“I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. 13 For Adam was formed first, then Eve;”

Notice the two things that Paul does not permit a woman to do. First of all, to teach, and secondly, to exercise authority over a man. I point out this verse because these two functions—teaching and exercising authority—are two of the main functions of this first office.

Follow my logic then. If two significant functions of this first office are to teach and exercise authority, and Paul—writing with Jesus’ authority—doesn’t allow women to do those two things—then it obviously follows that women are not to serve in this first office.

Practically Speaking

Practically speaking, there should be no such thing as women elders, women overseers, or women pastors. Why? Because God’s Word limits the office of elder/overseer/pastor, to men.

A Little Brake Pumping

Now, let’s not take this principle and over-apply it. For example:

- There are several female prophets—called prophetesses—throughout Scripture.
- Older women are to teach younger women according to Titus 2.
- In a way, all of us are to be teaching one another in our singing.
- In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul implies that it’s fine for a man’s wife to pray and prophesy in the gathered church
- Yes, in 1 Corinthians 14, God’s Word says that women should keep silent in all churches. But it seems best to understand that referring to women keeping silent about judging prophecies.

For these reasons, I see nothing wrong with women reading Scripture in the gathered church or women singing or even women leading a song—especially when elders have oversight over the songs that are chosen.

With that said, many churches have just given up on this issue. But the Scripture hasn’t changed. The implication of these qualifications is that those who serve as pastors, elders, overseers, are to be men.

Turn

But it’s not just any man who is qualified. And it’s not even just any Christian man.

2. Who are above reproach

1 Timothy 3:1–2

“The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach,”

Side Note

If you’re using the NKJV or KJV, it uses the word “bishop.” That’s just another way of translating “overseer,” which is perfectly fine. A few weeks ago, we learned there are three kinds of words to describe this first office—overseer (also translated “bishop”), elder, and pastor.

Illustration: Above Reproach

To reproach someone is to find fault with them or to point out their flaws. If someone is above reproach, it means that anyone who characterized them would be found wrong.

To illustrate, I have pictures of three different people that I'll ask the tech team to put on the screen in a moment, with one word I've chosen to describe their character.

Mother Theresa—uncaring

Elon Musk—poor

Arnold Schwarzenegger—boring accent

I have just reproached these people. But was the way I characterized them accurate? No, of course not. Saying that Mother Theresa is “uncaring” is obviously not true. She’s above that reproach. Elon Musk is obviously not poor. He’s above that reproach. Arnold has a famous accent. He’s above the reproach I gave him.

Men who serve in this first office are to be people that can be characterized as “above reproach.” In other words, they should be men that, if someone tried to characterize them as “ungodly,” they would obviously be wrong. They are men that are to be “above reproach.”

But what does that look like, practically? What follows are 12 descriptions of what God’s Word means.

a. faithful to his wife, if married

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be . . . the husband of one wife

The original language just has three words for this characterization: one-woman man. To say that this verse means a man can’t serve in this office if he’s ever had a divorce is too narrow of a description. These things are about the man’s character. Someone could never have been divorced and not be faithful to his wife.

A man who is above reproach is known as a man who is faithful to his wife. He may be tempted, but giving in to those temptations do not accurately describe him. He only has eyes for his wife, if he’s married.

b. sober-minded

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be . . . sober-minded,

To be sober-minded means to be characterized as being level-headed. A man who is above reproach isn’t the kind of man who is known to jump to conclusions without

hearing the facts. He's a man that knows there's two sides to every story. He's a man who knows the importance of seeking out all the facts before making decisions.

c. self-controlled

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be . . . self-controlled

Self-controlled is the result of being sober-minded. Because he's level-headed, he's not the kind of man who is known to overreact or give in to every temptation or whim or just have to share every link on social media.

d. respectable

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be . . . respectable

A man who is above reproach is the kind of man whose character is respectable. He's the kind of man you would listen to if he spoke up in a city council meeting.

e. hospitable

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be . . . hospitable

Everyone needs quiet time. But a man who is rarely generous with his time, rarely willing to be welcoming to others, rarely finds himself reaching out to those who need community . . . is not above reproach. The gospel of Jesus is hospitable to strangers of God, making them become His sons and daughters. And a man who has experienced the hospitality of God will be characterized as hospitable.

f. not a drunkard

1 Timothy 3:2-3

2 Therefore an overseer must be . . . 3 not a drunkard

There are many passages that warn about the dangers of alcohol. One Proverb even says that wine is not for kings. It can impair judgment. Truly, alcohol is a powerful thing that can easily be abused.

But let's not go beyond what the Scripture says. What does it say a man who is above reproach is like? He's "not a drunkard." He's a man that if you heard he was intoxicated, you'd be very surprised. You'd say, "that doesn't seem like him." On the other hand, a man who is known as a man who gets intoxicated by alcohol (or any other kind of substance, by the way) is not above reproach and is not qualified to serve in this first office.

g. not violent, but gentle

1 Timothy 3:2–3

Therefore an overseer must be . . . not violent but gentle

Men who are above reproach are men that people would not characterize as violent. Instead, they are to be characterized as gentle. Surely there will be opportunities to take advantage of people and countless situations where an elder will be insulted and taken advantage of. If he's known as a man who tends to take matters into his own hands, he's not above reproach and not qualified. The gospel hasn't yet settled down into that part of his character yet.

h. not quarrelsome

1 Timothy 3:2–3

Therefore an overseer must be . . . not quarrelsome

Along those same lines, if a man regularly needs to have the last word, regularly finds himself in little squabbles over disagreements—perhaps some silly ones he just can't let go of, or even Bible themes—he's not above reproach.

This is a particular temptation for men who are to be regularly engaged with God's Word—something that frequently divides people.

A godly, above reproach man is willing to stand up for truth. He actually must be able and willing to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine. But when it comes to third-level issues and some things that are extra to Scripture, he must be willing to let things go. He must be known as a man who keeps the main thing the main thing and is humble enough to admit that a conversation either isn't worth it or he might be wrong about third-level or extra-biblical things.

i. not a lover of money

1 Timothy 3:2–3

Therefore an overseer must be . . . not a lover of money.

The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, it says in 1 Timothy 6. A man that is above reproach has his heart so taken by the love of God that money does not have a hold on him. He knows that this world is not his home and that the treasures of earth can be stolen or eaten away by moth and rust.

j. good manager of his family

1 Timothy 3:4–5

“He 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?”

A man's family is his first ministry. If he doesn't manage them well—if he doesn't oversee them well as the leader of his family spiritually and otherwise—then he can't help manage and oversee a church. The argument is that if a father and husband isn't leading his family well, which is challenging but not nearly as complicated as a church, how could he help oversee a church?

Personally

By the way, I do thank you for your understanding about my family going to Arkansas for the funeral of Lynsey's grandfather. But I do not apologize. In fact, if I'm not prioritizing my family over my role here, I might not be qualified to be an elder anyway.

k. not a recent convert

1 Timothy 3:6

“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.”

This office is important. It's one that people look to for guidance. Indeed, it's the group of men that oversee and guide a church as they seek the Lord. Those extra eyes and that extra responsibility will naturally lead someone into temptation to pride. Like a newborn baby is especially vulnerable, so a newborn Christian is especially vulnerable to the attacks of the devil. So, men in this office should not be recent converts.

l. good reputation among unsaved

1 Timothy 3:7

“Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.”

He must be well thought of by outsiders—that is, non-Christians. If he isn't well thought of—if he has a poor reputation among non-Christians, he has potential to fall into disgrace.

To be disgraced is to bring shame on yourself.

“Whatever 'call' a man may pretend to have, if he has not been called to holiness, he certainly has not been called to the ministry.” Charles Spurgeon

Illustration: Mark Zuckerberg not on Social Media

You probably know that the CEO of Facebook is Mark Zuckerberg. Imagine if Mark Zuckerberg didn't use Facebook. If he wasn't the owner and CEO, who cares. But

because he's the leader of the company, it would send a huge message about his company if he didn't even use it.

Why?

This final qualification gets at the heart of the why of these qualifications for this first office. The reason the men in this office must be above reproach is because of the reputation of the gospel itself. If the men who are leading the church—the church that is supposed to be created by the gospel; if they are not shaped by the gospel so that their character is impacted deeply and they are changed, then what does it say about the power of that gospel they say they represent?

Turn

There are two more qualifications.

3. Hold to sound doctrine

Titus 1:9

“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.”

What is “the trustworthy word”? It's the teachings of the apostles of Jesus. Paul, Peter, the gospels—the New Testament. These words—this “word” tells us what the gospel is, how to understand all of the Old Testament, and tells us how to live.

This is necessary for anyone to be called a pastor, elder, or overseer. If he has business acumen but is not a man of God's Word, he's unqualified. If he's good with people but doesn't know his Bible, he's not qualified. If he can run a business meeting or raise money or influence people but is squishy on the resurrection, he's unqualified.

He must not just hold to the teachings of God's Word, but hold to them “firmly.” Yes, there are some things in Scripture that are not secondary and third-level things of importance. It's fine to have differences of opinion on some things. But when it comes to the core teaching of God's Word, the men must hold firmly to these things.

Practically

Practically speaking, I suggest that every man who serves in this first office should be willing and able to pass a thorough biblical and theological exam.

Why? That leads me to the fourth point.

4. And can teach sound doctrine

Titus 1:9

“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.”

The previous qualification build up to this final one. The reason he must hold firmly to the trustworthy word as taught is so that he can teach sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it!

There were many in Paul's day who wanted to be teachers of God's Word but were upsetting people and leading many people astray from the way of truth. How were they doing that? Teaching false doctrine.

Go back to 1 Timothy 3 with me. There is one qualification I didn't mention in verse 2. Did you notice the one I skipped over?

1 Timothy 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Paul was saying the same basic thing to Timothy that he was to Titus. It's the main qualification difference between that of elder and deacon, by the way. Deacons aren't required to be able to teach God's Word. But pastors, elders, overseers? Absolutely.

Don't Forget How This All Happens

Illustration: Turtle on a Fencepost

Have you ever heard about the illustration of a turtle on a fencepost? I'm not sure where it came from, but the saying goes that if you ever find a turtle on a fencepost, you can be sure it didn't get there by itself.

The same thing is true for any man that becomes qualified to serve in this first office. No one has his character changed over time in such a way that he becomes above reproach on his own strength and will power. No man becomes so convinced of the importance and beauty of the Word of God that he holds to it tightly and is willing to teach it and even rebuke those who contradict it.

Here's how Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 3:5–6a

2 Corinthians 3:5–6a

“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant,”

It matters who leads

Truly, the only man who is qualified to care for God's sheep is Jesus. It's His gospel. How does a man become qualified then if he, in himself, is a sinner? It's Jesus.

You see, it matters who leads. That is true for a local church. But the ultimate question that qualifies a man to help lead a church is the question, who is leading him? It has to be Jesus—the chief shepherd.

Gospel

Who is leading you?

APPENDIX 8

SERMON 4: “PASTOR-ELDERS AND A CHURCH— DEFINING THE RELATIONSHIP”

Introduction

Illustration: DTR

Many years ago, it became obvious to me that Lynsey and I needed to have a DTR conversation. We had been friends on a ministry team together, but over time I started to have more-than-friends feelings for her, and I was pretty sure she did for me, too. So, I asked her if she'd talk with me on campus at our alma mater at a building called the Thigpen Building. We sat on a couch in front of a fireplace and I awkwardly told her that I wanted to be more than friends and I thought she wanted the same thing. She said, “Only if you go bald one day.”

That day we had a DTR conversation. DTR stands for defining the relationship.

DTR = defining the relationship

Over the last three weeks, we've been looking at what God's Word says about who should lead a local church.

Today, it's time to have DTR about elder-pastors and a church. It's time to define the relationship.

Recap

So far, I've shared with you about why biblical polity—the way a church is structured and organized—matters. Then, we started talking about the first office of a local church. We looked at several passages of Scripture that show an overseer is an elder is a pastor. I'll be using these terms interchangeably for this sermon and perhaps until further notice.

We also saw that local churches in the NT were led by a group of these men.

Last week, we looked at the qualifications for this office. I summarized and explained these qualifications with one sentence: those serving in the first office of elder/pastor/overseer should be “Men who are above reproach, hold to sound doctrine, and can teach sound doctrine.”

Turn

We still need to consider something else about this first office before we move to the second office of deacon. That is, what are the responsibilities of the elders to a church, and what are the responsibilities of a church to her overseers? What should this relationship be like?

Set Up

The rest of this message is divided into two sections. In the first, I will share six main responsibilities that pastor-elders have to a church. In the second section, I will share six main responsibilities a church has to her elder-pastors.

Section 1: Pastor-Elders to a Church

This section is important for all of you because you need to know what to expect from your pastors.

1. Prayer

One hint for the role of prayer in the lives of elders is found in Acts 6 where deacons were probably first started. The apostles told the church to find seven men to take care of the widows. The purpose was so that they could do this:

Acts 6:4

“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

The comparison of apostles to elders is not apples to apples, but since we only have the written words of the apostles, it seems to make sense for the elders to focus on prayer for the church.

We see this reiterated in James 5:14:

James 5:14

“Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

Apply

Pastors must be devoted to prayer for the saints. Elders must be a praying bunch—they must pray for the sheep Jesus has entrusted to them, and they must pray thoroughly and fervently for all of them and for wisdom in shepherding and leading the church.

2. Leadership

1 Tim 5:17

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

The word “rule” is the idea of leading or administration. In fact, the NASB translates it as “lead” instead of rule. The NIV translates it as “direct the affairs of the church.”

Among the elders, there are some who are gifted at leadership. This implies that part of the role of the pastors—and perhaps some in particular—is leadership.

Another Scripture related to this is 1 Thessalonians 5:12:

1 Thessalonians 5:12

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,

The phrase translated “over you,” from the Greek *proistemi*, means “rule, direct, be at the head of.” It seems perfectly fine to me if it was translated as “lead.”

God’s Word describes the leaders of a local church as people who are “over you,” that is, people who are leading you.

Apply

Practically speaking, it seems most biblical for a group of pastor-elders to be the ones who do some of the things that our deacons are currently doing:

- Recommending people for membership
- Suggesting a budget to the membership
- Bringing items to the church for a vote on major renovations or constitutional changes

These things all fall underneath the principle of leading. Leading is connected to the office of elder/pastor in several passages, and it is never connected to the office of deacon in the NT.

3. Teaching

Another function of the pastor-elders is teaching God’s Word. Let’s consider three passages for this one.

1 Tim 3:2

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Notice that every man who serves in this office of overseer (the KJV/NKJV translates it as “bishop”)—the same office as elder/pastor—must be able to teach.

Look at Titus 1:9:

Titus 1:9

“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.”

Instead of saying that those who serve in this office must be able to teach, in Titus, Paul says he must hold firm to God’s Word so that he can give instruction in sound doctrine and to rebuke those who contradict it. Every elder must be able to “give instruction in sound doctrine.”

But, not every pastor must spend the same amount of time and effort in teaching or preaching. Look at 1 Timothy 5:17:

1 Tim 5:17

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

There are some elders who are gifted at leading. Within those elders, there are some who “labor in preaching and teaching.” “Labor” is work, isn’t it?

Reformed Circles

This verse is why Presbyterian churches have two different kinds of elders—ruling elders and teaching elders. The “ruling elders” are like a board, and the “teaching elders” are ones who are employed by the church and do most of the teaching and preaching.

I find that distinction unhelpful. First, because every elder is called to “shepherd the flock” in 1 Peter 5 and every elder is to be able to teach and give instruction in sound doctrine. The distinction in 1 Timothy 5:17 is that some elders labor in it and others don’t.

Practically Speaking

Some pastors will spend more time in preaching and teaching than others. (Personally, it takes me anywhere from 15-20 hours to have a sermon completely ready to preach.) Other pastors will spend more time on leadership, while many pastors have secular jobs and have less time to devote to the ministry. But every pastor is called to teach God’s Word in some capacity.

Indeed, teaching the Word is how an elder shepherds. So every elder is called to teach, but some spend more time doing so—like myself.

4. Oversight

Heb 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

The leaders for the Christians in Hebrews 13 were “keeping watch over” their souls. They were overseeing the souls.

Note 1 Peter 5:1–2:

1 Peter 5:1–2

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, exercising oversight.

Exercising oversight is how the elders are to shepherd the sheep. They are to look out for the sheep.

Acts 20:28

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,

Paul was speaking to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. They were to “pay careful attention . . . to all the flock.”

Illustration: Shepherds with Sheep

Picture a group of shepherds with their sheep. They get to know their sheep over time. When they shear them, they learn that Bob’s wool grows in a funky way around his shoulder so they have to be careful in shearing it. They know that Francesca was bit by a wolf not too long ago, is doing better, but is still easily frightened by loud noises, so they come up to her gently and make sure she’s able to see him well before they come near her. They know that Albert tends to bite other sheep, so they’re mindful of Albert for his sake, but also the sheep that are near Albert.

They shepherds are also on constant alert for any predators who might come nearby to harm the sheep. They’re looking out for them.

Apply

I submit to you, friends, that pastoring is so much more than preaching sermons and leading a staff or picking out songs or determining which games to play for the youth group. It’s paying careful attention to all the flock—every sheep that tends to stray, every sheep that’s hurt, every sheep that is a little malnourished. It takes a team of shepherds to do this well.

5. Godly examples

1 Pet 5:2–3 "being examples to the flock"

1 Peter 5:2–3

“shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . . not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.”

Men who are considering pursuing eldership, your life matters. Your godliness matters. Our talk gives clarity to our walk, but our walk gives credibility to our talk.

6. Equipping

Eph 4:1112

“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,”

The elders are not the only ministers. Every Christian is a minister. And the shepherd-teachers—the pastors, are to equip the saints to minister. Surely this applies in countless ways.

Final Application

I hope some of you men have been praying about whether King Jesus would have you serve Him as a pastor-elder at Lake Hills or elsewhere. Or maybe you’ve been serving as a deacon, but you sense the Lord pushing you to help care not just for the physical needs of the saints, but their souls. After hearing what you would be required to do, are you willing to pursue these things with God’s help?

Turn

It takes two to tango, as they say. You’ve just heard about the responsibilities of the pastor-elders toward a church. Now we turn to the responsibilities of a church to her pastor-elders.

Section 2: A Church to Her Pastor-Elders

What responsibilities do you have to your pastors? Your elders?

1. Observe and imitate

Hebrews 13:7

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

Fishbowl

Sometimes it feels like I live in a fishbowl. Honestly, it can be a little tiresome. But you know how else I need to be honest with you? It’s pretty biblical.

You ought to be able to observe the lives of your pastors and see their lives worth imitating.

2. Obey and submit

This one is perhaps a little more difficult to accept.

Hebrews 13:17

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

When leaders are not living repentant lives and leading faithfully according to Scripture, they should not be obeyed. We are correctable. But as your pastor-elders are watching over you and guiding you according to Scripture, you are called to obey and submit to our leadership.

Illustrate: Milton the Mutton

Allow me to introduce you to Milton the Mutton. He’s known as an ornery sheep. He is seemingly always resisting the direction of the shepherds. He always has a correction, he never serves, he always has a problem, oh, and he doesn’t even tithe. In time, how do you think the shepherds will come to see Milton?

Apply

You don’t want to be the kind of sheep that, when you walk near a pastor, they inwardly are saying, “Ugh, here comes so and so.” You want to be the kind of sheep that your pastors are glad to see and are glad to serve.

By the way, over the last two years, you have been a joy to serve.

3. Lovingly respect

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.”

Illustrate: Heart Doctor

Imagine with me that you had to have open-heart surgery in a way that your life depended on. Your heart is hugely important because if your heart doesn’t function properly, you’ll either die or you won’t live well.

It’s time to meet the doctor who will be performing the surgery, and when he meets you and talks about the procedure, you ignore him, roll your eyes, and act as if you know more than he does because you googled something the night before.

How inappropriate of you! Even if you don't like the doctor's personality, you ought to at least respect him and esteem him because of his work!

Apply

Dear friends, if we know that we should lovingly respect the doctor performing our open-heart surgery, ought you not also lovingly respect the men who are overseeing your souls?

4. Compensate (some)

Look at 1 Timothy 5:17–18.

1 Timothy 5:17–18

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 18 For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’”

There seems to be a slight distinction among some of the elders in this verse. The passage implies that a church has a group of elders, but within that group are some who “rule well.” And within the group of those who “rule well,” you’ve got some who “labor in preaching and teaching.” All of those who “rule well” are worthy of “double honor,” and especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

“Double honor” refers to financial compensation. Two reasons: (1) because of verse 18 that immediately follows. Paul quotes a common idiom that means someone who works hard at something should be given some of the proceeds. He then quotes another phrase about how a worker deserves wages. The second reason we know he’s talking about financial compensation is because of what he said earlier in 1 Timothy 5:3:

1 Timothy 5:3

“Honor widows who are truly widows.”

Paul means that if widows deserve honor, then elders who are ruling well—and especially those who are working hard at preaching and teaching—especially deserve to have their material needs met. They deserve honor doubly so.

Apply

Practically speaking, a local church should consider which of her elders are able and willing to spend enough time in ministry that it keeps them from providing for their families in other ways. Once those men are identified, the church should especially honor those elders by providing for their material needs. So then, it is normal for a church to have some pastor-elders that they employ, and others that are not employed. They are all

to have equal authority, but they don't all work the same amount, or do exactly the same things.

As a side note, I think I can speak for Pastor Adam and Pastor Chewy when I say, thank you for providing for us. It really does make us want to serve you more faithfully.

5. Hold accountable

1 Timothy 5:19

“Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.”

I hesitated on saying number five in this way because I've seen some people be too picky against her pastor-elders. But look at 1 Timothy 5:19. This verse gives every member of a church the opportunity to hold elders accountable if they fall into serious or habitual sin. Notice that you've got to have two or three witnesses to support you on what you have seen.

Apply

For example, you might see a pastor-elder engage with a member of the opposite sex in a way that you feel is inappropriate. It's probably best to reach out to him and just see how he's doing and mention it, or you may assume the best and just move on.

But in time, if you notice a pattern, and someone else mentions that they've seen the same thing, and then another person says the same thing, it seems appropriate to me to talk with those who have seen the same issue and agree to bring that concern to that pastor and the elders for them to investigate.

My point is that obedience and submission to your elders doesn't mean there's no accountability for them. Yes, respect your pastor-elders in love, as they lead faithfully to Scripture, obey and submit, but don't put us in such a place that we are untouchable in your eyes.

6. Pray for

Romans 15:30

“I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf,”

I can't count the number of times when the prayers of God's people helped me practically. There have been so many times that I didn't have clarity on a passage of Scripture or didn't know what to say in a counseling situation or didn't know what to suggest to other leaders and I asked for prayer and, sometimes almost instantly, the wisdom, clarity, or boldness came.

Please, church, pray for us. We cannot do this without you.

Final application

Perhaps God's Word has convicted you or corrected you about your perspective toward pastor-elders. Perhaps you need to ask for God's forgiveness and repent for undervaluing what God's Word says to value. Or, perhaps you've been placing the men in this office in an untouchable place in your mind—elevating them to the place only reserved for Jesus. Or, perhaps you've seen the deacons as being the main leaders of a church and have realized, perhaps for the first time today, that the main leaders are supposed to be a group of elder-pastors. Will you, church family, play your part in this relationship?

Conclusion

Illustration: Dancing

I am not much of a dancer. There wasn't so much dancing in a Baptist pastor's home in the 90's. I can do the lawnmower and the sprinkler, but that's about it. But even I know that when two people are dancing, someone must lead, and someone must follow. If the leader is constantly stepping on the toes of his partner or there is a struggle for leadership, it's not very pretty no matter how lovely the music. But when one leads well and the other follows her partner's lead in rhythm to a well-played melody, something beautiful happens.

When pastor-elders lead a church well, listening to the Spirit, under the direction of the conductor King Jesus, and the church follows well, also listening to the Spirit according to Jesus' instruction, something beautiful happens. You might even say that what happens is something glorious.

APPENDIX 9

SERMON 5: "DEACONS"

Introduction

Illustration: Pastor Visiting Deacon in Hospital

A deacon is in the hospital and his pastor goes to visit him. The pastor notices all the medical equipment attached to the deacon. He kneels by the bed.

The deacon motions to a pad and pen on the nightstand. The pastor hands his friend the pad and pen, and the deacon begins to write. Suddenly, the deacon dies.

At his funeral, the pastor delivers the service. He says, "I was with him when he died, and as a matter of fact, I just now remembered that I have his last thought in my coat pocket here. I haven't read it yet, but it seems appropriate for me to share it with you now."

The pastor pulls out the paper and reads, "Please, get up. You're kneeling on my oxygen hose."

If you've been here for the first four sermons of this series, you know I've been saying that I think we could be more biblical in how our church is structured—our church polity. You also know that last week I said there are some things our deacons are doing that are probably more pastor-elder type things.

Just because I think that's true doesn't mean I think we should be neglectful to our deacons and the office God has put them in. In fact, I think we have some wonderful godly men serving as deacons at Lake Hills.

Today, I'll be spending our time talking about this second office—the office of deacon.

Ven Diagram: LHBC Right Now

Right now, our structure is set up so that deacons do some things that deacons should be doing, biblically, and some things that pastor-elders should be doing, biblically. Here's a diagram that hopefully helps explain it as I see it. It's called a Ven diagram.

On the left is a purple circle that represents the biblical role of deacons. On the right is a red circle that represents the biblical role of overseers/elders/pastors. How I see our

current structure is having deacons serve an overlap of both roles. I'll give some examples of that later in the sermon.

Turn

Don't just take my word for this. Look at God's Word. God's Word—the Bible—is what every local church should strive to obey. It's enough for us as individuals and it's enough for us as a church.

Set Up

What then, does the Bible say about this second office? The rest of this sermon contains four sections. In the first, we'll consider the name of the second office. Section 2 is about the number of officers. Section 3 is about the qualifications of the officers. Finally, in section 4, we'll consider the qualifications of the officers.

Section 1: The Name

The word “deacon” comes from the word διάκονος.

Diakonos (διάκονος)—compound word of dia—thoroughly and konos—dust. It meant someone who thoroughly raised up dust by moving in a hurry. Greek scholar A.T. Robertson said diakonos “properly means 'to kick up dust,' as one running an errand.”

The word is used 29 times in the NT. Most times, it is translated “servant.” Other times it is translated as “minister,” which is not referring to a pastor, but someone who ministers to the needs of others. Only three times is it just called “deacon,” referring to an office.

Diakonos—servant, minister, deacon

Usages Outside of the Office

A. Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:5

Most uses of the word are referring to people serving or ministering to one another. For example, Paul used this word to refer to himself in 1 Corinthians 3:

1 Corinthians 3:5

“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.”

The word “servants” is the same Greek word we use for the office of deacon. Paul does not mean that he held the office of deacon. He was in the office of apostle. It's the context of a passage that determines what a word means. And words can mean different things based on the context.

B. Phoebe in Romans 16:1

This word is used to describe Phoebe—not the smelly cat Phoebe—in Romans 16:1. Some believe this word is saying that she was in the office of deacon. Look at Romans 16:1 with me:

Romans 16:1

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae.”

Phoebe is called a “patron” by Paul in verse 2 of this passage. She probably helped fund his ministry in some capacity. Her financial contribution led Paul to call her a servant of the church. The NIV even translates it as her being a “deacon.”

I think it’s possible that she was recognized as a deacon, but unlikely because Paul wrote Romans about 5-8 years before he ever mentioned about “deacon” being an office when he wrote 1 Timothy 3. More about the role of women in this office later.

Uses for the Office

We’re about to look at verse 8. A few verses before this, we were introduced to the office of “overseer.” Then we saw some qualifications for that first office. Now, we’re in verse 8 where we’re introduced to a second office.

1 Timothy 3:8

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.”

Apply

Surely the meaning of the word deacon has something to say about the role of this office. Keep these worms in your hand as we will talk more about it in section four.

Turn

That’s section one about the name of the office.

Section 2: The Number

There is no clear instruction about how many deacons a church should have. Nor is there any requirement for a church to even have deacons.

Acts 6?

The closest Scripture comes to giving us a number for how many deacons there could be is in Acts 6.

Acts 6:1–3

“And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.’”

Acts 6 is probably the origin story of deacons. The apostles—those personally chosen by Jesus to represent Him and even write Scripture—told the church to pick out seven men and the apostles then appointed them.

But just because they originally chose seven doesn’t mean every church must have seven. In fact, not every church even has to have deacons at all if there is no need. The Scripture just doesn’t say one way or another. Therefore, we have freedom to use wisdom and follow the Lord’s leading based on our context regarding how many deacons we should have.

Apply

How many deacons should a church have?

A church should have as many deacons as she needs, if they are qualified.

Turn

That was a quick section, I know. So far, we’ve considered the name of this office—deacon, which is most often translated servant and sometimes minister. We’ve also seen that the Scripture doesn’t say how many deacons a church should have, which leaves it up to our discretion and the leading of the Holy Spirit. What God’s Word does say a lot about for this office are the qualifications. Let’s move now to section three.

Section 3: The Qualifications

Unlike the qualifications for pastor-elders, the qualifications for the second office are only listed once in Scripture. The location is 1 Timothy 3:8–13. There are eight qualifications for deacons and four for what is probably referring to the wives of deacons.

1. Dignified

1 Timothy 3:8

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

To be dignified is to be someone that others respect. A man who is qualified to be a deacon is the kind of man that others listen to when he speaks because based on their knowledge of him, he’s a man to be taken seriously.

2. Not double-tongued

1 Timothy 3:8

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

Have you ever heard of the phrase “he has a forked tongue”? A forked tongue is the same idea as being double-tongued. It’s a saying that means he might say one thing to one person and say another thing to someone else. A double-tongued man is someone who changes his words based on who he is around so he can get what he wants.

A double-tongued person says things, sure. But what they say to your face is not always the same thing they say behind your back. For a man to serve as a deacon, he needs to be the kind of man who speaks with integrity regardless of the circumstance.

3. Not addicted to much wine

1 Timothy 3:8

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

Wine was a very common drink in their day. But if a man was addicted to much wine, it didn’t mean he had what we now think of as a medical condition of addiction, but it meant he was known as a man who loved his wine. Being intoxicated by wine or strong drink or any other kind of substance should not characterize a deacon. If it does, he isn’t qualified.

4. Not greedy

1 Timothy 3:8

“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.

Just like the qualification for elders not being a lover of money, so deacons should not be known as men who are trying to get money in unethical ways. Men who are greedy for dishonest gain are men who love money so much that they are willing to skirt the rules on their taxes, take unwise risks in gambling, overlook ethical concerns in investments, or neglect more important priorities because overtime pay is a time and a half.

5. Genuinely believe the gospel

1 Timothy 3:9

They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

You’ll have to take my word for it for the sake of time, but when Paul says, “the mystery of the faith,” he’s referring to the good news of Jesus. He uses the word “mystery” frequently in Ephesians to explain this.

Men must not be able to teach the gospel to be a deacon, but they must know it and believe it genuinely. They must not be “faking it.” They must be genuine Christians who hold to the good news of Jesus.

6. Proved blameless

1 Timothy 3:10

“And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.”

Elders shouldn't be recent converts. Deacons must be tested. I am not sure we do a good enough job of this for new deacons. It seems to me that based on this verse, a local church ought to know well whether a man who is being considered to serve as a deacon is qualified. There ought to be some kind of testing to make that clear. To my knowledge, we don't currently have any kind of formal testing for deacons.

7. Wives

Now we need to take a very quick detour. Verse 11 is much debated. Genuine Christians come to different conclusions on this verse. There are several views, but most Christians fall into two main categories.

Option 1: Women deacons

Some believe this verse is referring to women deacons. There are various arguments for this. The original language uses a word that could mean women or wives. Again, the context determines the meaning.

This understanding is reflected in the NASB and the NIV translations where it reads,

1 Timothy 3:11 (NASB)

“Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.”

Those who hold to this view see Phoebe in Romans 16 as being a deacon.

It would take me a long time to go through all the arguments for and against this view. We should not see those who have women deacons as being blatantly disobedient as long as their deacons are not overseeing men. Personally, I don't think it would violate my conscience to belong to a church that had women recognized as deacons—as long as the deacons don't function as elders.

With that said, I currently lean toward this option:

Option 2: Deacons' wives who serve with their husbands

1 Timothy 3:11

“Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.”

If this verse is referring to the wives of deacons, one of the most important questions about it is, “Why are there qualifications for wives of deacons but no qualifications directed to wives of elders?” It makes sense to us that if the wife of a deacon matters, it would matter even more for the wife of a pastor to be godly. But there are no qualifications mentioned for wives of pastor-elders either in 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1.

In my opinion, the reason there are qualifications for wives of deacons is because the wives of deacons are probably supposed to be directly involved with the ministry of their husbands more than the wives of pastors are with their husbands. Pastors are to exercise oversight—to lead churches—and women are not to do that according to 1 Timothy 2. But it’s not the job of deacons to lead churches, but to serve in practical ways. Women clearly serve the church in practical ways in many places in the NT.

So, for wives to submit to their husbands, the deacons are men, but their wives are to be very involved—so much so that they need to meet qualifications themselves.

What are those qualifications?

a. Dignified

1 Timothy 3:11

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

The wives of deacons should be women who are well-respected.

b. Not slanderers

1 Timothy 3:11

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

The wives of deacons are going to learn things about people that is sensitive information. If they are women who tend to slander others—to say untrue things about people to defame them—then her husband ought not to serve as a deacon. That would be opening up the church to serious problems caused by the wife of that deacon.

c. Sober-minded

1 Timothy 3:11

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

The wife of a deacon must be level-headed. She must be willing to see both sides before she jumps to a conclusion.

d. faithful

1 Timothy 3:11

Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.

The wife of a deacon must be a woman who is faithful in everything. Yes, she's a sinner, but generally speaking, she's known as a faithful woman because of and through Jesus.

In verse 12, the focus goes back to deacons.

8. Faithful to his wife, if married

1 Timothy 3:12

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

Churches have focused too much on the divorce issue for verse 12. Whether a man has been divorced or not divorced is too narrow of a qualification. The point is that deacons must be known as men who are faithful to their wives. They should not be known as men whose eyes are constantly wandering.

9. Manage family well

1 Timothy 3:12

Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.

Deacons must not be men who are abusive or absent. They are not overbearing to their children and family. But neither are they emotionally distant and aloof to what's happening. They are to lead their families and take the primary responsibility in disciplining their children.

Turn

We're progressing along here well now. We've finished three sections: the name of the office, the number of officers, and the qualifications. Now we come to the final section. What is it that deacons are supposed to do?

Section 4: The Responsibilities

The thing about responsibilities for deacons is that God's Word just doesn't say very much about it.

However, there are some clues.

A. 1 Timothy 3:13

1 Timothy 3:13

“For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.”

Deacons are to serve.

B. Acts 6:1–3

Acts 6:13

“And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.’”

Again, the relationship from apostle to elder is not apples to apples. But notice that in this prototype of deacons, the men were selected by the church and appointed by the apostles. The purpose was to free up the apostles to focus on the word and prayer.

The first office—pastor-elders, are to be shepherding the spiritual needs of a church through prayer and God’s Word and giving leadership to the church as a team. Deacons, then, are to take care of any practical needs that would take the pastor-elders away from their most important duties.

Deacons serve practical needs, freeing pastor-elders to focus on their role.

Illustrate: Raymond’s Extendable Fork

Can we me take that off your plate?

Gospel

This kind of sermon has potential to heap up guilt. We look at these qualifications and we might think of many times when we haven’t measured up to them. You might say, “This doesn’t bother me because I’m not supposed to be a deacon anyway.”

But we know that these characteristics aren’t unique to deacons and elders. We won’t spend the time doing it today, but we all know that every Christian should strive toward living a godly life. Not being a drunk? That’s every Christian. Not slandering? That’s every Christian. Being faithful in all things? That’s every Christian’s responsibility.

So, I wonder if in listening today, whether any of you are recognizing that you haven’t measured up to God’s standards this past week.

In our own strength, no one is qualified to serve.

Remember Romans 3:10?

Romans 3:10

“None is righteous, no, not one.”

Worse Than That

But I think our situation is even worse than that, if we’re being honest. It’s not just that we aren’t qualified to serve because we don’t measure up to God’s standards. It’s this

No one naturally wants to be a servant to begin with.

Why would you want to be a deacon? “Deacon” means servant! And who wants to be a servant? We know we should want to serve people. We should want to be willing to expend ourselves for the sake of others. But let’s face it, when we serve without recognition, we get upset! When serving means we’re inconvenienced, we’re not so willing!

Remember Jesus, the true servant.

Now is when we need to remember Jesus. Do you want to know something really, really awesome? The word diakonos that is used for deacon—do you remember that word? That is the same word Jesus used about Himself in Matthew 20:28

Matthew 20:28

“ . . . the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

If anybody deserves to be served, it’s Jesus! Amen? And if anyone doesn’t deserve to be served, it’s selfish people like you and me. But the good news is that Jesus came to earth not to be served, but to serve—to deacon! How? By giving his life as a ransom for us.

Despite our unwillingness to serve others, Jesus came to serve us.

The Key

This truth—this good news—is the key to Christian growth. This gospel is the key to being able, one day, to find yourself qualified to serve as a deacon. As we recognize our own deficiencies, we remind ourselves that Jesus succeeded where we fail, solidifying our standing before God and giving us confidence to come before God to find grace and strength. And because Jesus is alive today, having risen from the dead, Jesus’ Spirit in our hearts starts to train us over time to say no to ungodliness and yes to righteousness.

This gospel is also the key to being willing to be a true servant. If Christ has served us, then if He calls us to serve others, we will do so gladly, regardless of the recognition and regardless of a title.

Repent, Believe

Dear friend who is not a real Christian, turn from your selfishness and pride, from your self-righteousness. Believe in what Jesus has done for you—dying on the cross to serve you so that you can be made right with God and rising again from the dead to give you new life.

Conclusion

Dear church family, I am honored to serve you as a pastor-elder. I am so thankful for the godly men God has given us as deacons. I am so thankful for my fellow elder-pastors Adam and Chewy. I am so thankful for your willingness to lean in and look closely at what God's Word says. And I pray that Jesus would be glorified as we consider what it might look like for us to put into practice what we've seen in God's Word.

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ABSTRACT

INCREASING THE UNDERSTANDING OF LAKE HILLS BAPTIST CHURCH IN SCHERERVILLE, INDIANA OF SHARED PASTORAL OVERSIGHT

Jacob Douglas Riggs
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2025
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This project seeks to increase the understanding of Lake Hills Baptist Church of Shared Pastoral Oversight, or a plurality of elders. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction and roadmap to the project. Chapter 2 gives a biblical and theological basis for the project by exegeting Titus 1:5–9, 1 Peter 5:1–2, Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, James 5:14, and Acts 20:28. In chapter 3, three models of pastoral leadership structures are expounded, critiqued, and given reflection. Chapter 4 shares the details and a description of the project. Chapter 5 evaluates the project’s purpose, goals, strengths, and weaknesses before providing personal reflections of the author.

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