

Church 2.0

*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”
(Acts 1:8 ESV)*

“Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28:28 ESV)

Elders In Every Church

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Acts 14:19-23

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Acts 14:19; that’s on page 923 in your pew Bibles. We’re coming to the END of the story of Paul and Barnabas’ FIRST missionary journey. I mentioned last week that there is a certain pattern developing here. I quoted R.C. Sproul saying:

“Everywhere the Apostles went, we see God working mightily, bringing conversions from both Jews and Gentiles. In the midst of the bold preaching, divisions occurred, oppositions arose, and hostility set in, and the Apostles were barely able on very many occasions to escape with their lives.”¹

We’re going to see that pattern repeated again and again and again over the course of this narrative and rather than preaching the same sermon 10 weeks in a row, I mentioned last week, that from here on in we would focus rather narrowly on the unique details that Luke includes in each story.

In this story, here in Acts 14, we see Paul and Barnabas coming to the end of the line. Their trip looks something like a horseshoe, if you were to draw it out on a piece of paper. They began in Antioch of Syria and the went down and west and then up and east – but then instead of going all

¹ R.C. Sproul, *Acts: An Expository Commentary* (Sanford: Ligonier Ministries, 2019), 216.

the way around east and back to Antioch in Syria they STOP in Derbe and go backwards appointing ELDERS IN EVERY TOWN.

That's a remarkable statement.

That means that some of these elders would have only have been Christians for a couple of weeks or a couple of months at most. We wonder why Paul didn't just wait. Why didn't he LEAVE them for a year or two or ten so that some truly mature and grounded candidates could emerge? Why did he feel so strongly that every church needed to have ELDERS. And note the "s" on the end of that word. In not a single town did Paul and Barnabas appoint AN ELDER – in every one they appointed a plurality of congregational leaders.

That is a significant DETAIL. And it is ON THAT DETAIL that we will apply our thoughts and attention today.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 19:

But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20 But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21 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. (Acts 14:19–23 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright – it might be helpful to just revisit quickly how we came to this particular point in the story. Any time a Bible reading begins with the word “but” you are probably obligated to that. This particular “but” signals a dramatic turning point in the story of Paul and Barnabas' work in

the city of Lystra. If you were here last week then you will recall that Paul and Barnabas had rather an explosive experience in Lystra. By God's grace a man had been healed who had been lame from birth and the citizens of the city – which had no Jewish synagogue and no significant Jewish presence – completely misinterpreted that incredible event. They understood it to mean that Paul and Barnabas were gods – and not just any gods – they thought they were Zeus and Hermes who in Greek Mythology were known to take on human form and visit people from time to time to test their character and loyalty. Anyway – it was a huge mess and the Apostles were just barely able to restrain the people from offering sacrifice to them.

BUT – as we see here – the mood of a pagan city can turn on a dime. Jews from Antioch and Iconium arrived and persuaded the crowds to turn AGAINST the Apostles such that they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, leaving him for dead. But the disciples gathered around him – and presumably prayed for him – and Paul miraculously got up, and went back into the city.

Now that's a pretty incredible detail as well! We could park and preach right here, couldn't we – – but spectacular as this story is, it is really just a repetition of the general pattern. In general, when the Gospel is preached some people will respond positively and become disciples, and other people will respond critically, erratically, angrily and sometimes even violently – and that's what happens AGAIN here in Lystra.

So Paul and Barnabas move on – they go forward one city on the line and then they change directions and go back to every city and town they had visited previously encouraging the disciples to carry on in the Christian faith, to not be discouraged by trials and tribulations – and then we get this very important detail – everything else, we've seen already – we've seen preaching, we've seen division, we've seen hostility, we've seen persecution, we've seen miracles – but we haven't seen this. Look at verse 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. (Acts 14:23 ESV)

Alright, as I said – that is remarkable. Some of these people would have been Christians for like 6 weeks. How mature can they be? How established can they be? This FEELS RISKY – and yet, Paul and Barnabas seem convinced that EVERY CHURCH NEEDS TO HAVE A PLURALITY OF ELDERS if they are to survive.

So why is that?

That’s what I want to talk about this morning. To answer that question we’ll have to zoom out to consider what the Book of Acts as a whole says about elders and also what the Apostles say about elders in their various epistles.

Let’s get into it.

WHY ARE ELDERS ESSENTIAL IN THE LIFE OF THE LOCAL CHURCH?

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That’s the question, and I think the first part of the answer has got to be:

1. Because the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth

Paul says that in 1 Timothy 3:15 – right AFTER the section where he details the qualifications for elders in the church – he says:

“I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” (1 Timothy 3:14–15 ESV)

He says, “I hope to come and sort all this out myself, but I want to write and tell you how to do it, in case I can’t come – because this has absolutely got to get done, because the church is a pillar and buttress of the truth.”

We've got to have ELDERS, Paul says, because the job of the church is to preserve and proclaim the truth about who God is, who we are and how God has saved us through the person and work of Christ.

That's THE JOB, so somebody needs to be responsible for keeping us on track with that.

One of the things you notice when you read the New Testament is how CENTRAL the whole idea of preaching and teaching is to the church. There is no way around it – the church is WORDY. The church is TEACHY. And the church is still that way – even today. Think of how weird it is that you wake up early on a Sunday morning to go and sit in a large auditorium to hear a 40 minute MESSAGE – that is WEIRD.

Your friends aren't doing that. Your unbelieving friends aren't waking up on Sunday morning and going down to the local library for a 40 minute lecture on 17th century Italian renaissance sculpture – and yet here you are listening to a 40 minute message on a document written nearly 2000 years ago in the Middle East.

What is wrong with you?

What is wrong with you, is that you are a Christian – and Christians are WORDY, TEACHY, READ-Y people and we always have been. Preserving and proclaiming a body of TRUTH is essential to the mission and identity of the church – and it is central to the particular role and responsibility of the elders.

When we compare the qualifications for ELDERS with those given for DEACONS the main difference we notice is that an elder must be:

“able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2 ESV)

Paul elaborates on that when he writes to Titus about how to appoint elders in his church, there he says that an elder must:

“be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9 ESV)

So it sounds like there was a “delivery” side to this and a “discernment” side. Part of the job was to prepare and deliver sermons and part of the job was referee so as to make sure that all of the teaching in the church was being delivered within the boundaries of Holy Scripture. And it looks like they took a bit of a divide and conquer approach to that; we see that for example in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 where Paul says:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, **especially those who labor in preaching and teaching**. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” (1 Timothy 5:17–18 ESV)

In that passage we learn two things: we learn that not all elders were DIRECTLY involved in the preaching and teaching ministry – and we learn that some elders were paid. So again, what we are seeing here is that CONSIDERABLE time and attention was given over to the TEACHING MINISTRY – to the point where, for some of the elders, it was a full-time job.

That leads to the second reason why every local church needs a plurality of elders:

2. Because someone has to look after the money

That doesn’t sound as spiritual as the first reason, but it is. If the church is going to be a pillar and a buttress of the truth then we have to guard our integrity – and there are few faster ways for a church to lose integrity than for them to be accused of financial mismanagement. And the early church understood that. They understood – that if you are going to mission and if you are going to have people on the payroll – which they did, they had preachers and widows on the payroll according to 1 Timothy 5 – so if you’ve got STAFF MEMBERS and you’ve got MISSION – then

you've got money and there has to be a process in place for managing that. It has to be received and distributed in a reputable way.

The early church was aware of that need and so we see them beginning to adopt certain practices – we noticed that first in Acts 11. In Acts 11 the church in Antioch wanted to transfer some funds to the church in Jerusalem because there was a famine there and so the church was all the sudden distributing a great deal of food to the poor. Acts 11:29-30 says:

So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. 30 And they did so, **sending it to the elders** by the hand of **Barnabas and Saul**. (Acts 11:29–30 ESV)

It's not a good idea to send money in the stewardship of ONE individual – so the church in Antioch appointed TWO delegates to travel with this money. And then the money was handed off to a PLURALITY of ELDERS.

Paul adopted that basic practice in his later missionary work. As we'll be talking about in a few weeks, when Paul began collecting money from the Gentile churches in Greece and Macedonia for relief of the poor in Jerusalem he encouraged each giving church to send their money in the care of appointed delegates – he was very sensitive lest the church be discredited because of the way they handled the finances.

So we see principles here – principles related to accountability, transparency and competent stewardship – and wise churches will attend to those principles in ways appropriate to their context. Our Presbyterian cousins have RULING ELDERS and TEACHING ELDERS to ensure that those DRAWING A SALARY (teaching elders) and not the same elders as those stewarding the finances – that wouldn't be appropriate. That would leave the church open to accusations of mismanagement.

Similarly, here at Cornerstone, we have ELECTED ELDERS and PASTORAL ELDERS for the exact same reason. In our polity, the PASTORAL ELDERS do not have control of the finances –

the ELECTED ELDERS DO. To state the matter plainly, I, as a PASTORAL ELDER, do not have control over the finances. I don't VOTE on the budget at the Board meetings. I am not a Director of the Corporation – to use CRA terms. I wasn't even PRESENT at our final budget meeting this year – I was out in Calgary – so if you have a question about the budget, you direct that question to AN ELECTED ELDER. My job as a PASTORAL ELDER is to suggest appropriate priorities for the budget – but it is the job of the ELECTED ELDERS to COLLECT, STEWARD and DISTRIBUTE our COMMON FUNDS. So we're all ELDERS but we take primary responsibility for different pieces of the shared task.

Does that make sense?

Again, there are different ways you could apply these principles and different ways you could divide these tasks but it is very important for churches to have some kind of plan for ensuring that these matters are properly attended to. And in this church, there is a role for you to play in that process. When you come to the AGM next Monday night you need to be thinking about all of these various requirements and responsibilities. You need to be asking: are these elder candidates theologically sound? Are they strong enough to rebuke a small group leader or even a pastor if he started deviating from the truth? And you need to be asking can at least some of these candidates read a spreadsheet? Can they be trusted to identify biblical priorities for a church family budget? Can they be trusted to receive, transmit and steward church funds? That's all part of what an elder does – and so every church NEEDS a plurality of elders with a variety of gifts and capacities.

Alright – thirdly – every local church needs ELDERS:

3. Because there are fierce wolves who will try to infiltrate the church

Paul warns the elders in Ephesus of that very thing. He says in Acts 20:28-29:

“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. 29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28–29 ESV)

Paul said in no uncertain terms that there are in fact people trying to come into the church FOR nefarious and demonic purposes – and therefore we are going to need elders who are strong enough to man the door.

There was an interesting article on the CNN website last week, I don’t know if you saw it; it had the title:

“One of the most dangerous hours in America is now 11 o’clock on Sunday morning”

There has been a huge uptick in shootings at churches in America over the last decade or so – some of that obviously has to do with the gun laws down there – but gun or no gun – the church has become a dangerous place all of the sudden, so CNN went around and was interviewing pastors and church security consultants about that. One of the lines from the article really jumped out at me. One of the people interviewed said that some of the danger came about as a result of:

“pedophiles who try to join church ministries that put them into contact with children.”²

We can’t be so naïve as to fail to understand that. Listen, if you are a paedophile where do you want to go? You want to get in either to the school system or the church – that’s why those sorts of incidents tend to happen in those two places. Schools and churches are target rich environments for those kinds of people – so whose job is it to keep those people OUT?

It’s the elders’ job.

They’re the sheepdogs.

² <https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/10/us/faith-violence-security-blake-cec/index.html>

We're so confused about this – and some of that is our own fault. Practically every church in the universe has a sign in their front yard that says what?

“Everyone Welcome”.

Well, is that true? It's kind of true – I mean tall people are welcome, and short people, rich people and poor people, people from every tribe, tongue and nation – so it's true in that sense. But let me just state the obvious:

A paedophile is not welcome to volunteer at VBS – can you say amen to that?

And a heretic is not welcome to lead a Small Group – can you say amen to that?

And an unsaved, unrepentant, rebellious person is not welcome to take communion – can you say amen to that?

There are boundaries in the house of the Lord and it is the job of the ELDERS to police and enforce those boundaries. That's why our Elected Elders oversee membership – who is in and who is out. That's why our Elected Elders oversee our policies like Plan to Protect – they decide who can serve with what people under what conditions. And that's why it is our Elected Elders who pass the plates at communion time – it is their job to make sure that no one partakes in an unworthy manner.

We don't talk about that a lot – but that is the job of the elders – because there are fast talkers and deceivers, there are wolves in sheep's clothing – there are people who say they are Christians when they are not – there are people who come here only to hurt, abuse, divide and destroy, and therefore, until Christ returns, every local church is going to need a plurality of strong, watchful, vigilant and resolute elders.

Fourthly, every church needs **ELDERS**:

4. **Because in an abundance of counsellors there is safety**

Some of what we are saying about the elders here is unique to the Christian context but some of it was borrowed wholesale from Old Testament Judaism. The Christian church did not invent elders – they adopted and adapted something that had existed in Judaism. You may have noticed that as we made our way through Acts – the first several uses of the word “elder” or “elders” had to do with people serving in the Old Covenant church, so Acts 4:5 says:

On the next day their rulers and **elders** and scribes gathered together in Jerusalem (Acts 4:5 ESV)

Acts 6:12 says:

And they stirred up the people and **the elders** and the scribes (Acts 6:12 ESV)

Ok – those are JEWISH elders, so the point is that the concept of ELDERS was something the church adopted and adapted from Judaism. The idea for that goes all the way back to Moses in the Book of Exodus – actually, it goes back to JETHRO, Moses’ father-in-law. He saw Moses taking on too much of the burden of leadership by himself and he told him, ‘this isn’t good – for you or for the people’, so he said:

“look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.” (Exodus 18:21 ESV)

No one leader – not even Moses – can look after a whole community by himself. It takes a council of leaders - this was later set down as a principle of wisdom in the Book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 11:14 says:

“Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” (Proverbs 11:14 ESV)

It's not safe for all the authority in a community to reside in a single person. Trust me, you don't want to go to a church where one person has all the power. You don't want to go to a church where the pastor is also the Chair of the Board. That's not a good set up - for the pastor or the people.

Every human being has blindspots. Every human being has limitations and shepherding the flock of God is a massively complex undertaking and therefore the wisest and safest approach is to have a plurality of leaders and a division of powers and responsibilities.

And then fifthly and lastly, every church needs its own elders:

5. Because people need to see the Gospel lived out

Part of the job of the elders is to model the look and shape of the Christian life. Peter says that to his people, he says:

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, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but **being examples to the flock**. (1 Peter 5:1–3 ESV)

Now, the Bible doesn't say you have to be perfect to be an elder – remember, some of the people appointed in this story had only been Christians for a short time – and the qualifications mentioned by Paul in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are actually remarkable for being unremarkable.

So you don't have to be a spiritual GIANT to be an elder – but you do have to be an actual Christian and you do have to be living a life that is congruent with the Gospel. NT scholar George Knight III makes that point when explaining what Paul meant by “above reproach” in his list of criteria for the eldership; he says:

“By God’s grace the pattern of the bishop’s (overseer’s) life conforms to both the general and specific characteristics and he is not objectively chargeable.”³

So to be an elder – or an overseer, the terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament - you have to be living comfortably inside the boundaries of Christian doctrine and practice. You can’t be outside the lines on anything because it is your job to ILLUSTRATE and MODEL the Christian life – not perfectly, but authentically.

So an elder needs to love his wife in a way that fits the biblical pattern.

An elder needs to parent his kids in a way that reflects the biblical pattern – again not perfectly. His kids aren’t any different than anyone else’s kids, but the way he teaches and the way he corrects and the way he loves should be authentically Christian.

Same thing for his business practices. You should be able to review his tax records and talk to his employees and there shouldn’t be anything out of bounds there. Again – he doesn’t have to be perfect, but he does have to be in alignment.

Why?

Because we need to SEE this whole Jesus thing LIVED OUT.

Christianity is not just a set of beliefs – it is a WAY. And so all of our elders – Elected and Pastoral – need to be able to say, as the Apostle Paul said:

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 11:1 NIV11)

It’s a high call – it is a noble task – it is a work of grace – O God, help!

³ George W. Knight III, The Pastoral Epistles in The New International Greek Testament Commentary, 156.

Let me pray for us, let me pray for our elders and let me pray now for the decisions we will make as a congregation in one week's time. Let's pray.