

Don Green Interviews Chris Hamilton

Questions & Answers

By Chris Hamilton

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Don Green. This is completely unscripted and it's deliberately, it's deliberately that way. Chris and I have sat together so many times and had so many conversations about different things and about leadership that we just wanted to kind of let it go where it's gonna go.

First of all, thank you for that message that was personally challenging. Your reference to the prisoner spoke to me as well and I'm convicted and plan to go back and write my own letter in follow-up to that.

Chris Hamilton. You probably knew who I was talking about.

Don. I know exactly who you were talking about.

Chris. Yeah.

Don. One of the things that kind of arose in my mind out of this I'd like you to talk about is this: we're here talking about, in one sense we're talking about church leadership and the hope and the desire in any biblical church is that over time God would raise up men who would be qualified as elders to lead and to establish that kind of pattern for a church, but as you were talking, it occurred to me that really it's not about finding men to be elders, it's showing men what being a Christian man looks like and then the other things kind of flow out of that. Talk about the perspective of how you identify leaders and how men in a local church who maybe are just for the first time really thinking about these issues and about life in a church and leadership, you know, how should we be thinking as a church about cultivating that over time?

Chris. Yeah, I think Scripture is clear there's two-pronged criteria for an elder and that is qualification and function, and the qualification is life and you can go to 1 Timothy 3 or Titus 1 and it lays out what an elder looks like and really what 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 do is describe what a Christian looks like. But the point is that somebody in spiritual leadership in an official position of leadership in the church, has demonstrated a life and a track record that they are examples consistently on a trajectory not in perfection because Jesus was born, lived a perfect life, died, rose again and went to heaven, okay, so Jesus isn't in the mist so we're not looking for men who are perfect, we're looking for men who

are consistent and on the trajectory of sanctification that demonstrates a life that is exemplary.

Then the function is somebody who loves the church, who teaches the word of God, who shepherds the people, and that's a whole separate discussion and what we do at our church is we don't take a guy and make him an elder, we look around and we see who are the elders and we make them come to meetings. That's kind of how we, and that's a tough ask sometimes, "Can you come to a bunch of meetings in a month?"

So that's really the approach that we've taken and you know that because you were there, is we're looking for men who are already elders and we give them the title.

Don. Men, that's the kind of thing that we've talked about here is that really when the title is given, you're recognizing a preexisting reality. You're not asking a man to step up and do things that are new to him, you're just recognizing a preexisting reality that flows out of the life of a man who's doing this because it's what is right, it's how he honors Christ, it's what he wants to do, rather than trying to do something new so that he gets the title.

Chris. Yeah, and part of the process at our church is you go through what we call an ordination process. It's an exam, it's a three hour oral exam, and in that process when I went through it, one of the guys asked me, "Okay, Chris, how is your life going to change now that you're an elder?" And I thought about it and I thought about it, and my answer and I was sure it was the wrong answer, I said, "I don't know, I guess I have to go to a bunch of meetings now." And that was the right answer; that's what he was trying to convey to me is your life doesn't change once you become an elder other than whatever is added onto it by that particular church.

Don. So let's illustrate this a little bit with your personal life. You've been in church leadership for decades, what was it early in your life, when did you first start recognizing that church leadership was something that God had prepared you for, gifted you for? What did you start to see in life and how did you start to recognize that personally so that that became a direction that you pursued and others affirmed you in?

Chris. Yeah, I think two things. One is I used to get on the bus and take the bus to church on Thursday nights when I was a little kid and so that I could go to elder meetings. I was fascinated by who the men in the church were. There's a man still on the elder board now who was an elder back then and I just in some sense idolized the man in my immaturity.

Don. Was that John?

Chris. Uh-huh, John Bates.

Don. Yeah.

Chris. Yeah, and of course, he was a lay guy and so I was captivated by that. That's part of the beginning of it. The second part was, and I've told John MacArthur this many

times as I ask him, "Will you reteach the book of Acts?" When I was in junior high, John was preaching through the book of Acts and I was completely captivated by the church, by the place of the church in God's design in redemptive history and how it was to function and how it did function as it's recorded in Acts and the incredible story of the growth and the spread of the Gospel through the church.

So those two things probably planted the seed. When I came out of high school, I went right into... at Grace Church we have a couple hundred junior highers so I went on as a volunteer and started working with junior highers and started teaching and a guy in there named Chris Mueller(ph), now when I came out of high school, I wouldn't look at much of anything other than the tops of my shoes. I would never have gotten in front of anybody, never talked to anybody about anything and Chris Mueller saw something and he disciplined me for four or five years and it was not a pleasant discipleship sometimes, it was, "No, you will teach through the book of Romans to these seventh grade boys and you have five weeks to do it, and it better be good." I remember the Sunday he, something happened, he had to be in the main service and he handed me his notes and said, "You're teaching junior high this morning." It was that kind of a stretching thing and he built into me an additional love for ministry but also an appreciation that I had no designs on ever being an elder, that I always wanted the qualification, I always wanted to be participating in the church, I had no desire in that sense. I was never in the pursuit of being an elder and then as life went on, I got into a career, was offered, I worked for a Fortune 500 company fairly briefly, they offered me the world and I went home to my new bride and said, they had flown corporate execs out to have lunch with me and tell me this is your path, went home to my new bride that night, we talked about it and agreed that's not our future, that necessarily cuts out involvement in the local church and that was probably the week when I made definitive career decisions to not go where I could have gone because I wanted the freedom to be involved in the church. Not an elder. I wanted the church to be the center of my home, not my work.

Don. Okay, so let me just kind of emphasize that.

Chris. Okay.

Don. You actually made career decisions...

Chris. Yes.

Don. ...you made local church such a priority that you made adverse career decisions so that you were free to do that. That sounds rather insane in modern terms.

Chris. [agrees]

Don. Did you...

Chris. I've been called worse. [laughter]

Don. Not by me you haven't. So you recognized from the book of Acts and from your involvement, you recognized that the local church was that much of a priority that you actually shaped your life around it. That is not necessarily common to hear in Christian circles.

Chris. Yeah, and it was also a derivative of being a parent. When Ann and I got married, we knew that, or we didn't know, we hoped that the Lord would bless us with children. We had two or three goals for our family when we got married and one of those three goals was that the church would be the center of our existence as a family. I wanted to raise my family to love the church, that's how we articulated it, and so if I wanted to have children who left my home some day loving the church, that necessarily dictated decisions early on to put me in a place where my children would love the church. So it was a derivative of I love the church, but I also felt the responsibility I needed to raise the next generation to love the church.

Don. Yeah. And you and I did not talk about this before just now, right?

Chris. No.

Don. Yeah, that's kind of important.

Chris. This might be something we've never talked about.

Don. Yeah, that's cool, though. Let's pivot. Let's pivot. You're the chairman of the elders at Grace Community Church. You've been there for 10 years. You've got 45 elders. You have a seminary on campus. There are 7,000 people in your database and we're a church of a fraction of that size with three elders and, you know, and just the scale of operation is much much different. Does that mean that there are different principles of leadership for a large church versus a small church? Or how do we process that? How do we take what you know in your leadership position in a, I don't mean it in a negative way, a megachurch, and here in a local church where we're, you know, at a much different scale? Talk about the differences or the similarities that should inform our thinking that your position there doesn't insulate us from what we share in common.

Chris. Yeah, I'd say that there's far fewer differences than there are similarities in how an elder board would work in your church and how our elder board works, the reason being that the Bible's very clear on the authority of an elder, on the function of an elder, on the qualification of an elder, and it makes no distinction between a large church and a small church. So where we get into trouble is starting to, and I'm talking about at my church, if we start to think we're unique or we can step away from that because obviously Paul never anticipated a church where there's 10,000 people running around on a Sunday. That's dangerous thinking. We stay very closely to what Scripture says. There are going to be differences in what maybe is on an agenda for an elder meeting in terms of the topic, but one of my roles as chairman of the elder board at Grace Community Church is to guard that agenda and I think the Bible's pretty clear about what elders talk about and what they don't talk about, and that there's deacon work, there's elder work, and that the

elders are to be freed up to do the ministry of the word in prayer. That's what should drive the agenda of the church whether there's 50 people in it or 5,000 people.

I just think there's way more similarities and the load of responsibility on your elders is as significant as the load of responsibility is on me and the elders of Grace Community Church. There is a supernatural nature to the burden, to the joy, to the stresses of ministry regardless of where you are and I've seen, I've been to churches in other countries, other states, and it's amazing the instant camaraderie there is between you and me and the people of my church and me, and if you came to Grace Community Church, you probably would feel completely comfortable maybe not with thousands of people running around, I don't know, and the traffic to get there and the parking, but when you got in with the people, it would be a sweet sweet experience because God's people, in some sense, are the same wherever you go and that extends to the leadership too.

Don. Good. Now let's, let's go from outside to inside the walls of the room and I want to give you an opportunity to directly minister to some of the men here. Hopefully I can go in, you know, broad categories here. Talk to the men who maybe don't have any aspirations for spiritual leadership, for the office, but they want to be a contributing member of the church like you described here, acting like men. They're interested in church leadership but they don't really feel like the office itself is for them, what would you say to them about their contribution that they can make to the life of a local church?

Chris. Yeah, it's a great question. First of all, I just want to say what you're implying and I want to state it explicitly. The gateway qualification for an elder is that that man desires the work. By that definition then, not all men do and I think it's really important to understand that an elder is not a first-class citizen and non-elders are second-class citizens. That's not in the Bible. It is a desire that God puts in a man's heart and if that desire is not in your heart, that is a great confirmation that you're not to be an elder. That is not the freedom, though, to stand back and say that's what those guys are supposed to do.

There is all over Scripture, Ephesians 4 talks about service in the church, that all the parts of the joints working together for the common advancement of the kingdom. 1 Corinthians 12 talks about spiritual gifts. Romans 12 talks about spiritual gifts, that the Lord has equipped every single one of us with a unique gift, not to make you a better employee or more successful in your career, this gift is specifically and dramatically and clearly for the benefit of the church. So if you can teach, that doesn't make you an elder but it means you have a responsibility that you'd better be teaching. If you love hospitality, then you have a responsibility in the context of the church to use that gift for the benefit of the church. And so there's a responsibility for everybody to use what God's given them in the context of the church for the benefit of the church.

Don. Alright, now and talk about how that, how men exercising their giftedness like that in that realm, talk about how that works to encourage and help men that those that do have the leadership responsibility, and just, you know, take that wherever you want to go,

because men like that support the ministry in ways that they may not recognize because of what it means to the people who are in leadership.

Chris. Yeah, and Acts 6 is a great illustration of that, where there was a conflict in the church, there was a need for service to a certain group of people in the church, the elders had the need then to appoint men to oversee that service, and it specifically says to free the elders up, the apostles up, for the ministry of the word and prayer. And so in a well-functioning church, the fact at Grace Community Church that there are hundreds of volunteers, if you will, doing what God's called them to do, it frees me up to not have to worry about taking care of that. And again, I don't want that to sound elitist, it is that I'm called to a certain function in the church, you're called to a certain function in the church; studying, preaching, teaching, shepherding, those are the things that God's called you to do and the fact that you have men who have the ability to lead music, to set up the room, the hundreds of other functions, I don't want to start naming them because then I'll leave one out and somebody there, you'll feel bad that I didn't say that, but everyone pulling their weight makes it all happen and it cannot happen on the back of one or two men by God's perfect design. And this is what you see, this is God's design. At the end of Acts 6 it says that people were coming to the Lord and the church was growing. That is the result of everyone playing their role.

Don. It's a collective effort.

Chris. Yes, very definitely. A collective effort not for the same recognition. For example at Grace Community Church we do have 44 elders, I will tell you, every one of those elders is all about pushing influence and recognition, if you will, to our senior pastor because God's gifted him in a very unique way, preaching and teaching like I would say we haven't seen in this country in 100 years. So why wouldn't we do everything we can to free him up to do what he does for the advancement of the kingdom, and if we're not playing our role in assisting and doing the stuff that never gets recognized so that he can do that, that's kind of what it's about.

Don. Let's pivot and speak a little bit to men who maybe are here and their marriage isn't what you described in Hebrews 13, or men who look back on their lives and say, "You know what? I failed the Lord in so many ways," and they need a word of encouragement about their role in the church and even their, just how God can still use them after a lot of failure going forward to give them a different, you know, role of contribution and a different level of spiritual growth and sanctification than what they've known before, but they hear your message from Hebrews 13 and say, "Oh, I fail in every one of those six areas." Talk to them and tell them what the way forward is.

Chris. Well, I have a similar response and I'm sure you do too. You read Hebrews 13:1-6 and it's devastating. It's a listing of all the reasons why we need a Savior and my word of encouragement is 1 Corinthians 6, it lists all these horrible sins and it says, "But such were some of you but you've been saved, you've been redeemed." And I think that is an important reminder and I think we all look back with great regret in any or all of those areas and it should be a reminder and it should drive us to humility of recognizing that

Christ saved me, and the longer I walk this earth, the more difficulty I have with the doctrine that God chose me because if I was God, I wouldn't choose me, and I'm sure some of you hear something like Hebrews 13:1-6 and you might have that same response. That is not opportunity for us to wallow in it, it is an opportunity for us to turn that back and thank the Lord and to give him glory. And I think that is a role in the church, not to glory in your past sin but to remind people from a unique perspective, whatever your perspective is that, "God saved me? What a great God."

We are involved and this is why I love the church, one of the many reasons I love the church, we tend to think that miracles happen in the charismatic churches, right? We don't talk about miracles. Miracles happen in the church every single day. We are living in a miracle era and I see it Sundays when we do baptism services and you hear the testimony, you remember those when you were there, Sunday evening, that's part of our service, and you just marvel at the work that the Lord's doing.

Don. The new birth is the miracle.

Chris. That's the miracle. Yeah, look in the mirror. That's a miracle. God saved you and if you're not blown away by that, then you don't understand the depth of your sin.

The other thing I would tell you is you look through Scripture at the men, just because the Bible describes men in the Bible doesn't mean they were good men, it doesn't even mean they were necessarily qualified men at one point. You look at the history of Paul, you think Paul didn't struggle at one time or another that, "God saved me? I was killing Christians." David, look at the story of David, a flagrant open adultery, murder, and he's still David. God used him. And so I think I would encourage you with that, that God has the habit throughout redemptive history of choosing men who are by human standards completely unqualified and using them, and I would include myself in that and I bet you would include that. I don't understand why the Lord would use me.

Don. Yeah, the whole point of being a Christian is that we are on the receiving end of mercy that we don't deserve and that we have received a righteousness from Christ that is not our own.

Chris. Yup.

Don. Let's pivot to the other end of the chronological spectrum. We've got some young guys here, very young guys, and they're on the front end of spiritual life, maybe sorting out what their life priorities are going to be, hearing these things and they don't have direct experience of the challenges of church leadership or anything, talk to the young guys here about how do they take what you've talked about in what we've done this morning, what's the take-away for them and how do they start to shape their heart in response to these things? What's the particular application to the young guys?

Chris. Yeah, I think there's purposeful living. I think it's a decision now that this is what I'm going to be and what I'm going to do, and that's on the positive side. On the negative

side, these are the things I am not going to do, and I'm not talking about from a legalistic standpoint. It is articulating clearly, "This is what I want to be and who I want to be," and very often that is in the application of that is, "There is a man I want to be like some day," or, "Those are the men I want to be like," and if you can identify that, then you go to those men and you say, "How do I become like you?" And I say that on the authority of Scripture. I read you four or five Scriptures that say imitation, imitation, imitation. It's all over the place and part of that is imitating the people that are described in detail in the Bible.

So there is that. The other thing I would tell young men is learn the Bible. Spend time in the word. And then I think of Proverbs 1, starting in verse 20 through the end of the chapter, where it gives the ultimate description of the difference between the wise man and the fool, and that ultimate difference is the wise man seeks the rebuke. That's the difference. You want to see a man who's older, who's wise? It's because in his life he has sought the rebuke. The fool is the man who has never allowed people to rebuke him, or if they've rebuked him, he's always written it off. And so I would tell young men Proverbs 1, starting in verse 20, read that, understand that, make that a discipline of your life that you seek the rebuke, and there is so much that rolls into that, the humility, the curiosity of a young man all towards the direction of wisdom.

So the word of God, follow men in your church who you want to be like. The Bible says that's a biblical pursuit and that will produce and we're talking discipleship there.

Don. Yeah. We've got maybe three minutes. Time's gone by really really fast here but I want to give the men a chance to interact with you privately as well. Let's just bring it home, make it personal. You and I are close to the same age.

Chris. You wear it much better than me.

Don. [laughter] Yeah, I wish. I don't think that I really talked about this so much. You've had the opportunity to interact with church leaders over the years with your involvement at Shepherds' Conference, men from all over the world who are in church leadership, but if I can just be, you can make this as personal as you want to, but this is now you and me and talking about Chris Hamilton, not anybody else, what are your aspirations in the remaining 20 years, if the Lord gives you that, give or take? What are your spiritual aspirations going forward? You're the chairman of Grace Community Church, you're universally respected. That's a lot of responsibility, a lot of example to carry, but what are your aspirations going forward as your own man, as the husband to Ann, the father to your children, the grandfather to your grandchildren? What are your own aspirations after all of the years of ministry that the Lord has given to you, as you now look forward, what are you aiming after?

Chris. Yeah, it's wrapped up in what we talked about this morning. I want to be an example and I'm not saying that from the standpoint that I want everybody to look at me. The people I'm most concerned about are in this order: obviously Christ, Christ knows my heart and my pursuit of holiness and sanctification is my wife's pursuit, that's my

ambition as the Bible defines it as sanctification. I want Ann at the end of my days to say she lived with a kind, gentle, spiritual leader and who cared for me. Ephesians 5 is my spiritual goal with Ann. I have three daughters. One is married with three babies and one on the way. I don't think I told you that yet. So I want to shepherd my daughters and that is one lives on the East Coast and two are on the West Coast and that takes a lot of commitment. I want them to see what a grandfather looks like. I want them to know, sure they know all my weaknesses and my failures, I want them to see that the Bible is true because they look at their father and they say, "He's lived it." And then with the grandchildren, they are the love of my life and it is so much fun to hand them back....

Don. [laughter] Amen.

Chris. ...and to spoil them terribly, but to have amazing conversations with them about right out of Deuteronomy 6, that I want them to love the Lord. I want them to fear the Lord and I want them to see what that looks like in an old man that they call Poppa.

You know, at work, you know, I want to finish well there. I don't want to be, and this kind of goes beyond spiritual but it is spiritual, I want them to see that excellence doesn't drop off because I am the old guy or, you know, I've reached some level of success or whatever, and I see that in John MacArthur. I see him in the chair 30-40 hours a week still. He's 80 years old. He's been doing this for 60 years and he's still in the chair 40 hours a week studying and that's what I want. That level of commitment to not perfection but competency in my work I think reflects well on the Lord because I have a lot of employees who are not believers.

Don. And really what you're saying is we look at life and we realize the breadth of responsibility that being an example entails, that there's a broad spectrum of people that look to us from all kinds of walks of life.

Chris. Yeah, and what I explicitly didn't say was it's not my goal to be chairman of the elder board, it's not even my goal to be elder. The Lord takes care of all of that. My goal was from high school and remains today that I'm qualified and that the Lord allows me to function in the church and all that other stuff can come or go, that doesn't impact the long haul.

Don. Got it. Last question. Let me just do it this way, I like to end little interviews like this with this thing. This is final question, just last thoughts, anything that you want to say, anywhere you want to go...

Chris. Shouldn't have done that.

Don. You, you take it.

Chris. You shouldn't have done that.

Don. Take it and run with it.

Chris. Yeah....

Don. You've got an open floor here.

Chris. Okay. Do I get half an hour?

Don. You get whatever you want.

Chris. I want to encourage you because I know you already do this. First of all, thank you for loving my friend Don. Thank you for your care for him. You have as the pastor of this church, one of the most precious men I have ever had the privilege of being in the foxhole with. What you see is what you get and there's so much behind that you don't see but it's all completely consistent. I pray that you would honor this man and I encourage you to honor this man because I know that you do. And by honor him, I don't say put him on a pedestal and all of that, he wouldn't let you do that and that's part of who Don is. But the Bible talks about good friends in the single digits. A good friend is hard to find. It's not in the plural in Scripture. And Don is one of those men and, you know, when we, boy, there's, I wish I would've known you were gonna say this because I would've structured this out better. Don is an amazing gifted preacher but he's a godly man and if there's a man that I could recommend that you imitate, it's Don Green and I'm amazed as long as I walk on this earth how many men I have to back away from them at some point. It's never going to be the case with Don Green and a guy from outside your church can come in and teach and I hope encourage you, but the point is that the guy you've got is the Varsity, the A-Team, top-notch. We still miss him desperately at Grace Church. If I was really concerned ultimately with Grace Church, I would've told Don Green, "Don't come here to Cincinnati." But we were thrilled and that worked out and for the advancement of the kingdom here in Ohio you've got the best.

So thank you for your care for him. Thank you for your love for him. Please excel more in that and we pray for you at Grace Church. I told John two nights ago that I was coming and he asked me to express his great love to all of you. So thank you. We feel like you're part of us and we're grateful for the work that you're doing here.

Don. Well, if I had known you were going to say all of that...

Chris. You wouldn't have ever let me do that.

Don. I would not have. You can buy dinner tonight.

Chris. Alright!

Don. Thank you, Chris. We look...

Chris. I love you, Don.

Don. Same here. We look forward to [clapping]. I love you too. We look forward to your ministry in the pulpit tomorrow.

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