

Introduction

This is an important day in the life of Grace Community Church. We will be installing Doug Ferrell to the office of elder in this body of believers. It is an occasion for all seriousness and prayerfulness and careful attention. It is also a day for a specific kind of sermon that heightens our attention to the place and role of elders in the life of the local church and to the way in which the church is to relate to them. So we turn to Acts 14:21-23.

[Read Text]

The church at Antioch was worshiping and fasting and the Holy Spirit directed it to set apart Saul and Barnabas for a special work. And they went out preaching and planting churches. They came to Iconium and then Lystra. Lystra is where Paul was stoned and left for dead. Revived and gathered up by the disciples, Paul left the next day for Derbe.

The details of what happened in these cities reveal that this Holy-Spirit-directed mission followed a certain pattern. Go to a city. Preach the gospel. Make a substantial group of disciples. Strengthen them. Prepare them for hardship. And finally, appoint elders in each church before leaving them in the care of God and going on to continue the work in other places. The core components were: gospel preaching. Disciple-making. Soul-strengthening. Tribulation preparation. Elder-ordination. God-trusting. This is how churches were planted.

A few weeks ago, it was planting season. This year like just about every year, we get some tomato plants and some annuals along with a few extra perennials, mostly from the GCC plant sale. I get out my trowel and open up a place in the dirt. I place the young plants in the soil and water them and watch them day by day become strong. They grow taller and fuller. Eventually they produce flowers and even some tomatoes. I sometimes think about the fact that the growing process started long before I brought those plants home. It started with a seed that was placed in the soil at the right time. The seed was watered and fertilized. It emerged from the dirt

as a tiny and vulnerable little seedling. It was allowed to grow with continued care for some time before being sold in a ready state to be placed in the bed or pot out in the yard. Then I placed it in the soil and continued to watch it for several days until I could be confident it had taken off on its own.

This kind of care went on as Paul did mission work. The seed of the gospel was spread through preaching. There were some the soil of whose hearts welcomed the seeds of the gospel. These were assembled in their towns. They became a church, an assembly of disciples. Paul continued then to strengthen and prepare them for the day he would no longer be able to watch over them personally. That preparation meant appointing elders in each church. These elders would be responsible now for continuing the growth process in the local churches. It would be their responsibility to guard the fledgling body from the influence of false teaching and instruct them faithfully in the truth.

The basic elements in getting a local church going continue to be basic to its ongoing maturity. I want to take a quick look at these several elements this morning.

I. The Gospel.

A. This is where it all started. Each of the churches was birthed out of the preaching of the gospel. Saul and Barnabas arrived in Derbe and they preached the gospel. Seeds in their infancy need three things—soil, moisture, and light. And in their maturity they need those same things—soil, moisture, and light. Likewise, for the church to arise in its infancy, it requires the gospel. And for a church to continue on a healthy path, it needs the gospel. It needs the good news. A church is birthed through the preaching of the good news, and a church continues to gain strength and exhibit faithfulness through the preaching of the same good news.

B. So what do we mean when we say, “The Gospel”? Literally, the term means good news. Isaiah 52:7 says, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation. The gospel is news to be excited about, news about which to be happy.

In the biblical sense the gospel is God's good news. It is good news from God. In Romans 1:1, Paul says he was called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. Then he calls it the gospel of God's Son, Jesus Christ. The good news is the truth about who Jesus is and what he has done. And the good news is that God in Christ has done for sinners what they could not do to be acceptable to him. This phrase from Romans 3:24 puts it in a nutshell: sinners are "justified by his grace." God's good news is that he offers redemption as a gift through the work of Christ Jesus. It is received by faith. Sinners who hear this good news and believe on Jesus are forgiven; they are justified—declared righteous.

It is the best of news to sinners who understand we deserve the judgment of God to learn that God has done for us in Christ what we could not do for ourselves. And we can't earn it; we do not deserve it; but we can receive it as a gift by simply trusting in Christ Jesus!

II. The Local Church.

A. The people in a locale who are brought to believe the gospel become an assembly. That is what the word church means—assembly. Other terms that are used in the NT for this assembly are body and bride. The church is an assembly of parts, each one unique and each one important, each one having a role which the whole body depends upon. As a whole she belongs to Jesus. He is preparing her by his death and is now continuing to prepare her for a glorious union with him. He has given gifts to the church in the form of people who teach and shepherd to equip the saints for the works of ministry and the building up of itself.

B. Paul went from city to city preaching the gospel, and the group of believers in that city that sprouted from the preaching was a church. When people believe the gospel and they join together, it is interesting the conglomeration that you get. People sometimes from the most diverse backgrounds and walks of life come together. God uses the church to strengthen its members. He works through the church to cause the individual parts to grow. He has designed that the church work in the lives of each part to produce holiness and perseverance. This happens through encouragement, instruction, ministry, and sometimes through the really hard and difficult work of discipline.

C. Grace Community Church of West Allis Wisconsin is one such assembly. Birthed by the Holy Spirit's work of grace in the hearts of the people, we are a local expression of the body of Christ. We are members of each other and together members of Christ's body. Each of us bears a responsibility to the whole body. Next week we will be installing new members. That is always an exciting time for me. This is a fitting time to remind all of us that to be the body Christ has designed us to be, we must be mindful that each of us has a role to play. Each of us is told to consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, to NOT neglect meeting together, to encourage one another and all the more as we see the day drawing near.

We are a body not a social club. We are a family not a corporation. Our goal is not making a profit but moving each other toward holiness and greater worship of God. We cannot do this by being disconnected or present merely when it is convenient. This is our life not our extracurricular activity. It's our major not an elective. Church is not about religion. For us it is about having breath in our lungs to serve and to keep at it.

III. Elders.

A. Considering the progression of Paul's church planting procedure, we realize that Paul and his church planting team could not continue to plant churches if they remained in a given place indefinitely. In the case of each church, they were working toward the day when the church would be able to stand on its own. They would be in the care of God but outside the direct oversight of apostolic authority.

Do you remember learning to swim? Perhaps you learned strokes with a parent holding you up in the water. Then maybe you went on your own with a life jacket and eventually a ski belt or arm band swim trainers. Finally you were ready to take off on your own without any assistance. Learning to ride a bicycle follows a similar progression. Maybe you start with a tricycle but then there comes a time when you go to a bike with training wheels. Gradually the training wheels are raised. Then a parent holds the back of the seat and occasionally lets go. But there comes a day when mom or dad have to let you go completely. You have been taught and trained. But the goal is for you to be able to ride on your own.

For the local church, that day is when leadership is in place. The church is entrusted to the hand of the Lord. As the time of Paul's departure became nearer, it was crucial to have a group of under-shepherds to feed, guide, lead, and protect the flock. That leadership team in each church consisted of a group of elders. These were men appointed by the apostle himself. Once these were in place, the churches were ready to make a go of it entrusted to God but in the absence of the apostle.

When we look over to Titus, we see that Paul had been on the island of Crete with Titus by his side. Folks in the different towns had come to faith in Christ. Assemblies of believers had been established in each town. One more critically important task needed to be completed—the appointment of elders. In Titus 1:5 Paul says, "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."

B. The role of elders in a local church is multifaceted. Three terms sum up the role—oversight, instruction, and ministry.

Oversight speaks of authority and management. Paul calls the role of elder the office of overseer in 1 Timothy 3. Elders supervise the local church. Before committing the local church to the care of God and departing, Paul appointed elders. They were to function in the role of Paul the Apostle. Elders exercise authority. Paul uses the word "rule" in 1 Timothy 5:17 to describe their function and role. 1 Timothy 3 indicates that the way in which an elder cares for the church reflects the way a godly father manages his home. Hebrews 13:17 corresponds to elder rule as it commands church members to "obey and submit" to church leaders.

Instruction is also a critical aspect of the elder's role. 1 Timothy 3:2 stipulates that the elder must be able to teach. Elders serve in the role of shepherd-teacher that Paul mentions in Ephesians. They equip the saints for ministry through the teaching of the word. Titus 1:9 says the elder must give instruction in sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it. The goal in the church is that we preach Christ; we warn; and we teach the doctrines of the apostles in order to present everyone mature in Christ.

Finally elders must minister personally. To properly minister to the whole there must be personal connections. The concept of shepherding applies here. And Peter instructs the elders in the church to “shepherd the flock of God.” A good shepherd knows the needs of those in his flock. He watches over them. Hebrews 13:17 says that leaders are in a position of “watching over the souls of those in their charge.” The faithful soul watcher will follow the Lord’s example. Green pastures, quiet waters, paths of righteousness, soul restoration, comfort in dark valleys—these are aspects of elder ministry. It does not happen from on high but in the context of personal relationship.

Elders are to be examples to the flock. They sometimes have to pursue lost sheep. The “one another”s to which the flock is called—encourage one another, admonish one another, build up one another—these are responsibilities that must be emulated first by the elders. Elders are not appointed to do all the ministry but to lead in the example of ministry that is to be carried out by the entire flock.

Oversight, instruction, personal ministry. These are the chief functions of the elders of the local church.

C. The NT lays out not only the role and function of the elder in the local church but also provides guidelines to determine who qualifies to serve in the office. The work of the elder is a noble task, and it is good that men aspire to it. But because of the nature of the role, those who are appointed to it must exhibit certain qualifications.

They must be: above reproach.

Faithful to their one wife.

Sober minded.

Self-controlled.

Hospitable.

Able to teach.

Not a drunkard.

Gentle.

Not quarrelsome.

Not a lover of money.

A good manager at home.

A seasoned believer.
Well thought of by outsiders.

One of these areas of qualification needs some special attention as it can be interpreted in such a way as to lead to unnecessary restriction. On the home-management side of things, Paul's letter to Titus chapter 1:6 is translated in the ESV as follows: the elder's "children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination." Some other translations speak similarly. But in the ESV there is a footnote which indicates that the Greek verbiage here may also be translated as saying the elder's children must be faithful, as in obedient and under control. A number of English translations contain that wording including the NLT, KJV, CSB.

Meanwhile, there is a parallel passage to help us out. 1Timothy 3 addresses the elder's children this way: "He must manage his own household well, with all dignity, keeping his children submissive." If we allow scripture to interpret scripture, we have to conclude that the requirement is not necessarily for believing children but for children that are well-behaved under the management of their father. After all, the other qualifications all have to do with aspects of character for which a man is personally responsible, not ones which are out of his control. Moreover, these are children who are in the household. They are under the elder's roof and management and authority.

Elders, just as many godly parents who have faithfully managed their households, may have children who do not believe. They may have children who move out of the home, abandon Christ, and pursue an ungodly life. The question is not whether they were able to bring about saving faith but how well they managing their household.

D. The church's responsibility in relation to elders is humility. After charging elders to shepherd the flock of God, Peter charges the flock to be humble. In 1 Peter 5:5, he says, "be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And let me tell you what humility does. Humility listens. Humility takes on a teachable spirit. Humility

respects. Humility is willing to be led. Humility serves. And humility prays for those to whose leadership it submits.

Conclusion

It seems that the suitable thing for this morning is to conclude with a charge—a charge to all the elders and to Doug Ferrell in particular as well as a charge to the flock.

As to the charge to the elders and Doug, I think of Paul's charge to Timothy. "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. He also said, "Set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity." "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."

As for a charge to the flock, I think of Hebrews 13: "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. [And] pray for us."

Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. A-men."