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Sermon Notes

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Paul's Pattern for Elder Ministry

Acts 20:17-38

How best should a church be governed? Is there a Biblical pattern for church government? And by whose authority should church leaders lead and spiritual ministry be done?

“By Whose Authority?”

That's the very name of a recent booklet addressing these questions by Mark Dever, pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church

Baptists have always been very careful about how the money is handled and who makes the decisions in church life... and they tend to view with suspicion any who fill those roles

Dever begins that booklet with the assertion that church government is one of the two most divisive questions facing Baptists today.

Thinking they have nowhere else to turn, many Baptist churches and their pastors turn to secular government or to modern corporate models to govern the church

Another Baptist pastor, Louie D. Newton described his own approach to church government:

“The first step I undertook when I became pastor of Druid Hills church was to set up the Pastor's Cabinet, composed of the heads of all the departments of church life—Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Deacons, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Finance committee, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Chairman of the Board of Ushers, Clerk, Treasurer, Chairman of the Relief Committee, Superintendent of the Sunday School, Director of the Training Union, President of the Women's Missionary Society, President of the Brotherhood, Minister of Music, Chairman of the Music Committee, Chairman of Guest Book Committee, Chairman of the Youth Council, Librarian, and Members of the Church Staff.”

Pastor Newton said that in this Pastors Cabinet, all plans for evangelism, enlistment, stewardship, etc. are first discussed and resolved, then the ideas are submitted to ever-larger groups for feedback, before the ideas are finally submitted to the church for approval or disapproval.

- Baptists and the Sufficiency of Scripture:
 - Great hallmark of the Baptist movement in church history: clarity on the nature and essential role of the local church
 - Local church should as much as possible be composed of true believers in Jesus Christ
 - Baptism should only be administered to those who can give a credible profession of faith in Christ
 - Part of that: the habit of going to the New Testament for every aspect of local church life
 - In this, Baptists have been an example to all of the Christian world
 - Yet, what about church government? Is the New Testament sufficient to lay out a clear pattern for church leadership?
- Since I began here at FBC almost ten years ago, I have believed that the Bible was indeed sufficient for all aspects of local church life... including church government
- And I am convinced that the New Testament teaches that a group of elders should lead each congregation to fulfill its mission from Christ
- In Acts 20, the Apostle Paul gives one of the greatest farewell addresses in history
 - On his second missionary journey, Paul had come to the famous Asian city of Ephesus, the chief city of the province of Asia Minor
 - It would become the center of all his evangelistic outreach to the whole region
 - It was a cultural and economic center of the in the Roman Empire
 - But it was best known for the massive Temple of Artemis, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world
 - Paul had preached the gospel boldly in Ephesus and a riot resulted... for three hours they had chanted “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians”
 - Paul’s greatest legacy, however, had been his faithful ministry of teaching and preaching
 - For three years he had met with the converts daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus
 - During this period he had appointed elders to serve the church

- On his third missionary journey, Paul had come near the church; but he was in a hurry to get to Jerusalem, if possible, by the Feast of Passover
- So he sailed past Ephesus and landed in Miletus, about a 70 mile journey overland south of Ephesus
- From there he sent for the elders of the church to speak to them one last time
- From this farewell address, we get a tremendous number of insights into what Paul felt was involved in the life and ministry of an elder
- Yes, he spends most of his time speaking of his own ministry among them
- BUT he does this as a pattern for the life and ministry they should all have as elders
- This farewell address has been used again and again at the ordination of vocational elders... full-time pastors
- But it should be understood also as a pattern for ALL elders, whether they are vocational elders who give their full-time to church ministry or lay elders
- This farewell address to the Ephesian elders answers forever the question “Why elders??”

I. The Number of Elders

A. Paul Spoke to a Group from One Location

Vs. 17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

1. this was a group of men, coming from the one church at Ephesus
2. opponents say there were many house churches in Ephesus... these are just the various house church leaders
3. however, that is not honest to the verse itself
4. the word “church” is singular, the word “elders” is plural

B. Plurality of Elders Always in View

1. Consistently in the NT, the pattern is of a plural group of elders leading each local church
2. Many biblical examples:

Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

[every local church had a group of elders appointed to lead it in ministry]

Titus 1:5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

[every town would only have one local church... and yet a group of elders was to be appointed in every town; one church, plural elders]

James 5:14 Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

[one local church, a group of elders responsible for its members]

1 Timothy 5:17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

[elders is plural, church is singular... one church, plural elders directing its affairs]

C. The Wisdom of This

1. Solitary church leadership more open to abuse of power

John MacArthur: “Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual.” “In fact, one-man leadership is characteristic of cults, not of the church.” [quoted in Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, p. 67]

2.

3. Key text:

^{ESV} Proverbs 11:14 Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

II. The Title of Elders

A. A Variety of Terms All Meaning The Same Thing

1. first term: vs. 17 “elders” Greek = presbuteros, from which we get the word prebyterian

a. word generally meant an older man...

b. word focused on age producing experience and wisdom

c. Timothy, however, was an elder while a young man...

1 Timothy 4:12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

d. The real issue is spiritual maturity

2. second term, vs. 28 “overseers” Greek = “episkopas”

a. from this word we get ‘episcopalian’

b. 1 Timothy 3:1... the KJV translates it ‘bishops’ from the old English for episkopas, overseer

c. Concept is one who watches over the souls of the flock of God, as on a hillside overseeing any dangers that might beset the flock

3. Third term, verbal form vs. 28 “shepherd”

Vs. 28 Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

a. Related to the word for “pastor” in Ephesians 4

Ephesians 4:11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers

Since Paul is talking to the same group of people the whole time, it is obvious that these terms are interchangeable...

Elders are overseers

Overseers are pastors

Pastors are elders

These terms are absolutely interchangeable... so also in Titus 1

Why is this important? It shows the simplicity of church government: the bible recognizes two officers in the church—

Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons

Deacons are never shown to be entrusted with spiritual leadership in the New Testament... the spiritual leaders are elders/overseers/pastors

That means that qualified men in our congregation who exercise spiritual leadership (whether they are full-time, vocational elders or not) should be called elders, not deacons

III. The Calling of Elders

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

- A. The Holy Spirit makes elders... the church recognizes them
- B. This is a calling from God... and a gift of God to the church
- C. The church should receive them as a blessing from God
- D. And the elders should see themselves humbly as servants, accountable to God for that calling He has placed on their lives

IV. The Character of Elders

A. Visible Holiness

Acts 20:18 When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia.

- 1. Paul clearly puts his life on display for all to see
- 2. Later he speaks of this again:

Acts 20:34-35 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak

- 3. he has been consciously living life before them as a role model

this whole speech is the final consummation of that role modeling... many times he refers to their personal knowledge of how he lived his whole life in front of them from the first moment he came

He's doing it so that they also will be examples to the flock

- 4. so much of the Christian life is caught by example... watching godly leaders live life in front of you
- 5. An elder is to be a role model in visible personal holiness... more on this in a moment

B. Humility

Acts 20:19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.

1. it may seem odd for someone to speak of how humble they were
2. Paul was humble... he was constantly opposed, and yet he bore it with great patience

1 Corinthians 4:12-13 When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly.

3. he was meek toward his enemies
4. an elder can't be proud, haughty, above criticism

St. Augustine captured the importance of humility, saying

“For those who would learn God’s ways,
 humility is the first thing
 humility is the second,
 humility is the third.”

“God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

An elder must be a humble man if he is to shepherd the flock well... and the elder’s ministry will certainly do much to humble him!!!

C. Personal Courage

1. Constant opposition from human foes

Vs. 19 “I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews”

Acts 20:22-23 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

2. constant temptation to shade the truth and make it popular

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you

Acts 20:27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

3. constant danger from within the flock

Acts 20:29-30 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. ³⁰ Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

4. constant danger from Satan and his demons

D. Single-Minded Focus

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me-- the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

1. An elder can't get sucked into a life of self-gratification
2. he must live for the calling God has placed before him
3. he must be willing to die daily to his own purposes and desires to see the task completed

E. Freedom from Covetousness

Acts 20:33 I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing.

1 Peter 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

F. Diligence in Responsibility

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

Acts 20:31 So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

G. Passion and Compassion

1. A godly elder is not merely a thinking machine... a bible answer-man, a doctrinal computer
2. he is to show his passion for Christ and for the people of God
3. Paul shows a great deal of emotion in ministry

Acts 20:19 I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews.

Acts 20:31 Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

4. in return note the tremendous affection they feel for him

- a. he says this to them

Acts 20:25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again."

- b. And this is how they responded as he said goodbye one final time

Acts 20:36-38 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. ³⁷ They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. ³⁸ What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

H. Hard Work

1. Paul was an incredibly hard worker
2. He accepted no financial support from a small, struggling church plant like that was
3. Instead, he says he worked hard with his own hands so as not to be a burden to anyone

Acts 20:34-35 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak

4. my take on it was that he spent the days in the marketplace witnessing to the lost, the evenings in the lecture hall of Tyrannus, teaching sound doctrine to the church, and the nights working as a tentmaker to support himself and his companions
5. a godly elder must also be a hard worker... no slacker

I. Generosity

Acts 20:34-35 You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. ³⁵ In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

1. This obviously shows the character trait of generosity
2. He used his own earnings to support those who couldn't support themselves
3. An elder must be generous of himself... of his time, his money, his home in hospitality

J. Faith in God for the Results

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified."

1. one of the most important things an elder can do is to recognize whose church it really is
2. this verse settles it forever:

Acts 20:28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

3. Only Jesus shed his blood for the church... we are his for he bought us with a price
4. an elder should realize God was working on the church long before he got there, and will be working on it long after he's dead and gone
5. so an elder must look to God for the results... for the eternal fruit... not give in to pragmatism, to techniques of church growth, to fads and to follies to build the church
6. he must be a man of eternal perspective and faith

K. Happiness

Acts 20:35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

1. "blessed" = happy
2. an elder should realize the happiness of serving in Christ's kingdom...looking ahead to the eternal rewards

1 Peter 5:4 when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

V. The Duties of Elders

A. Preaching and Teaching the Word

1. This is the most vital aspect of the ministry of the elders
2. a special requirement for elders: ability to teach and defend doctrine

1 Timothy 3:2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach

Titus 1:9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

3. Here in Acts 20, note how much Paul makes of his faithful teaching ministry

Acts 20:20 You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.

Acts 20:26-27 Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

4. If an elder is

B. Role Modeling

1. as we've noted, Paul put his life on full display before them from the first day he set foot in their city

2. so also, they must do for the flock

ESV 1 Corinthians 11:1 Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

Philippians 3:17 Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.

Philippians 4:9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

The Apostle Paul was no hypocrite... he lived what he preached; so must every elder live up to their doctrine

Just before he was to be burned at the stake, John Hus said "What I preached with my lips I now seal with my blood."

Richard Baxter, in his classic *The Reformed Pastor* wrote this: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine, and lest you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind, as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you unsay with your lives what you say with your tongues, and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labors."

"Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those sins which you preach against in others, and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and when you have finished, dishonor him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power, and yet condemn it and rebel yourselves? Will you preach his laws and willfully break them? **If sin be evil, why do you live in it? And if it be not, why do you dissuade men from it?**"

Charles Spurgeon, nearing the end of his ministry, was attacked by some enemy who wrote in a letter threatening to expose him in some way. Spurgeon responded, "**You may write**

my life across the sky. I have nothing to conceal!” (from C.H. Spurgeon on Spiritual Leadership, Steve Miller, p. 58)

C. Service

D. Evangelism

E. Guarding the Flock from Danger

F. Prayer

Acts 20:36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

VI. The Accountability of Elders

A. Paul’s Statement: Innocent of Blood

B. Paul’s Assumption: Full Accountability

C. Supporting Scripture

VII. Application

A.

B.

VIII.

A.

B.

C.