

To All Elders

This sermon is an unusual thing for me. I have felt led to prepare a sermon without first having an audience. I do not know if anyone will ever listen to this or read the sermon notes. But based on what I am seeing on numerous fronts I thought it very important that the scripture be proclaimed to address some mistakes we are making as elders.

I am an elder at Ferndale Baptist Church in Oakland Maryland. I have been an elder for about 10 years. I am in the process of learning to be a better elder to our flock here. I have been a believer for 39 years. I was in Youth For Christ for 15 years. So I have rubbed shoulders with a lot of fellow believers in all types of churches. What I have seen has, at times, been very troubling. And as always, I believe all the answers we need are found in God's Word.

Now, you may not call the leaders of your church elders. They may be called Trustees or a number of other things. I'm not sure that the title matters but the job sure does. As far as I can see in scripture there are elders and deacons with two different jobs. I am speaking today about the elders position, no matter what your local church might call this position.

Our church recently did a church camp on the book of Titus. We studied the passage regarding Elders in chapter 1. This study was very helpful to me. The teaching sermon can be found on SermonAudio.com if anyone is interested.

Today's sermon will touch on some of the highlights and side issues that have come to light in that study and over the years. I pray as I prepare this that God would use it to right some wrongs. I pray also that the church would be a little more edified as a result.

Titus 1:5-9 lists qualifications for the elder position. This list closely resembles the list found in I Timothy 3. I will focus mostly on the second half of the Titus passage that focuses on the responsibilities of an elder. I will also refer to Acts 20:25-32.

To begin I would like to clarify **what I believe** scripture says Elders are **for**. Elders were put in place by God **to nurture and protect** the local bodies of believers. **To nurture and protect**, just as shepherds tend to sheep. In Psalms 23 we have often heard that Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Well, most of us can quickly understand how a shepherds staff can be a comfort. The staff is the long stick that the shepherd would use to aid sheep that were in trouble. It is a tool they would use to tend to their sheep and meet their needs. The staff is a tool of **nurture**. But the **rod**, that is a different story. The rod is a club that often had nails sticking out of it. It was designed to put a major hurt on any wolf or lion or bear that wanted to

have mutton for dinner. How is that a comfort to the sheep? The answer is simple. The sheep know that they are safe because the shepherd is, in many ways, not a safe person. The shepherd is dangerous. He is dangerous to the enemies of the sheep.

We as elders are to shepherd the flock of God. And that shepherding involves both the tender care and the fierce protection of the flock. And we are to do it at the risk of our lives and sometimes at the cost of our lives. That, in a nutshell, is the biblical picture of the elder. Search it out for yourselves. I think you will **quickly** find that I am telling you the truth. If you are an elder, this is what you signed up for. If this is not what you understood when you agreed to serve, ask yourself now... am I willing to perform this service? If you are not, do yourself and your church a favor. Step down now. This is too important of a position to have the **appearance** of the shepherd without the **reality** of the shepherd. If you are willing to provide this service, then apply yourself **to it** as if the **safety and nurture** of the church **depends** upon it. Because God says it does.

Also, look at your church structure and any of your documents. Does it allow you to totally fulfill the biblical role of the elder. If it does not, **change your documents**. Conform your man made structure to God's infallible guidelines. Do not throw up your hands in despair saying, "but this church document won't allow me to obey God in this manner." Change the documents. When you said yes to being an elder you took on the responsibility of elder-ship the way **God** defines it. It is **His** church. So now it is your responsibility to perform this function and overcome any obstacles in your way.

Now let's look at Titus 1:9

This is one of the traits of a person who qualifies to be an elder. It says: Holding fast the **faithful word** as he has been taught, that he may be able, **by sound doctrine**, both to **exhort** and **convict those who contradict**. Here we see the tool of the elder. Here is both the rod and the staff. And it is the faithful **word** as he has been taught. This is the **word of God**. When an elder holds fast to the Word of God, when the Word of God is his authority, **then and only then** can he both **exhort those who are his true sheep** and **refute those who are the wolves**. The Word of God is the primary means of carrying out the Elder's job as given to him by God. This is one verse among many like it that should give an elder the proper priority to his work. Let me show you what I mean by asking you some questions. What has your focus as an elder been lately? What has your time and effort gone into?

Now let me ask this:

Where in scripture does God give elders the responsibility for administrating or overseeing plans and programs for church growth? What verse specifically tells you as an elder to do this thing?

Where in scripture does God tell the elders that they can delegate their responsibility for knowing scripture and using scripture to a full time minister? What verses tell us this?

Where in scripture are we told that any of mans plans or programs for running any area of the church are to be accepted as if they are God's word and carry the same priority as such? Any scripture on this?

The point I hope I am making is this. We as elders seem to be sidetracked into doing everything and anything but the thing that God has made us responsible for. And we will do it **every** and **any** way except using the specific guidelines he has given us to use. Let me ask you another question.

Who in your church is the most responsible for knowing and holding the church to sound doctrine or scriptural teaching? Is it the **full time minister?** Is it the teachers? Or is it the elders? The answer is clear in scripture. The responsibility for the teaching and preaching of the church conforming to God's word is **laid squarely on the Elders**. Like it or not, we are the doctrinal guards of our churches and we must be competent in our job. It is one of the most important jobs we will ever have. The elder of the smallest church has a more important job than the CEO of the biggest corporation. Every single thing the corporation accomplishes will burn up. But the charge of the elder will live on forever.

Before moving on to the next point I want to make this challenge. Will you make the priority that God gave you as Elder your top priority? Will you pour yourself into God's Word and rely upon it as your only guide for how to shepherd the flock and your primary tool for ministering to their needs. I believe we would do well to throw all our man made plans and programs away and get on our knees while reading Gods word and ask God, what most pleases YOU? And then as God reveals it to us through the study of His Word we should get off of our knees and do it.

Now, onto the next point. I have a question. Does your full time minister, if you have one, qualify as an elder? Is he one?

I have a bias and I'm not going to try to hide it. I have no idea where we came up with the idea of seminaries and our current feeding system of producing so called "pastors". Try to find that in scripture. Good luck. My position is that if the Church is **God's church**, the way the church is run should be **God's** way. My Bible says that God calls some to be preachers and teachers. That is good enough for me. Some of those called people go

through seminary. Some don't. And some who go to seminary have never been called of God. We have an excellent preacher. What makes him excellent is the combination of being gifted by God to preach and being driven by God to lead a faithful life. I would pick those qualities over a seminary product any day of the week. Just as being in a church doesn't make a person a Christian, so attending a seminary doesn't make a person a pastor.

In fact, much of what I see coming out of seminaries is dependence upon the horses and chariots of man, the methods of man, rather than a trust in God and His Word. There is such a quest to make the church relevant to our culture that the church ends up with more of our culture than of God's power. And evangelism becomes the **focus** of the church rather than the **natural spiritual fruit** of the church. We succeed in filling our seats with the world and the end result is we drive true believers out the door in search of something that resembles the Church of Christ.

My point is that we, as elders, are to oversee the flock. And if we have a full time minister, they are part of the flock. If they qualify as an elder, then we can appoint them as one. But in saying this, I wonder how many ministers have actually been tested to see if they qualify as elders before being appointed as such. Really, how long does it take to really know if a person meets the qualifications. I cannot imagine it taking less than a year to really know the person you have brought in from the outside. It is irresponsible and un-biblical to automatically appoint such a person as an elder. In my experience, much harm would be avoided in churches if they refused to appoint a minister to this position until they have proven they are qualified for it. And in my opinion a person coming from the outside should never be a head elder until it is very clear they intend to stay.

Along with this, full time ministers are still to be submitted to the word of God just like any other member. We cannot fall for this idea that they are the "Lord's anointed" and as such untouchable by rebuke or correction. I doubt that anyone was more anointed than David, but Nathan still had a job to do to walk up to David and severely correct him. Full time ministers have no special privileges other than having more time to do some of the work of the church. We as elders must be sure to never lose sight of our responsibility. And be sure it is **we** who are responsible. We can never say, "it is not my fault. It is the fault of that bad minister that we hired." No, if it happens during our watch it is **our fault**. We are the God appointed elders! And besides, guess who is going to be left to clean up the mess? The full time minister is likely to shop for another position elsewhere. It is we who

will be left with the hurt and the healing. Why sit back and let it happen. We need to be actively involved.

So the first thing we saw in scripture is that elders are responsible for **serving and protecting** the church using **God's word** to hold the church to **sound doctrine**. This implies that we must know the Word, study the Word, read the Word and apply the Word. Now let's look at verses 9-11.

Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. 10 For there are many insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, 11 whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole households, teaching things which they ought not, for the sake of dishonest gain.

We see here that an elder must be prepared to face opposition. Think about this passage. Scripture says that there are **MANY** insubordinate, both idle talkers and deceivers whose mouths must be stopped. These are people who do not **want** to stop their mouths. And they are people who are not limited in their approach by submission to the rule of God. They can use **slander**. They can use **manipulation**. They can **weasel** their way around. But it becomes our job to stop them from harming our flocks.

There are several things to note here.

1. The rebellion being described here is rebellion against that **sound doctrine** we saw in verse 9. This is speaking about rebellion against the clearly revealed word of God as contained in scripture. This describes a person who hears clear teaching from the Bible and begins to say –No, the Bible is not true here. Now it is rare to have someone speak this clearly. Normally it will involve a twisting of scripture that, over time, reveals a person that is not submitted to scripture. This passage is **not** describing **all opposition to directives and plans that we as elders come up with**. It is describing opposition to **God's Word**. We as elders must become lovers of truth. Truth is not friendly but it is our friend as believers. And to love truth we must receive truth from even the most unlikely of sources. While we as elders may think a plan or direction is perfectly ok, someone in our body of believers may be given a very clear discernment that our plan is a mistake and is headed in the wrong direction. We must be prepared to listen to these people. A 10 year old with a Bible holds as much authority in the Body as a trained scholar with a Bible. It is the Bible that is the authority. Christ IS the Head of the Body after all. So this passage is not saying we should silence all opposition to our style or mode of leadership. It IS saying we

should **silence opposition to God's Word. To the degree we speak scripture, we speak with authority. To the degree that we speak from our thoughts and imaginations, we do not hold authority.**

Always clarify what is being **opposed** before coming up with a plan of action of what to do about the **opposition**. The prophets in the Old Testament were almost always unpopular to the leadership of the country but they were **always** right. We must be very discerning here. And pride cannot be a factor in our reactions. We must be the first people to admit we are wrong when we find out that we are. **We should never punish those who evaluate critically if the critics are using God's Word as the basis. To oppose them is to oppose God.** The church needs **more** people like this. The church needs more people that are able to discern when the leadership is getting off track. To silence a prophetic voice, no matter what the source, is to do great danger to the flock. It is like leprosy that kills all of a person's nerve endings. The leper cannot feel pain so they cannot tell when their flesh is being destroyed. The truth of God's Word is **the priority** and we all must submit to it. It is not the elders job or privilege to boss people around with some master plan that we have come up with for our church. It is our job to minister God's Word to the flock. Any arbitrary plans or programs must be kept voluntary for our body members.

2. **When the elders speak God's Word clearly, some people will rise up in opposition to what God has clearly said.** They do this because they are **not sheep**. They may be pretend sheep who are really wolves. Or they may be Wolves who are not even trying to hide their true character. Either way they are enemies of God. When this happens an Elder must be prepared to fight for the sheep. A man should know full well when being appointed as an elder that **this is part of the job**. A man should not be appointed as an elder if he has no backbone or if he is gutless. I am convinced that there are too many people serving as Elders who do not understand this. They want to **help**. They want to be **of service**. They may be successful as businessmen or they may be retired and have time on their hands. There are a thousand stories. But these men do not understand that **this is by its very nature a conflict position. We must both initiate conflict and respond to conflict.**

I have seen elders abandon their posts because the wolves started getting mean. That's like dropping out of a boxing match because the other guy is hitting us. What do you expect from the devil? Do we think he will sit back and allow us to minister without interruption?

We as elders will be misunderstood. We will be sided against. We will be slandered. And if we are worth our salt it will cost us. It will cost us time. It will cost us comfort. We will grieve deeply over things that others know nothing about. And we will sometimes have to look like the bad guys because we cannot resort to the same tactics as the wolves use. But think about it. **What is the church? Is that not what Christ died for?** If that is true, **if** these people are the ones that Christ viewed as being worth dying for, **aren't they worth a little suffering** on our part? Really... The difference between a hireling and a shepherd is in his degree of commitment. A hireling is at his post to collect a paycheck. When the paycheck is not worth the price of service to the sheep, he will hit the road. A shepherd will guard the flock at risk of his life. He is committed to death for the welfare of the sheep. That is a picture of what we are to be as elders.

Now just in case you think I am making too much of this text, let's take a look at

Acts 20:17-32

Verse 17- From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. Now skipping to verse 26

26 Therefore I testify to you this day that I [am] innocent of the blood of all [men]. 27 For I have not shunned to declare to you the whole counsel of God. 28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the **Holy Spirit** has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves** will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 Also **from among yourselves** men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. 31 Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. 32 "So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Now look at verse 25-27. How can Paul say this? How can Paul say that he is not guilty of blood guilt? Is it because he administered so well? Or is it because he worked so hard? Or is it because he created such a wonderful evangelism strategy?

No. Paul says he has no blood guilt because he declared the **WHOLE COUNSEL OF GOD**. He spoke the truth and the whole truth, even the unpopular truth. He spoke what Christ spoke and he stuck to it.

You can also see again the charge given to elders. They are going to face wolves. And there is a cost to be paid to protect the church. It is the same kind of cost that Paul has already displayed by his service to them. Paul tells the elders to take heed to yourselves and your flock. Watch out! There will be wolves from the inside and from without. That is why Paul worked so hard for 3 years with the Ephesians. He worked on tents or saddles in the morning and the evening. Then when the rest of the town was sleeping during the hottest period of the day Paul was teaching the body. Paul serves as a good example for us as elders.

Then Paul goes on to commend them to God and to the Word of His grace. There it is again... God's Word. He starts with it and ends with it. Why? Because it is because it is able to build us up and give us an inheritance among those who are sanctified. It is not a new program or a new strategy or a new gimmick that will build us up. It is God's Word and only God's Word.

I speak to you elders today with a burden on my heart. I have been involved in church splits where elders quit and ran because of controversy. I have seen churches split because elders blindly backed the plans and programs of their full time minister and would not deal with the biblical opposition by the members. I have seen churches split because the elders would not stand up to fellow elders and set things straight. I have watched as elders seemed powerless to do the very things that God commissioned them to do. And I have seen churches split because the leaving members no longer to submit to God's Word. There is nothing we can do about the last kind of split. It is actually a blessed subtraction. But the other kinds of splits are completely unnecessary. We as elders **MUST** do something about them. Our job is to see that, based on God's word, no one is **excluded** from Christ's church that Christ would **include** and no one is **included** who will not submit to Christ's authority and Lordship over their lives. What this means is that we must carry out all of our responsibilities within the boundaries of Biblical authority. We only pronounce something as a sin if God pronounces it as a sin. We do not claim for ourselves any special mystical authority. We only rebuke what God rebukes. We only bless what God blesses. If we will do this we will avoid unnecessary splits and we will foster the growth and health of God's sheep. That is our job.

So I challenge you today- Are you an elder? Act like it! Don't accept your own excuses. You have a Bible. What does it say? It is your job to minister that truth to your fellow elders, to your full time ministers and to your flock. That is the job we need to be about. We are stewards of the most precious commodity on the planet, the children of God.