

Elders (1)

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[0 : 00] Just of you who are new to the church, let me explain. We are in the middle of a transition. I'm going to be stepping back from full-time ministry in the not-too-distant future, and we've been planning for this for a long time.

Our plans haven't quite worked. We thought we would have a full-time pastor elder in place by now, but that hasn't happened. So we're going back to first principles and just thinking about the structures in the church, the way we work and serve together as a church, and we've been looking at the whole idea of serving because that's what the church is all about, and we've been looking at our commitment to the Lord and our commitment to one another and revisiting those basic things, and we've been looking at appointing deacons because the way our church works is that we have people who look after the practical matters of the church who we appoint as deacons, and we're in the middle of that process, and hopefully we'll be able to vote together to appoint deacons before too long.

And in the next two sermons, we're going to look again at the matter of elders because that is a very important thing for us to understand. So that just gives you a little bit of background why we're looking at this.

So I'm really giving some teaching on this matter. It's not rocket science. I think it's fairly familiar, but I just want to make sure that we're all on the same page in this.

So here is my introduction, and the question is, how does God get people to heaven? How does God get people to heaven?

[1 : 44] And of course the first answer is by Jesus because Jesus himself died on the cross. No one else did that.

He's totally unique. When he died on the cross, he bore the sins of his people so that they are totally forgiven, and Jesus rose from the dead in newness of life, and by Jesus Christ we get to heaven because of his blood, because of his resurrection, because of his promises, because of his spirit, because of his faithfulness, because of his obedience, because he is our Savior.

And so we get to heaven. Am I right? Amen. But what methods does Jesus use not just to save us in the first place, but to make that salvation have a long-term effect, so all the way through, however many years we have on this earth, from becoming Christians to going to be with the Lord, how does Jesus keep us?

How does he keep us in faith? How does he keep us in obedience? How does he change us to become more like him? And, well, he uses methods.

He uses things. He uses his word. And his word is a powerful thing in the lives of Christians to change us, to keep us in faith, and to mold us, and to change us, sometimes to correct us, sometimes to make us feel very uncomfortable, sometimes to bring us to repentance, sometimes to make us very joyful.

[3 : 21] He uses his word, and we feed on his word. Feeding would be an appropriate way of thinking of it, like eating. He uses his spirit. So the Christian life is a supernatural life.

It's not just lived in human power. There's a power of God in every Christian by the Holy Spirit. And how else does God keep us?

Well, we've learned this, I hope, over the lockdown period, that we need other Christian people. And if we're separated from them, it makes us weaker, it makes the Christian life more difficult, and we need one another.

And Jesus uses his people. And through his people, Jesus sort of ministers to us, shows us his love, because we receive that through our brothers and sisters, and so on.

He uses his people. But I want to say, there is a particular group of people that Jesus uses to get us to heaven. And these are the people who shepherd us.

[4 : 25] These are important people. Jesus uses these people, the pastor, teacher, elder, to get us to heaven. I'll just say that again because that's so important.

Jesus uses in particular these people, these pastor, teacher, shepherd, overseer, presbyter, these people to get us to heaven.

So that's what the people we're going to be thinking about this morning. We're going to go back to first principles, and I'm thinking way back.

We were thinking, would God tell us the name and address of the next future paid elder and apparently not. But God does promise to guide and provide for his people in accordance with his word and by his spirit.

And we were singing, I will trust in you, I will trust in you alone. And this is a matter of faith for us as a church, isn't it? Because we haven't yet seen his answer. And we sing, we're going to trust him, so we actually need to be trusting him, don't we?

[5 : 28] So presumably, God's way is better than giving us the name and address of the next full-time elder. And it involves us in praying, and we've had a week of prayer quite recently, and examining ourselves, and we say, are we the sort of church that God would see fit to send a future paid elder to?

I mean, that's a good question, isn't it? Are we the sort of church that God would say, yeah, if I send him to those people, that would be a good, they'll treat him well, they'll listen to what he says, they'll respect him and help him, and that would be a good place to send somebody, aren't we?

That sort of people. Examining ourselves, I'm examining our situation, and learning to trust God, and learning more about his ways in our own experience.

So we're coming on a journey as a church, aren't we? A little bit like the people of Israel when they came out of Egypt to the Red Sea, and they had to trust God and what's going to happen next, and God says, trust me, I'll show you the way, and that's our sort of situation.

So next couple of weeks, why elders? What are elders? What do they do? What are they like? How do you get them? I wish I knew the answers to that. Just painting with a broad brush, and my plan is these four very, very snappy titles.

[6 : 48] One, it's not just the New Testament that has elders. Number two, the New Testament church did have elders. Number three, the elders had various titles, and number four, Jesus is the ultimate elder.

Okay, so this is what I had in my notes in 2018. In this, and all other matters, we have, we ought to have faith in God, even though we cannot see how he will work it out.

I wrote that in 2018. That's still true, isn't it? We need to have faith in God, and part of faith is waiting. Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength.

And I also wrote this in 2018, Jesus, the Lord, is our good shepherd. He will lead us and protect us. Your rod and staff, they comfort me. That's what we were just singing, and we need not just to sing it, but to believe it, and to work on the basis of it. So here's my first point.

[7 : 45] It's not just the New Testament church that has elders, and there are many places that still have elders. Here's a report from, I can't remember where I got it from, I think the BBC website, 2018, about Kabul.

Security officials in Afghanistan are working with local tribal elders to trace the seven Indian engineers kidnapped reportedly by the Taliban gunmen, et cetera, et cetera.

So in Afghanistan, they have tribal elders. That's how some societies operate. Ancient Egypt had elders. So in Genesis chapter 50, verse 7, Joseph went up to bury his father.

All Pharaoh's officials accompanied him, the dignitaries of his court and the dignitaries of Egypt, depending on your translation, but those two words are actually elders.

So they're, if you want to know the Greek, the Greek translation of the Old Testament had this word presbytery, presbytery, presbyter, elder.

[8 : 55] They had them back in those days. Ancient Israel had elders. Exodus 24, verse 1, God said to Moses, come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and 70 of the elders of Israel.

So ancient Israel had elders. I think I put down there the Hebrew word and the Greek word because they carry on into the New Testament. The time of Jesus, Israel had elders.

So here's Matthew 27, verse 20, the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and have Jesus executed.

So elders are not just a New Testament thing or not just a New Testament church thing. And there are elders in heaven. That's comforting to know, isn't it?

Revelation 5, 14, the four living creatures said, Amen. And the elders fell down and worshipped. So from ancient history into the future, there are elders.

[10:06] It's not just a New Testament church. So let's just think that means that these societies needed and accepted this sort of leadership.

And it seems to be part of human wisdom and part of the human condition. Societies don't function properly without some sort of leadership.

And this is the sort of leadership that in many places emerges. And God endorses this and uses it and we could even say expects this to have elders.

And why is it using the word elder and I guess originally the word elder comes because they are elder. Thus they are older.

The assumption being that if you are older you have more experience and perhaps more wisdom and are deserving of more respect and I guess that is why they are called elders.

[11:10] However, it is not always true that older people automatically have more wisdom. The elders who voted for the execution of Jesus didn't have much wisdom, did they?

and I remember my brother saying Phil, there is no fool like an old fool. That is a bit of a proverb actually. So being older sadly does not automatically make you wiser but there is an assumption if you call leaders elders it is because they have got wisdom that has come from age and experience. Elders and being old therefore does not automatically disqualify an elder because they are called elders. So just a little bit of background there.

Number two the New Testament church had elders so get your Bible out and let's just look at these Acts 11 from verse 20 Acts 11 from verse 20 this is the bit where some of the men from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch and spoke to Jews also telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem it's interesting to know that a church has ears isn't it?

[12:41] News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas to Antioch when he arrived and saw the grace of God he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts he was a good man full of the Holy Spirit and faith and a great number of people were brought to the Lord then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul and when he found him he brought him Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people the disciples were called Christians first at Antioch so just as we're looking at that passage we notice that Barnabas saw a congregation which needed input from outside and brought in Saul who then Barnabas and Saul taught great numbers of people in verse 27 it says during this time some prophets went down from Jerusalem to Antioch one of them named Agabus stood up and through the spirit predicted a severe famine would spread over the entire

Roman world this happened during the reign of Claudius the disciples each according to his ability decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea this they did sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul I think that's interesting that in order to help the brothers in Judea they sent their gift to the elders so the elders we presume sort of headed up the brothers or represented them or were the people through whom you channeled things to the brothers so there are elders there let's look at Acts 14 22 and 23 Acts 14 22 and 23 they preached the good news in that city won a large number of disciples then they returned to Lystra Iconium and Antioch going back to the churches that they had previously been evangelizing strengthening the disciples and encouraged them to remain true to the faith we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God they said

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 so this is instructive isn't it on their return journey Paul and Barnabas wanted to leave the churches in a secure and safe situation so what they did was they appointed elders plural in each church so each church had elders appointed by Paul and Barnabas now how did they appoint them so this word which is made up of sort of stretching out the hand now does it mean they stretched their hands upwards and voted or does it mean they stretched out their hands ordained because it gets translated ordained in some of the bibles and I

don't think we actually know but in this appointment it says it was a matter of prayer and fasting so I take it that this was a serious matter they wanted the

Lord's hand to be upon it they prayed and the fasting I'm not a big proponent of fasting myself but I'm not going to stop anybody else fasting I think the fasting is really meaning a spiritual seriousness this is an important matter we need the right people appointed in these churches if we don't have the right people these churches are not in a safe and secure situation and by prayer and fasting they appointed elders and this was done by Paul and Barnabas Paul was an apostle we don't have apostles nowadays and I presume that there must be a way of appointing elders that doesn't mean you've got to get an apostle in to do it for you that there's a competence within the church to appoint elders and that's what we've been praying for that's what we continue to pray for let's look now at Titus 1:5 so again we're surveying the New Testament material just seeing what is taught about elders so that we can know this as we go forward together in Titus 1:5 he says the reason I Paul left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town as I directed you so Paul says I want you to straighten things out for the church they're unfinished until you've done this and what you need to do is to appoint elders in every town and again

[18:36] I notice there's a plural there so each town didn't just have one elder each town had elders that's what it says to appoint elders in every town as I directed you and here is the list of qualifications which we could go through in detail but I'll just list them this morning verse 6 an elder must be this isn't saying that everybody who fits this ought to be an elder but it's saying they shouldn't be an elder unless they fit this description so they must be blameless blameless doesn't mean sinless but it means there shouldn't be major outward flaws in that person's life blameless they should be the husband of but one wife so I don't think this is saying they have to be married but I think it does say they have to be exemplary in regard to marriage so if the person had two wives that would count them out they had a wife and a mistress

I think that would count them out they ought to be maritally exemplary and in verse 6 it says a man whose wife believe sorry a man whose children believe or are faithful and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient so this is within what we nowadays call a traditional view of family life and it says that this person if they're married if they have children should be a competent father should be a caring disciplining loving constant dependable father to his children of course if they can't be that at home then they certainly can't be that in the church and you'll notice that this is one of the texts where an elder and an overseer are the same person because it says in verse 6 an elder and then in verse 7 it says an overseer since an overseer is entrusted with God's work he's a manager of God's work he must be blameless and not what have I got here my translation seems to be gone different but I've got not overbearing in the translation I work from it said not given to pleasure

I wonder why that happened not quick tempered not an angry person not given to drunkenness it says not an alcoholish person NIV says not violent authorised version says not a striker not somebody who when under pressure hits out that person shouldn't be an elder not pursuing dishonest game it's just one word in the original rather he must be a lover of strangers what's the hospitable is what it's translated as but it says who loves foreign people that's what it actually would say in Greek a lover of strangers one who loves what is good a lover of good and then somebody who is self controlled sound minded somebody who is fair just holy

I don't remember the translation of that and disciplined that word is power over oneself so that one this is somebody who instead of saying I can't help myself has power over themselves and what does it say disciplined yeah he must hold firmly to the trustworthy message holding firmly to the faithful word as it has been taught so that he can encourage others so his ability to exhort and encourage and motivate other people by sound doctrine by healthy teaching and to contradict and show the error of those who have got the opposite of sound teaching and to refute and convict and beat the teachers of stuff that is wrong and what we got in verse 10 to 14 there are many rebellious people mere talkers and deceivers especially those of a circumcision group they must be silenced because they are ruining whole households by teaching!

things they ought not to teach etc so these people need to be rebuked so that they will be sound in the faith so there's this necessity to be able to contradict and show where things have gone wrong ok where did I get to there the New Testament church had elders and we just surveyed some of the passages about New Testament elders and my third point is that the elders have various

descriptive titles and as we've noticed at least so far they're always plural there's always a group of them let's go back to Acts 20 verse 17 and this is another classic passage which says who these people are Acts 20 verse 17 they are the elders the presbytery of the church and in verse 28 this is [24 : 51] Acts 20 verse 28 he says specifically to the elders of the church keep watch over yourselves and all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers shepherding or being shepherds so that's the third word shepherding the church of God which he bought with his own blood and he says I know that savage wolves will come in and you need to protect the flock from them so take heed to yourselves first thing look out for yourself it's like on the airplane where they say if the oxygen masks if the oxygen fails get the oxygen mask put it on yourself first because you can't help other people if you're knocked out so take heed to yourselves he says first to these leaders and then take heed to the flock and all these things are worth noticing how did they get to be overseers of the flock and he says yeah there might have been a vote there might have been hands laid on or hands stuck in the air but actually this is the work of God the Holy

Spirit has made you overseers over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers that's quite a thought isn't it that God has been at work in appointing people as overseers the hand work of God and he says shepherd feed tend care for the church of God and then he says why bother with this random group of people and he says because Jesus bought them with his own blood that's quite something isn't it who is this group of people they're people that God bought with his own blood so look after them so I notice here that the New Testament the leaders are the elders and nowadays people get called all sorts of different things reverends vicars rectors pastors ministers but in New Testament terms these are the elders and they're overseers from which we get the word bishop so they're bishops as well if you like the New Testament as far as I can see always speaks in terms of plural a team working together and their role is to shepherd that's what a pastor is a shepherd and they're appointed by the Holy Spirit so not just the church and not just the apostles but God himself places elders in his church and that's why we're praying we're making this a matter of prayer that God would raise up and send us and bring amongst us new leaders elders full time part time whatever and this passage also teaches us that this is a really demanding task you can't do it if you're half asleep you can't do it half heartedly watch out he says keep watch over yourselves and over the flock

I didn't look up that word but one of the words at least for keeping watch means losing sleep it says put in time so that you are keeping watch like the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night and my fourth point is and I always want to come back to this that we shouldn't be focusing on human beings as we think about human beings serving the Lord we must always lift our eyes to the great shepherd because he is the one who is the great savior of the church Jesus is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep let's look at 1 Peter chapter 2 we'll turn to 1 Peter if you would please in chapter 2 it talks about

Jesus and it says in verse 24 he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness by his wounds you have been healed you were like sheep going astray but now you have returned to the shepherd and the overseer of your souls that's comforting isn't it that Jesus is the shepherd of our souls and the overseer he watches he knows he understands and he guides us and praise the lord for that isn't it that's so special and still in 1 Peter chapter 5 he has a little section there about the overseers the shepherds 1 Peter chapter 5 to the elders among you I appeal as a fellow elder a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed shepherd

[30 : 56] 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 not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock and when the chief shepherd appears you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away there's Peter's appeal to the elders take care of God's flock 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 not bossing everybody around not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock and when the chief shepherd appears you will receive a crown of glory that will never fade away so just summarizing some of the things that we've seen it is a very important matter right and necessary to be concerned for the future church to have elders and

I don't think we're praying just for one person certainly we pray for one person who can work full time for the church and give his life and energy to serving but let's not stop our prayers there we

want a team if the church is to be strong as part of the tradition of our church we've aspired to and mostly had a team of elders being old is not a disqualification but neither is being young in the bible the quality of the person matters a huge amount the quality of their life the type of person they are their character these matter but also the quality of doctrine matters so having an elder who just has a good heart and is loving to everybody is not quite what's required we need somebody I mean Paul gave the example that he wept over his the people that he worked with didn't he and so that care is so precious but the person also needs doctrine knowing what God's word is saying and able to teach it and knowing what God's word is not saying and able to contradict the wrong stuff and that's essential for good eldership and not just to inform people having loads of books of theology but to put God's word to work in people's lives to impact lives to get down to motives to correct to inspire to encourage to exhort to deploy God's word God's word and we've also seen that this is the work of the Holy Spirit there's certainly the apostolic word there's certainly the agreement and endorsement of the congregation but the bottom line is it's the Holy Spirit who sends elders and that's why we make this a matter of prayer and I say again this is a serious spiritual matter and as I said before we're not quite where we thought we would be at this point but let's keep on praying let's keep on trusting let's keep on taking the next step that we can take that's what Julian was saying to us the other week wasn't it there's some things that are hidden but there's some things that we are able to do as a plain step of obedience so let's keep taking those plain steps of obedience and trusting that the Lord will guide and provide in this very important matter and I point us again to Jesus who was the ultimate elder overseer and shepherd I think it was Barbara Dowst who many years ago said this the best shepherds or the good shepherds point people to the good shepherd and so I would like to aim to be that and to point us at the end of this talk to the good shepherd

Jesus said I'm the good shepherd and we want to point our hearts and our souls to Jesus we don't want to go forward just sort of because it says this in the constitution we want to go forward really reaching out our hands to the Lord on his throne don't we it is he who shepherds his people using his under shepherds it is his voice that is heard via the under shepherds it is his purposes that are fulfilled via the under shepherds and may it be that Jesus gets all the glory Amen