

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## ECCLESIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of the Church*

*One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All*

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### UNIT 5: CHURCH GOVERNMENT

*Elder-Led, Congregationally Accountable*

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#### Lesson 13

## THE BIBLICAL OFFICES

*Elder and Deacon, The Two Offices Christ Has Given to His Church*

*The church is not a democracy governed by majority preference, nor an autocracy governed by a single will, but a covenant community governed by Christ through His Word, administered by appointed, qualified, accountable servants in two offices.*

*“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer,  
it is a fine work he desires to do.”*

*1 Timothy 3:1, NASB 1995*

*Key Texts: Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 6:1–7; Philippians 1:1*

*“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which  
is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”*

**1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

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Every institution requires governance, and the church is no exception. The question is not whether the church will be governed, but by whom, in what form, and on what authority. The history of Christianity reveals that three broad answers have been given to this question: *episcopalianism*, which vests governing authority in a hierarchy of bishops; Presbyterianism, which vests it in a hierarchy of representative assemblies of elders; and congregationalism, which vests it in the gathered membership of the local church. Each of these models has been defended on biblical grounds by serious and godly theologians, and the differences between them are not trivial. The structure of the church's governance has direct and practical consequences for the congregation's accountability, the protection of the flock from pastoral abuse, the maintenance of doctrinal integrity, and the exercise of the discipline that the third mark of the true church requires.

This lesson opens Unit 5 by addressing the most foundational question of church government: what offices has Christ appointed for the governance of His church? The answer the New Testament gives is specific, clear, and deliberately limited: two offices, elder (also called overseer and pastor) and deacon. No third office is recognized or required. No hierarchical tier of regional bishops overseeing multiple congregations is established. No professional class of clergy whose authority is derived from institutional ordination rather than from the congregation's recognition of spiritual qualification is authorized. The New Testament's governance structure is as simple as it is sufficient: elders who lead, teach, govern, and shepherd; and deacons who serve, administering the practical and mercy ministries that the congregation's life requires, freeing the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer.

Before examining each office in detail, it is worth noting what makes this two-office structure so theologically significant. The limitation of permanent governing offices to two reflects the New Testament's conviction that the church's governance is not primarily organizational management but spiritual oversight. The elder's authority is not derived from institutional position; it is derived from the qualifications that Scripture requires of him, the character that those qualifications describe, the Word of God that he preaches, and the Chief Shepherd whose under-shepherd he is. The deacon's service is not derived from administrative appointment; it is derived from the character qualifications that Scripture requires, the practical needs of the congregation that he serves, and the Spirit's gifting that equips him for that service. Both offices are genuinely servants, servants of Christ, servants of the congregation, servants of the Word, and the authority both exercise is always derivative, always accountable, and always limited by the apostolic deposit that Scripture preserves.

The lesson moves through the identity of the elder's office (establishing that elder, overseer, and pastor are three terms for a single office), the qualifications Scripture requires of elders, the responsibilities that define the elder's ministry, the identity and history of the deacon's office, the qualifications Scripture requires of deacons, the distinction between the two offices, and the sensitive question of women and office. The governing principle throughout is the regulative principle as applied to church order: the church's governance should be ordered according to what Scripture prescribes, not according to what pragmatic efficiency, institutional convention, or cultural preference might suggest.

# I. THE OFFICE OF ELDER

## *One Office, Three Names*

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### **A.** *Elder, Overseer, and Pastor Are the Same Office*

The New Testament uses three distinct terms for what is, in every case, a single office. The first term is *presbyteros*, translated “elder,” which is the most frequently used designation and which emphasizes the dignity, maturity, and authority of the office by analogy with the elders of Jewish community life. The second term is *episkopos*, translated “overseer” or “bishop,” which emphasizes the supervisory, watchful character of the office, the elder who keeps watch over the souls of the flock (Hebrews 13:17). The third term is *poimēn*, translated “pastor” or “shepherd,” which emphasizes the relational, caring, protective dimension of the office by analogy with the shepherd who knows, leads, feeds, and guards his flock. These three terms describe the same person exercising the same office from three different perspectives: his standing within the community (elder), his function of oversight (overseer), and his relational character (pastor-shepherd).

The clearest evidence that these three terms describe the same office is found in Acts 20:17–28. In verse 17, Paul calls for “the elders (*presbyterous*) of the church” at Ephesus. In verse 28, he charges these same men: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopous*), to shepherd (*poimainein*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” In a single passage, Paul addresses the same group of leaders with all three terms: they are elders (verse 17), overseers (verse 28), and shepherds (verse 28). The terms are applied interchangeably to the same men exercising the same function. Titus 1:5–7 confirms the equivalence with equal clarity: Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders (*presbyterous*) in every city” (verse 5) and then immediately describes the qualifications for the overseer (*episkopon*) in verse 7, using the terms as synonyms for the same office. First Peter 5:1–2 provides a third confirmation: Peter exhorts the “elders (*presbyterous*)” to “shepherd (*poimanein*) the flock” among them, “exercising oversight (*episkopountes*).” All three terms appear in the same instruction, clearly applied to the same men.

The significance of this terminological equivalence cannot be overstated for the doctrine of church government. If elder, overseer, and bishop are three terms for one office, then the three-tier episcopal hierarchy, bishop, presbyter, deacon, that developed in the second century and that defines the governance structures of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and many Anglican traditions, is not a development warranted by the New Testament. The New Testament knows only one tier of governing eldership, not a hierarchy of bishop over elder over deacon. The Reformation’s recovery of the identity of elder and bishop (overseer) was not a theological innovation; it was a return to the New Testament’s own terminology, against the second-century’s institutional development. The Baptist tradition stands firmly in this Reformation recovery: there is one governing office, called by three synonymous names, occupied by qualified men who are both the elders and the overseers and the pastors of the specific congregation they serve.

### **B.** *The Qualifications for the Elder’s Office*

The New Testament’s two principal passages on the qualifications for the elder’s office are 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. Together they provide the most comprehensive account in Scripture of the character and competency that the office requires. The qualifications fall into five broad categories: moral character, family management,

doctrinal fidelity, the ability to teach, and a good reputation with outsiders. Each category is worth examining in detail, because the qualifications are not merely a checklist for hiring a professional religious manager; they describe the character of the man who will be entrusted with the souls of the congregation and who will give account for his stewardship of those souls before the Chief Shepherd at the last day.

The moral character qualifications are comprehensive and demanding: the elder must be “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6), not perfect, but not publicly disqualified by any characteristic that would undermine his pastoral authority. He must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6), a qualification whose precise meaning is debated but whose general import is that the elder’s sexual and marital life should be unimpeachably faithful. He must be sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, gentle, peaceable, and free from the love of money (1 Timothy 3:2–3). The comprehensive moral character of the list reflects the New Testament’s conviction that the elder’s life is inseparable from his ministry: the man who cannot govern his own passions, appetites, and relationships cannot govern the church of God. The elder who fails in character fails in his primary qualification, regardless of his doctrinal precision or his rhetorical gifts.

The family management qualification deserves particular attention because it is directly connected to the elder’s fitness for church governance: “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Timothy 3:4–5). The household is the proving ground of the elder’s fitness for the larger responsibility. The elder who leads his family with spiritual authority, relational warmth, and consistent example has demonstrated the combination of character, wisdom, and loving firmness that the congregation’s oversight requires. The elder who cannot maintain the respect and willing submission of his own household, not through coercion but through the genuine spiritual authority that character and love produce, has not yet demonstrated the fitness for the greater responsibility that the office entails.

## II. THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE ELDER

### *Teaching, Shepherd, Governing, and Guarding*

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#### **A.** *Teaching and Preaching the Word*

The elder’s responsibilities are both extensive and specifically defined by the New Testament, and together they constitute the most demanding and most significant calling that any human being can undertake. The first and most fundamental responsibility is the teaching and preaching of the Word. The qualification of 1 Timothy 3:2 requires that the elder be “skillful in teaching” (*didaktikon*), the only qualification in the entire list that describes a skill rather than a character trait, reflecting the centrality of the teaching function to the elder’s office. First Timothy 5:17 further distinguishes between elders who “rule well” and those who “labor in the word and doctrine,” implying that the latter form of eldership is especially worthy of double honor.

The teaching responsibility of the elder encompasses the full range of the congregation’s theological formation: the public preaching of the Word in the gathered assembly; the systematic teaching of the whole counsel of God in the congregation’s educational ministries; the pastoral application of Scripture in counseling conversations, in membership interviews, and in the ongoing discipleship of members through the various seasons of the Christian life. Paul’s charge to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove,

rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction”, captures the comprehensive, courageous, patient character of the teaching ministry that the elder’s office requires. The elder who is not a committed, prepared, theologically serious teacher of the Word has neglected his most fundamental responsibility.

Titus 1:9 adds a dimension of the teaching responsibility that is sometimes overlooked: the elder must be holding “fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” The teaching ministry is not only constructive, building the congregation up in the knowledge of God, but also protective, refuting the false teachers whose attacks on the apostolic deposit are a constant threat to the congregation’s spiritual health. The elder who can only preach comforting truths to willing hearers but cannot identify and refute theological error has not fulfilled the full scope of his teaching responsibility. The polemical dimension of the elder’s teaching, the willingness to name error, to confront false teaching, and to guard the congregation from doctrinal distortion, is as necessary to the full exercise of the office as the constructive proclamation of the gospel.

### ***B. Shepherding, Governing, Guarding, and Praying***

The second major responsibility of the elder is the shepherding of the flock: the personal, relational, ongoing pastoral care that we examined in Lesson 12 as one of the primary privileges of church membership. First Peter 5:1–4 defines the manner of this shepherding with pastoral precision: voluntarily, not under compulsion; eagerly, not for sordid gain; as an example to the flock, not as a lord over it. The shepherd who shepherds under compulsion is a hireling; the shepherd who shepherds for financial gain has made his office a commercial transaction; the shepherd who lords it over the flock has confused pastoral authority with coercive domination. Peter’s threefold negation defines the elder’s shepherding by excluding its most common distortions. The positive vision is simple and demanding: the shepherd who gives himself voluntarily, eagerly, and by example to the specific, personal, costly care of the flock entrusted to his oversight.

The governing responsibility of the elder is addressed in 1 Timothy 5:17 (“the elders who rule well”) and Hebrews 13:17 (“obey your leaders and submit to them”). The governing function is not primarily administrative management; it is the exercise of spiritual authority through the Word, through the oversight of the congregation’s life and direction, and through the making of decisions about the congregation’s doctrine, discipline, and practice in accordance with the apostolic deposit. The elders’ governing authority is real, it is the authority that Hebrews 13:17 invites the congregation to submit to, but it is always derivative from the authority of Christ and His Word, and it is always exercised in accountability to the congregation whose covenant community the elders serve. The guarding responsibility, Acts 20:28–31’s warning to “be on guard” for the flock against the wolves who will come, is the doctrinal and disciplinary dimension of the governing function.

James 5:14 adds to the elder’s responsibility the ministry of prayer for the sick: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.” This text is sometimes invoked in debates about the miraculous continuation of healing gifts, but its primary ecclesiological significance is simpler and more pastoral: the elder’s ministry includes the personal, prayerful attention to the congregation’s physical and spiritual suffering. The elder who visits the hospital bed and prays over the sick member is not performing a religious ceremony; he is exercising the pastoral office in one of its most intimate and most necessary expressions. The equipping responsibility of Ephesians 4:11–12 is the fifth dimension of the elder’s calling: the gifted pastor-teacher is specifically given to the body for the purpose of equipping the

saints for the work of service, so that the congregation's ministry is not confined to the professional work of the office-holders but is the distributed, every-member ministry that the Spirit's gifts make possible.

### **III. THE OFFICE OF DEACON**

#### *Servants of the Body in Practical Ministry*

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##### **A. The Origin and Purpose of the Diaconate**

The office of deacon finds its clearest institutional origin in Acts 6:1–7, where the crisis of the widows' daily food distribution became the occasion for the apostolic church's first formal differentiation of roles. The complaint of the Hellenistic Jewish widows against the Hebraic Jewish widows, that the former were being neglected in the daily serving, threatened both the pastoral integrity and the social unity of the Jerusalem community. The apostles' response is a model of ecclesiological wisdom: "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2–4).

The purpose of the diaconate as Acts 6 defines it is twofold: to serve the practical needs of the congregation, and thereby to free the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer. Neither purpose is subordinate to the other; both are essential to the congregation's health. The mercy ministry that the deacons serve, the care for the physically needy, the administration of practical resources, the service of the congregation's material welfare, is not a second-order concern that can be neglected as long as the Word is faithfully preached. It is the community's embodied expression of the love that the gospel creates, and it requires the same Spirit-given wisdom and character that the apostles specified in their selection criteria for the seven. At the same time, the relief of the elders from the demands of administrative and practical service is essential for the quality of the teaching ministry that the congregation's spiritual health depends on. The congregation that buries its elders in administrative detail and practical management is a congregation that has failed to grasp the principle of Acts 6.

The word "deacon" comes from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning "servant" or "minister." Paul uses the term in its technical, office-bearing sense in Philippians 1:1, "Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons", where the pairing of "overseers" and "deacons" as the two formal offices of the local church is explicit and deliberate. The New Testament thus knows precisely two permanent offices in the local church: the overseers (elders) and the deacons. The 1689 Confession's formulation is faithful to this evidence: "The officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church so called and gathered, for the peculiar administration of ordinances and execution of power or duty which he intrusts them with according to his commandments, are bishops, or elders, and deacons." Two offices, neither more nor fewer.

##### **B. The Qualifications for the Deacon's Office**

First Timothy 3:8–13 provides the most comprehensive account of the qualifications for the diaconate. The overlap with the elder's qualifications is significant, reflecting the fact that the diaconate is also a genuinely honorable office requiring genuine spiritual maturity, but the differences are equally instructive. The deacon must

be “men of dignity, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not fond of sordid gain, but holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:8–9). The character qualifications are consistently about the integrity of character that trustworthy service in the congregation’s practical affairs requires: dignity (the opposite of frivolity, suggesting a seriousness of demeanor that earns respect), truthfulness (the opposite of double-tongued speech, which is particularly relevant to the financial and administrative responsibilities that deacons often carry), self-control in relation to alcohol and money (the two appetites that most commonly compromise those entrusted with practical administration), and doctrinal soundness (“holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience”).

The requirement that deacons first be tested, “Let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach” (1 Timothy 3:10), is an important institutional safeguard that the contemporary church frequently neglects. The testing of deacon candidates is not merely a background check or a doctrinal exam; it is the sustained observation of a person’s character and conduct in the community’s life over a sufficient period to confirm that the qualifications are genuinely and consistently present. A congregation that appoints deacons because they are willing volunteers or because they have professional skills relevant to the tasks the diaconate performs has missed the point of Paul’s testing requirement. The diaconate is not a skills-based role but a character-based office, and the testing that qualifies a person for the office is the patient, observant, congregationally accountable assessment of his or her character over time.

First Timothy 3:11 introduces a reference to “women” in the context of the deacon qualifications that has generated significant exegetical discussion: “Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.” The Greek word is *gynē*, which can mean either “wife” (in which case Paul is addressing the wives of deacons) or “woman” (in which case Paul may be addressing women who serve in a diaconal role). The ambiguity is genuine, and the question of whether the New Testament authorizes women to serve as deacons is genuinely contested among faithful Reformed Baptists. The outline of this series notes that the question “deserves careful, charitable examination,” and this lesson honors that instruction. The discussion below in Section VI addresses the women-and-office question with the care and charity it requires, distinguishing the clear biblical prohibition on women serving in the elder’s teaching and governing office from the more nuanced question of diaconal service.

## IV. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE TWO OFFICES

### *Different Functions, Equal Dignity*

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#### **A.** *How the Offices Differ*

The distinction between the elder’s office and the deacon’s office is a distinction of function, not of dignity. Both offices are genuinely honorable; both are specifically given by Christ for the good of His church; both require serious character qualifications and formal appointment by the congregation. The distinction is functional: elders lead, teach, and govern; deacons serve the body in practical ministries of mercy, administration, and care. Elders bear the primary teaching and governing authority; deacons bear the primary practical service responsibility that frees the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer.

The governing and teaching function of the elder gives that office a distinctive authority in the congregation's life that the diaconate does not share. When the elders preach the Word, they speak with the authority of those who have been commissioned to declare the apostolic deposit to the congregation. When the elders exercise church discipline, they act with the binding and loosing authority that Christ granted to the gathered church in Matthew 18:18. When the elders make decisions about the congregation's doctrine, membership, and direction, they exercise the governing function that Hebrews 13:17's call to obedience acknowledges. The deacons do not exercise this teaching and governing authority; they serve the congregation in the practical dimensions of its life, and they do so under the oversight of the elders who are ultimately responsible for the quality of the congregation's overall ministry.

The practical implications of this distinction are important for the health of the congregation's governance. The confusion of the two offices, allowing deacons to exercise governing authority that belongs to the elders, or allowing elders to become primarily administrators of the congregation's practical affairs, produces the kind of ecclesial dysfunction that Acts 6 was designed precisely to prevent. The congregation that allows its elders to be consumed by administrative detail is a congregation that has turned its teaching officers into institutional managers and has deprived its members of the doctrinal depth and pastoral care that the teaching office is designed to provide. The congregation that allows its deacons to make doctrinal and governance decisions that belong to the elders has confused the two offices in the opposite direction and has placed the congregation's most significant decisions in the hands of those who have not been specifically qualified for the teaching and governing function.

### ***B. The Dignity of Both Offices***

The distinction between the two offices must never be read as a hierarchy of dignity in which the elder's office is inherently superior and the deacon's is inherently inferior. Acts 6 describes the seven original servants as men "of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom", exactly the kind of Spirit-filled, character-rich, community-respected men whose service reflects the same quality of Christian character that the elder's qualifications require. Stephen and Philip, two of the seven, emerge in the subsequent narrative as powerful preachers and evangelists whose ministry was far from confined to tables and administrative tasks. Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 3:13 about those who have served well as deacons is particularly instructive: "For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus." Faithful diaconal service is not a stepping stone to the real ministry of the elder; it is a genuinely honorable and genuinely consequential form of service in its own right, which produces a high standing and great confidence in the faith.

The practical mercy ministry of the diaconate, the care for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the sick within the congregation's community, is not a peripheral administrative function that can be safely neglected when the congregation is busy with more important spiritual concerns. It is the congregation's embodied expression of the love that the gospel creates and the justice that the covenant demands. James' letter is unsparing on the significance of practical mercy: "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress" (James 1:27). The deacon who faithfully administers the congregation's mercy ministry, who visits the bereaved, distributes the food pantry's provision, manages the benevolence fund with integrity, coordinates practical care for the congregation's most vulnerable members, is exercising an office of genuine theological significance, not merely performing organizational housekeeping.

The two offices together constitute the complete structure of the local church's ministry: elders providing the spiritual oversight, doctrinal formation, and pastoral care that the congregation's spiritual health requires; deacons providing the practical service and mercy ministry that the congregation's material welfare requires. Each office makes the other possible: the deacons' practical service frees the elders for the Word and prayer; the elders' spiritual oversight provides the doctrinal and pastoral framework within which the deacons' service takes its meaning. The congregation that has both offices functioning according to their biblical purpose has the governance structure that Christ has appointed for her good, and is well-positioned to pursue the full range of her mission with the full range of the gifts and offices He has given her.

## V. THE APPOINTMENT OF OFFICERS

*Called, Qualified, Recognized, and Set Apart*

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### A. *The Process of Appointment*

The New Testament describes the appointment of church officers through a process that involves both the recognition of spiritual qualification and the congregation's affirmation. The 1689 Confession's formulation in Chapter 26.9 is precise: "The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself." The language of "common suffrage", the gathered congregation's vote or affirmation, reflects the congregationalist principle that the authority for the appointment of officers ultimately rests with the gathered membership, not with a regional hierarchy or an outside institution.

The apostolic precedent in Acts 6:3 is instructive: the apostles instruct the congregation to "select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." The congregation selects; the apostles appoint (verse 6: "these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them"). In the post-apostolic age, the congregation's selection corresponds to the apostles' appointment: the congregation affirms its recognition of a candidate's qualifications through vote or consensus; the existing eldership or the broader congregation formally sets the new elder or deacon apart through prayer and the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands (1 Timothy 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:6) is not a sacramental act that conveys authority; it is a formal, symbolic expression of the congregation's recognition and affirmation of the officer's calling.

Paul's instruction to Titus to "appoint elders in every city as I directed you" (Titus 1:5) might seem to suggest a top-down appointment process in which an apostolic delegate appoints officers without congregational involvement. But the context makes clear that Titus' task is to "set in order what remains", to complete a process that has already been begun by the congregation's common life. The elders that Titus appoints must meet the qualifications that the congregation can verify; they will serve the congregation whose recognition of their spiritual fitness is essential to their effective ministry. The appointment process is always ultimately accountable to the congregation, even when an apostolic figure plays a directing role. In the post-apostolic church, the elders who recognize and formally set apart new officers are performing the function that Titus performed in Crete, but the authority of the appointment rests ultimately with the congregation's affirmation of the candidate's qualifications.

## **B. Ordination and the Ongoing Development of Officers**

The formal setting apart of an elder to the ministry of Word and prayer is sometimes called “ordination,” a term that can carry sacramental connotations in some traditions but that in the Baptist tradition means simply the church’s formal, public recognition and appointment of a qualified man to the office. Baptist ordination is the congregation’s solemn act of affirming that it recognizes in this specific man the qualifications that Scripture requires, and of formally commissioning him to the exercise of the office for which he has been found qualified. It is not a transaction that confers a qualitative change on the ordinand; it is a recognition that acknowledges a calling that God has already initiated and a qualification that the congregation has carefully assessed.

The ongoing development of qualified elders is one of the most neglected but most important responsibilities of every local church. Paul’s instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”, describes a pattern of intentional, multigenerational elder development: the apostle entrusts to Timothy, who entrusts to faithful men, who are able to teach others. This pattern of intentional theological formation and character development is the New Testament’s prescription for ensuring the ongoing supply of qualified leaders for the church’s ministry. The congregation that does not deliberately identify, mentor, form, and test candidates for the elder’s office from within its own membership is a congregation that is living on borrowed time and will eventually face a leadership crisis that proper investment in elder development would have prevented.

The formation of future elders is not primarily an academic program, though some theological education is essential for a man who will be required to “hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9). It is a holistic formation of character, knowledge, skill, and proven experience that takes place primarily in the context of the local congregation under the mentorship of existing elders. The elder-in-formation needs the theological instruction that equips him to teach and refute; the pastoral experience that develops his shepherding instincts and relational wisdom; the character assessment that confirms his qualification in the areas that Scripture requires; and the congregation’s growing recognition of his gifts and calling, which is the human side of the Spirit’s call to the office. All four dimensions are necessary, and all four are best cultivated within the life of a specific local congregation committed to the ongoing investment in its own leadership pipeline.

# **VI. THE QUESTION OF WOMEN AND OFFICE**

## *The Elder’s Office Is Reserved for Men; the Diaconate Requires Careful Examination*

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### **A. The Elder’s Office Is Reserved for Qualified Men**

The question of whether women may serve in the offices of elder and deacon is among the most contested questions in contemporary evangelical ecclesiology, and it deserves the kind of careful, text-grounded, theologically serious treatment that its importance warrants. This series holds the conviction, grounded in the texts examined below, that the office of elder, with its functions of public teaching and congregational governance, is reserved for qualified men. This conviction is not a reflection of a low view of women’s spiritual capacities, theological competencies, or ministerial gifts; it is a reading of the apostolic teaching that the governing authority of the elder’s office is specifically associated with the male leadership pattern that Scripture grounds in creation order rather than cultural convention.

The primary text is 1 Timothy 2:11–14: “A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve; and it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression.” Paul’s prohibition addresses two activities: teaching (in the public, authoritative sense of the elder’s doctrinal instruction) and exercising authority over a man (the governing function of the elder’s office). The ground of the prohibition is explicitly not cultural convention, Paul does not appeal to the customs of Ephesian society or to the temporary situation of an uneducated female congregation. He appeals to the creation order: Adam was formed first, and the deceived one was Eve. This grounds the male leadership in the public teaching and governing office of the church in the order of creation itself, which cannot be culturally revised.

First Timothy 3:2’s qualification that the elder must be “the husband of one wife” (literally “a one-woman man” in the Greek) further confirms that the elder’s office is specifically designed for men. The qualification is not merely that the elder must be married, it is a character qualification about sexual and marital faithfulness, but its gendered formulation is not incidental. The elder is a man (“if any man aspires to the office of overseer” in 1 Timothy 3:1; “the husband of one wife” in 3:2). The consistent male language throughout the elder qualification passages reflects the apostolic assumption that the office is occupied by men, in accordance with the creation-order teaching of 1 Timothy 2. This is not a culturally conditioned assumption; it is the consistent apostolic pattern.

### ***B. The Question of Women Deacons Requires Charitable Examination***

The question of women serving as deacons is more complex than the question of women serving as elders and has been discussed among faithful, text-honoring, Reformed Baptist theologians for many years. While sincere believers have reached different conclusions, the cumulative biblical evidence appears to favor the office of deacon being entrusted to qualified men, while recognizing and encouraging the indispensable ministry of women throughout the life of the church.

The primary text raising the question is 1 Timothy 3:11: “*Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.*” The Greek word *gynē* may be translated either “wives” or “women.” Some understand Paul to be introducing qualifications for women serving as deacons, while others understand him to be describing the character required of the wives of deacons. Although the grammar permits either translation, the broader context of Scripture should guide our interpretation.

Several considerations point toward Paul referring to the wives of deacons rather than establishing a second office of female deacons. First, the qualifications surrounding verse 11 are consistently directed toward men. Paul repeatedly speaks of the deacon as the “husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:12), using the same covenantal language he employs for elders. Second, Acts 6:1-7, which provides the clearest biblical pattern for the origin of the diaconate, records the apostles instructing the church to select “seven men” who were full of the Spirit and wisdom to oversee this ministry of service. While Acts 6 is descriptive rather than prescriptive, it establishes the only explicit biblical example of men being formally appointed to this servant office.

Likewise, the qualifications Paul gives in the Pastoral Epistles consistently present church offices in masculine terms. Just as the qualifications for elders assume qualified men who lead and shepherd the congregation, the qualifications for deacons likewise describe qualified men who faithfully serve the church. If Paul intended to establish a parallel office of female deacons, it is noteworthy that he never explicitly gives qualifications for such an office or records the appointment of women to it in the same manner he does for elders and deacons.

Those who advocate for women serving as deacons often appeal to Romans 16:1, where Paul refers to Phoebe as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea. Because the same Greek word can refer either to the office of deacon or simply to one who serves, the passage does not by itself settle the question. Many understand Paul to be commending Phoebe as a faithful servant of the church without identifying her as holding the formal office of deacon. Given the broad New Testament use of *diakonos* to describe ministers, servants, and even civil authorities, the word itself is not sufficient evidence that an official office is intended.

None of this should diminish the vital ministry of women within Christ's church. The New Testament consistently presents women as indispensable partners in gospel ministry. Women disciple other women (Titus 2:3-5), labor alongside church leaders (Phil. 4:2-3), show hospitality (Acts 16:14-15), exercise spiritual gifts for the building up of the body (1 Cor. 12:7), and serve Christ in countless ways. The question is therefore not whether women minister, but whether Scripture assigns them to the ordained office of deacon.

For these reasons, while recognizing that faithful interpreters differ, the overall pattern of Scripture appears to favor limiting both ordained offices of the church—elders and deacons—to biblically qualified men. This conclusion rests not on questions of worth, ability, or giftedness, but on the church's desire to follow the pattern God has revealed in His Word. At the same time, this issue should be discussed with humility and charity, recognizing that many who disagree do so out of a sincere commitment to the authority of Scripture rather than a rejection of it.

## VII. THE TWO OFFICES IN THE LIFE OF THE CONGREGATION

### *A Sufficient Structure for Every Dimension of Ministry*

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#### **A.** *Why Two Offices Are Sufficient*

The New Testament's limitation of permanent governing offices to two, elder and deacon, is not a minimalist concession to the simplicities of the first-century house church; it is a sufficient and complete structure for the full range of the local church's ministry in every age and cultural context. The two-office structure is sufficient because it corresponds to the two fundamental dimensions of every local congregation's life: the spiritual oversight that requires qualified teaching and governing leaders, and the practical service that requires qualified, Spirit-filled servants who care for the congregation's material and mercy needs. Every ministry function that the local church's life requires can be organized under one of these two offices, and the distinction between the two is the key that prevents both the elder's ministry from being consumed by administrative detail and the congregation's mercy ministry from being starved of leadership and resources.

The contemporary church's tendency to multiply the governance structure beyond the two biblical offices, adding boards of trustees, finance committees, property committees, Christian education boards, and a variety of other governing bodies, reflects an institutional elaboration that the New Testament does not authorize and that frequently produces the governance confusion that the two-office structure is designed to prevent. The congregation that governs itself through a complex array of committees and boards, each with its own authority in its designated sphere, has created a governance structure in which the elders' spiritual oversight is frequently fragmented, the deacons' practical service is frequently duplicated, and the congregation's decision-making is

frequently paralyzed by the competing claims of multiple governance bodies. The recovery of the two-office structure, with the elders' spiritual oversight and the deacons' practical service clearly defined and clearly distinguished, simplifies governance, clarifies accountability, and focuses the congregation's energy on the ministry that matters.

The relationship between the two offices and the congregation's broader mission should also be understood. The elders' teaching ministry forms the congregation in the knowledge of God that equips every member for the work of service (Ephesians 4:11–12). The deacons' mercy ministry demonstrates the love of God in the congregation's practical life together, creating the kind of authentic community that the watching world finds compelling. The congregation's evangelistic witness is strengthened by both: the elders' faithful proclamation of the gospel prepares members for evangelistic conversations; the deacons' care for the needy provides the context of genuine love in which those conversations become credible. The missionary impulse, the Great Commission's call to make disciples of all nations, flows from the congregation's life as a whole, but it is the elders' teaching and the deacons' serving that most directly nourish and sustain that impulse.

### ***B. The Character of Both Offices as Servant Leadership***

The most important structural feature of both the elder's office and the deacon's office is the one they share: both are defined by service, not by status. Jesus' paradigm-setting teaching on leadership in the kingdom of God, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25–28), is the defining description of leadership in the church. The elder who serves from pride, who seeks the status and authority of the office rather than the congregation's welfare, who lords it over the flock rather than proving to be an example (1 Peter 5:3), has contradicted the very nature of the office he occupies. The deacon who serves for the recognition it brings rather than for the congregation's good has missed the meaning of the name he bears.

The servant character of both offices is the church's most powerful testimony to the watching world that the gospel produces a fundamentally different kind of authority and a fundamentally different kind of ambition than the world's power structures exhibit. In a world where leadership is consistently associated with privilege, status, and the extraction of value from those below, the local church's elders and deacons, when they exercise their offices faithfully, demonstrate a form of authority that is genuinely other: the authority of those who lay down their lives for the sheep, who wash feet rather than command service, who seek the congregation's welfare rather than their own advancement. This form of leadership is not natural; it is the product of genuine regeneration, genuine sanctification, and the genuine embrace of the gospel's counter-cultural vision of greatness. It is, when it appears, one of the most compelling demonstrations of the gospel's power that the church can offer to the watching world.

*"Be on guard for yourselves and for 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."*

**Acts 20:28, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Elder (presbyteros)</b>           | One of three synonymous New Testament terms for the single governing office in the local church. Emphasizes the dignity, maturity, and authority of the office, by analogy with the elders of Jewish community life. Used interchangeably with episkopos (overseer) and poimēn (pastor/shepherd) in the same passages (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Peter 5:1–2).                                                                                                           |
| <b>Overseer / Bishop (episkopos)</b> | One of three synonymous New Testament terms for the single governing office in the local church. Emphasizes the supervisory, watchful character of the office, the one who keeps watch over the souls of the flock (Hebrews 13:17). In the second century, the term came to designate a separate, superior tier of church leadership above the presbyters; this development is not warranted by the New Testament's own usage.                                                |
| <b>Pastor / Shepherd (poimēn)</b>    | One of three synonymous New Testament terms for the single governing office in the local church. Emphasizes the relational, caring, protective character of the office by analogy with the shepherd who knows, leads, feeds, and guards his flock. Combined with “teacher” in Ephesians 4:11 as a single gift (pastor-teacher), suggesting that the pastoral function and the teaching function are inseparable in the elder's ministry.                                      |
| <b>Deacon (diakonos)</b>             | The second of two permanent offices in the New Testament local church. Meaning “servant” or “minister.” Established through the crisis of Acts 6:1–7 for the purpose of serving the practical needs of the congregation and freeing the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer. Governed by the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:8–13. Paired explicitly with “overseers” as the two formal offices of the local church in Philippians 1:1.                                  |
| <b>Didaktikos</b>                    | Greek for “skillful in teaching,” the qualification for the elder's office listed in 1 Timothy 3:2. The only qualification in the elder's list that describes a skill rather than a character trait, reflecting the centrality of the teaching function to the elder's office. Related to the elder's responsibility to both exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9).                                                                            |
| <b>Episcopalianism</b>               | A form of church government in which authority is vested in a hierarchy of bishops (episkopos) understood as a distinct and superior tier above the presbyters (elders). The dominant polity of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and many Anglican traditions. Distinguished from the New Testament's two-tier structure (elder/overseer and deacon) by the three-tier hierarchy (bishop, presbyter, deacon) introduced in the second century.                           |
| <b>Ordination</b>                    | The formal, public recognition and appointment of a qualified man to the office of elder (or deacon) by the local congregation through prayer, the laying on of hands, and the affirmation of the congregation. In the Baptist tradition, ordination is not a sacramental transaction that confers a qualitative change on the ordinand; it is the congregation's solemn acknowledgment of a divine calling and a spiritual qualification that has been carefully assessed.   |
| <b>1 Timothy 2:11–14</b>             | The primary Pauline text prohibiting women from the teaching and governing function of the elder's office. Paul's prohibition addresses two activities (authoritative teaching and exercising authority over a man) and grounds both in creation order (Adam formed first; Eve deceived), explicitly not in cultural convention. This creation-order grounding establishes the prohibition as trans-cultural and permanent, applying to all churches in all times and places. |
| <b>Primus Inter Pares</b>            | Latin for “first among equals.” A model of elder leadership in which one elder serves as the primary preacher and theological leader while sharing governing authority with the other elders of the plurality. Consistent with 1 Timothy 5:17's distinction between elders who “rule well” and those who “labor in word and doctrine.” Avoids both single-pastor autocracy and the complete equalization of function within the plurality.                                    |

**Regulative  
Principle of  
Worship and  
Order**

The principle that the church's governance and worship should be ordered according to what Scripture prescribes, not according to what pragmatic efficiency, institutional convention, or cultural preference might suggest. Applied to church government: the church should recognize the offices that Scripture establishes (elder and deacon) and should not create additional governance structures that Scripture does not authorize, however organizationally convenient they might be.

## Practical Application

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### **A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?**

We must believe that the New Testament's two-office structure is not an organizational simplification that the contemporary church should supplement with additional governance bodies, but the sufficient and complete framework that Christ has appointed for the local church's governance. The elder's office and the deacon's office together provide the structure for the full range of the congregation's ministry: the elder's spiritual oversight, teaching, and governance; the deacon's practical service and mercy ministry. The congregation that maintains these two offices according to their biblical definition and biblical distinction has the governance structure that Christ intended.

We must believe that the qualifications for both offices, moral character, family management, doctrinal fidelity, specific competencies, and a good reputation with outsiders for the elder; dignity, truthfulness, self-control, doctrinal soundness, and tested character for the deacon, are the irreducible requirements of the offices, not optional ideals that can be relaxed when qualified candidates are in short supply. The elder who does not meet the qualifications should not be appointed; the deacon whose character has not been tested and confirmed should not be set apart. The church that lowers the bar for officer qualification in the name of institutional necessity has not solved a staffing problem; it has created a governance crisis.

We must believe that both offices are genuine forms of servant leadership in the tradition of the Lord Jesus Christ who "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). The elder who aspires to the office because he wants authority, status, or institutional influence has failed to understand what the office is. The deacon who serves for recognition rather than for the congregation's welfare has forgotten the meaning of the name. Both offices are honorable in the measure that they are exercised in the spirit of the Servant who is their model and their Lord.

### **B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?**

We should feel a genuine gratitude for the specific elders and deacons of this congregation who are faithfully exercising the offices Christ has given to His church. The elder who spends hours in the study preparing faithful sermons, who makes pastoral visits to the sick and the grieving, who guards the congregation's doctrinal integrity with vigilance, and who shepherds his flock with the eschatological accountability of Hebrews 13:17 is exercising a calling that is genuinely costly and genuinely honorable. The deacon who manages the congregation's practical affairs with integrity, who coordinates mercy ministry for the community's needy, and who frees the elders for Word and prayer is performing a service of genuine ecclesiological significance. Both deserve the congregation's gratitude, prayer, and support.

We should feel a holy concern for the quality of leadership in this congregation and in the broader church. The scriptural qualifications for both offices are not arbitrary; they describe the character that the specific responsibilities of each office require. A congregation led by elders who do not meet the qualifications is a congregation that is spiritually exposed, inadequately protected from false doctrine, inadequately shepherded in its covenant life, inadequately modeled in the servant leadership that the gospel demands. The desire for the best possible leadership in both offices is not a form of elitism; it is a form of love for the congregation whose spiritual welfare depends on the quality of those who govern and serve it.

We should desire for this congregation to be intentionally developing future elders and deacons from within its own membership, according to the pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2. The congregation that does not invest in its own leadership pipeline is consuming a resource without replenishing it, and the leadership crisis that results from years of neglect in this area is both predictable and preventable. The desire for a well-led congregation requires the patient, deliberate, congregation-focused work of identifying, mentoring, forming, and testing candidates for both offices from among the congregation's own members.

### **C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?**

- Read 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9 in their entirety this week as a study of the character that the offices require. For the elder qualifications, ask: which of these qualifications do I see most clearly exemplified in the elders of this congregation? Which do I see as areas for prayer and development? For the deacon qualifications, ask the same questions. Bring your reflections to an elder in a conversation about the congregation's ongoing leadership health.
- Pray specifically this week for each of the elders and deacons of this congregation by name. Pray for their character, their wisdom, their courage, and their faithfulness in the specific responsibilities of their offices. Pray for the elders' preaching and teaching, their pastoral visiting, and their governance of the congregation's direction. Pray for the deacons' practical service, their care for the congregation's needy, and their support of the elders' ministry. Pray for the Spirit to sustain and deepen the quality of leadership in both offices.
- If you are a man who has a genuine aspiration to the elder's office, examine your life honestly against the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Not as a checklist for self-certification, but as an honest assessment of where you are genuinely qualified and where you need to grow. Speak with an elder about your aspiration and ask for his honest assessment and his guidance for your ongoing formation. The aspiration Paul says is "a fine work" (1 Timothy 3:1) is a noble desire; the path to the office runs through the qualifications, and the qualifications are formed in the community's life over time.
- If you are currently serving in a leadership role in this congregation, as a committee member, a ministry coordinator, a small group leader, or in any other form of service, ask whether your role is properly understood as service under the oversight of the elders and deacons, or whether it has become a form of autonomous authority that the two-office structure does not sanction. The recovery of the two-office structure as the congregation's primary governance framework may require the consolidation or elimination of some of the additional governance bodies that have accumulated over time. Be willing to participate constructively in that recovery.
- Read Acts 6:1–7 as a case study in the wisdom of distinguishing the elder's ministry of Word and prayer from the deacon's ministry of practical service. Identify one specific area of this congregation's life in which the elders are currently carrying a practical administrative burden that could and should be transferred to deacons or lay servants, freeing the elders for more focused investment in the ministry of Word and prayer. Bring that observation to an elder or deacon in a constructive, practically oriented conversation.

**Key Texts:** Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 6:1–7; Philippians 1:1

## Study and Discussion Questions

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### **Opening Question**

- What is your current understanding of how this congregation governs itself? Who has authority, how is it exercised, and how is it accountable? Before this lesson, how clearly did you understand the distinction between the elder's office and the deacon's office, and how has the lesson sharpened that understanding?

### **Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)**

- Read Acts 20:17–28. In verse 17, what title does Paul use for the Ephesian leaders? In verse 28, what two titles does he use for the same men? What does the combination of all three titles in a single passage demonstrate about their relationship? What two responsibilities does Paul specify in verse 28, and what does the phrase “purchased with His own blood” add to the weight of the responsibility?
- Read 1 Timothy 3:1–7. List all the qualifications Paul names for the overseer. Which qualifications address moral character? Which address family life? Which address his relationship to the congregation? Which address his relationship to outsiders? What is the significance of verse 5's reasoning (“if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?”)?
- Read Acts 6:1–7. What was the problem that prompted the creation of the diaconate? What was the apostles' primary concern (verse 2–4)? What qualifications did they specify for the seven (verse 3)? What was the result of the seven's appointment (verse 7)? How does this passage establish both the purpose and the dignity of the diaconate?
- Read 1 Timothy 3:8–13. List the qualifications for the deacon. How do they compare with the elder's qualifications in verses 1–7? What is the significance of the testing requirement in verse 10? What does verse 11 say about women? What promise does verse 13 make to those who serve well as deacons?
- Read 1 Timothy 2:11–14. What two activities does Paul prohibit in verse 12? What is the ground Paul gives in verses 13–14 for the prohibition? Why is the creation-order grounding significant for determining whether the prohibition is culturally conditioned or transcultural and permanent?

### **Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)**

- The lesson argues that the three terms, elder, overseer/bishop, and pastor/shepherd, all refer to the same office. Is this argument conclusive? What would the advocate of a three-tier episcopal hierarchy (bishop, presbyter, deacon) say about Acts 20:17–28 and Titus 1:5–7? How would you respond? What is the most important exegetical evidence for the identity of the three terms?
- The lesson identifies five categories of elder qualifications: moral character, family management, doctrinal fidelity, ability to teach, and good reputation with outsiders. Which of these categories do you think is most frequently neglected in contemporary evangelical elder selection? What are the practical consequences of appointing elders who are weak in any one of these categories?
- The lesson argues that the two-office structure (elder and deacon) is sufficient for the full range of the local church's ministry. Many contemporary churches have elaborate governance structures far beyond two offices. Is the two-office structure genuinely sufficient, or does the contemporary congregation's complexity require additional governance bodies? How would you defend the two-office structure against the pragmatic argument that complex modern institutions require more complex governance?

- First Timothy 2:11–14 grounds the prohibition on women in the teaching and governing office in creation order rather than cultural convention. How does this creation-order grounding affect the question of the prohibition’s applicability across all cultures and times? What would it mean for the prohibition to be culturally conditioned? What would it mean for it to be trans-cultural? Which reading does Paul’s own argument support?
- The lesson characterizes the question of women deacons as a “genuine exegetical dispute among careful scholars” and calls for “careful, charitable examination.” What makes the women-deacons question genuinely more complex than the women-elders question? What are the two most important pieces of evidence on each side of the debate? What is your current assessment, and on what grounds?

### ***Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)***

- The lesson argues that elder qualifications should be non-negotiable standards, not ideals to be relaxed when qualified candidates are scarce. Does this congregation currently have elders who meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 in all five categories? If the answer is yes, give thanks. If there are gaps, what is the pastoral path toward addressing them, through further development of the existing elders, the identification and formation of future elders, or the honest acknowledgment that the congregation is presently under-eldership and needs to address that gap?
- Acts 6’s model of diaconal ministry was specifically designed to free the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer. Are the elders of this congregation genuinely free for that ministry, or are they consumed by administrative and practical burdens that could and should be carried by deacons or trained lay servants? What specific steps could be taken to redistribute the practical burden more effectively, freeing the elders for the deeper investment in teaching and prayer that the congregation’s health requires?
- The lesson closes with the image of servant leadership as the church’s most powerful testimony to the watching world that the gospel produces a different kind of authority. Where in this congregation’s leadership culture is the servant character of both offices most visible? Where is it most at risk? What specific practices or cultural habits would most strengthen the servant orientation of the leadership in this congregation?
- Second Timothy 2:2 describes the multigenerational pattern of elder development: entrusted to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. Does this congregation have an intentional strategy for identifying, mentoring, and forming future elders? If so, what does it look like and how effective is it? If not, who bears the responsibility for beginning that work, and what would a realistic first step look like?

## Prayer Focus

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Begin by reading Acts 20:28 aloud: “Be on guard for yourselves and for 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.” Three phrases deserve specific attention. “Be on guard for yourselves”, the elder’s own spiritual health is the first precondition of faithful shepherding; the shepherd who neglects his own soul will eventually fail the flock. “Among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”, the elder’s appointment is not merely institutional; it is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the elder who exercises the office in the Spirit’s power exercises a calling with divine authority and divine accountability. “The church of God which He purchased with His own blood”, the flock is not the elder’s property or the denomination’s franchise; it is the blood-purchased possession of the living God. Let these three phrases define the weight of what is being prayed for when the congregation prays for its elders.

Pray for the elders of this congregation with the specificity and the theological weight that Acts 20:28 requires. Pray for their own spiritual health: for their regular, personal, deepening engagement with the Word of God in personal study and prayer; for their marriages and families as the proving ground of the character qualification that Paul names first; for their courage to preach what the text says rather than what the congregation wants to hear; for their pastoral wisdom in the counseling conversations that require both truth and grace in exactly the right proportion; for their vigilance against the wolves that Paul warns will come from outside the flock and will arise from among the elders themselves (Acts 20:29–30). Pray that the elders would be found faithful stewards of the flock that God purchased with His own blood.

Pray for the deacons of this congregation with equal specificity and with the theological dignity that Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3 assign to the office. Pray for the practical mercy ministry they administer: that the congregation’s needy members would be well-cared for, that the practical burdens of the congregation’s life would be faithfully managed, that the congregation’s financial resources would be administered with the integrity that Paul’s qualifications require. Pray for the deacons’ character: that they would be men and women of dignity, truthfulness, and self-control who hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. Pray that the result of the deacons’ faithful service would be the release of the elders for the ministry of Word and prayer that the congregation’s spiritual health depends on.

Pray for the development of future elders and deacons in this congregation according to the pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2. Ask God to raise up from within this congregation the men and women of Spirit-filled character, doctrinal seriousness, and practical wisdom who will carry the ministry of both offices into the next generation of this congregation’s life. Pray for the existing elders and deacons to be intentional in identifying and mentoring the next generation of officers. Pray for those in the congregation who may be called to either office but who have not yet been formally recognized, that the Spirit would confirm the calling in their hearts and in the congregation’s discernment, and that the process of formation and testing would proceed with faithfulness and wisdom.

Close with the petition of Matthew 9:38 applied to the church’s governance: “Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.” The Lord of the harvest is also the Lord of the church’s offices. The prayer for qualified, faithful, Spirit-filled elders and deacons is ultimately a prayer for the Lord to act, to raise up, to form, to call, and to commission the servants His church needs. We do not ultimately produce qualified leaders through our institutional processes; we receive them from the Lord who builds His church and who has promised that the gates of Hades will not prevail against her. To Him alone be the glory.

*“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”*

**Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Acts 6:1–7; Philippians 1:1

## ***Soli Deo Gloria***

*To God Alone Be the Glory*

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## **FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

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