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The church is not an institution for perfect people. It is a sanctuary for sinners saved by grace, a nursery for God's sweet children to be nurtured and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep, the home for Christ's family. The church is the dearest place on earth.

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If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab them. First Timothy, chapter 3, is where we're going to camp out. You just heard this text in that bumper, but we're going to spend our time in this one and in one other text tonight. We're in week four of a series we've simply entitled *The Dearest Place on Earth*. We got that from a quote from Charles Spurgeon, who called the church *the dearest place on earth*.

I said from the beginning the two great hurdles on that were going to be some of you have had experiences where the church has most definitely *not* been the dearest place on earth. The second hurdle is some of you have some pain-points in your life right now and you're going to want me to address those rather than this thing called *the church*.

What I've tried to plead with you over the last few weeks is, first, there are no perfect churches. In fact, even Spurgeon's quote was in the confines of a larger quote that basically said you should like that churches aren't perfect because that way you would feel welcome in that church, because if churches were perfect, then they would feel impossible for you to get involved in because of your own lack of perfection.

We celebrated together the church is imperfect people, and what I tried to press on you, which I believe all the more to be true even four weeks after I said it, is the role of the church in the believer's life is how God most often tangibly makes himself known. I said if you've ever been a part of a church (I didn't say if you ever went to one, but if you actually belonged to a group of believers) if you get sick, they're going to be there.

If something bad happens, they're going to rally around you. You're going to have meals delivered to you. You're going to have your grass cut. You're going to have your kids watched. This is how God tangibly makes his love known to his people through his people. We said, really, if either one of these are hurdles, they shouldn't be.

First, you should rejoice that the church is imperfect people because you can be there without jacking it up. Secondly, if you've come in and your marriage is a train-wreck or if you have addictions or if you're depressed or if you're lonely (on and on and on I could go), really one of the ways God wants to show his deep and abiding love for you is through the church. That's what we covered that first week. Then we just defined the church.

The church is a group of people saved from both near and far. How many of you were saved as kids? You were a kid when Christ rescued you out? I don't mean like some kind of cursory, "I don't want to go to hell." I mean, Christ converted you when you were a child? You fell in love with Jesus when you were a kid? Okay. How many of you would go, "Not me. Not me. He had to grab ahold of me later"?

What you have are those saved from near, those who got rescued in fourth-grade Sunday school, and those of us who had to bleed a little bit, those of us who had to figure out we weren't as smart as we thought we were, those of us who had to get to the end of ourselves, and our runway was a bit longer. There's a little bit more collateral damage in us.

Christ rescues from among both, and that's great news. He takes those people and he forms local communities of faith, and here's how the Bible explained that. You and I, as the church in the local context are empowered by the Holy Spirit, informed by the Word of God, and held together by Christ the Cornerstone. What I mean by Christ the Cornerstone is, and I'm quoting Ephesians, chapter 2 now, that you and I have experienced the grace of God. It and it alone is the only thing that can hold us together.

I usually use the illustration of justice to prove my point, but let's throw justice out the window and let's just talk church. All across this room, there are different preferences on how music should be done at church. Some of you don't think it's loud enough; some of you think it's just too loud. Some of you would rather have some legit horns up here and the bass turned up. Right? We like gospel style. We like this Hillsong-y Coldplay. We're all over the map on it. If music holds us together, we don't have a shot.

If we talk about discipleship... How many of you grew up where Sunday school was the primary model? You went to Sunday school? It's just what you did. You went to church. You went to Sunday school, but we

do groups, so how you do discipleship isn't going to hold you together, because there are different preferences on what you would like.

There are different preferences on what you want in a building, what you want in a pastor, what you want in dress, what you want... If we're not careful, all of that's driven by me and personal preference, which is what Christ is trying to kill in you (your personal preference for something greater), and really, what holds us together is this reality that all of us come to the table sinful and are made one by the reconciling work of Jesus Christ and his life, death, and resurrection. On that, personal preferences become secondary for the good of the body as a whole. That's the church. That was week one.

In week two, we moved on from there to talk about the type of relationship God has with the church and, therefore, we have with one another. We said that relationship is not contractual but, rather, covenantal, which means we don't come to God and we don't come to church demanding things. We actually come to God and we come to one another giving ourselves to. Does that make sense to you?

The illustration I used was wedding vows. Wedding vows are not contractual. They're not built around services. Wedding vows are covenantal. "For richer or poorer, I'm yours. For better or worse, I'm yours." They're not contractual. "If you stay healthy and make some coin, I'll stay. If you get sick or broke, I'm out." That's contractual language, and you've never heard vows that went like that, because vows are covenantal. "I give myself to you. Whatever's coming, I'm tackling it with you." We said our relationship with one another is like God's relationship with us in that we're giving ourselves to one another, fully acknowledging we're imperfect.

Last week, we tackled the question, "Is church membership biblical?" I believe we showed absolutely it is biblical. Really, the place I wanted to press and I always want to press is there are 59 "one anothers" in the New Testament. We've covered that extensively the last few weeks. There are 59 of them. Love one another. Care for one another. Be interested in one another. Serve one another. Outdo one another.

There are 59 of them that dictate how our relationships should work, but because it's covenantal and not contractual, we don't demand others are those things, but we actually become those things for the good of everyone else. Are you tracking with me? In the end, what you and I have the opportunity to do is not demand of others but actually be ourselves. By being ourselves, we'll find that reciprocated.

I used this illustration: Before I asked Lauren to marry me... Lauren and I would get in the same fight every six to eight weeks, so I asked my pastor, "Should I marry this woman? I just feel like we're getting in the same fight every six to eight weeks." His response to me was, "You're going to fight with someone for the rest of your life. Do you want to fight with Lauren?"

Lauren has become, for 16 years now, who I fight with, and we've grown in grace, and we've learned how to fight well, and we understand each other a bit more, but we still disagree at times. I'm trying to get her there. Eventually, maybe. (She's not in this service. I didn't say that in the 5:00. I didn't say it in the 5:00 at all.) In the end, here's what I mean. I want to say this clearly. Covenantal means I am not quick to push away from the table. You're going to offend me. I'm going to offend you. This is going to happen, because there are way too many sinners in here. What that means is I'm not pushing quickly away from the table.

I'm president of a church planting organization called Acts 29 Network. One of our stated hopes (we have four stated hopes) is we would radically increase the ethnic diversity in the network, and we've worked our tails off this year to make sure... In fact, at our pastor's conference this past week, the band for the week was a full-on, gospel, "Go get 'em," African-American driven band. There were four drummers and horns, and it was unreal. There was dancing at one point. The Anglo brothers...

Do you remember watching the jump-rope growing up and not being quite sure how to get in there? That was all my Anglo brothers. We were like, "How do I get into this song, Pastor?" Some of them figured it out and some of them didn't, but here's why we were able to do that. We were able to do that because there was a group of five or six African-American, Latino, and Asian pastors who, despite the fact the other 400 of us are Anglos and have been repeatedly offending them, without knowledge, for years, didn't push away from the table.

Do you know how easy it would have been for Eric Mason to go, "Forget this," and push away from the table? Leonce Crump to go, "Ridiculous," and push away from the table? For Jerome Gay or Dwayne Bond to push away from the table and go, "Anglo fools!" But they didn't. They stuck in there, and because they didn't push away from the table, we were able to see something spectacular.

Church membership is a covenantal relationship. It means we don't push away from the table. It means, "You've offended me, and let's work that out in a brotherly way. You've sinned against me, so let's handle this in a way that's distinctively Christian." We answered the membership question that way. Now we want to look at how the church is structured. She has members. We also know some of those members are her leaders, and those leaders, according to the Word of God, are called *elders*.

There are elders and deacons in there. I don't have time to do elders and deacons, so I'm just going to cover elders. I'll tell you out of the gate, just to get my cards on the table, and we'll chat, elders are men. There are not female elders. That has nothing to do with gifts and abilities. Did you hear me? That has nothing to do with gifts and abilities. That has to do with design and God's plan for flourishing, both in the church and in the home.

It makes no accusation on women at all. It's God's design for their good, and you'll see this as we walk through this list. I wish I could give you more on that. I know some of you are giving me a hearty "Amen," and some of you are not. Just trust me. Come next spring, Lord willing, I'm going to do a huge series on personhood. We're going to start with personhood and move to manhood, talk about womanhood, and we're going to build that out a lot more there.

Just know, according to the Word of God, elders in the church are men, but they are a type of men women flourish under. If women aren't flourishing under them, they're the wrong men. Are you tracking with me? It has nothing to do with gift set. I have met plenty of women who are far smarter than I am, more gifted than I am, ferocious teachers of the Word of God.

On and on and on I could go. This has nothing to do with giftedness; it has to do with design. That's why Paul's arguments aren't cultural. They go back to creation. God designed it like this. I'm already preaching the wrong message. This week, I now want to talk about elders. Here's the funny thing. Elders are a weird animal. A lot of us grew up in churches where there weren't elders. There were just deacons, and deacons kind of functioned like elders.

Others of us grew up with elders, but it went really bad. They had too much power. They abused that power. They weren't necessarily the right men in the role. Others of you still have no idea, so you kind of get confused that a young guy could be an elder. Elders kind of come off maybe like a Jedi Council or something. What I want to do is just walk through the Word of God with you (two chunks of text in particular).

Here's my plan. *Who are they? What do they do? How do they do it?* Three points. All I need to do is throw a poem in there and I'm full-on Baptist again. There are my three points. I plan on beating all of those to death until you fully understand how God has organized his bride so she would flourish, she would be a safe place, and she would be a place where maturity is the norm, or let me say it this way. Maturation is the norm.

First, *who are they?* First Timothy, chapter 3. Starting in verse 1. **"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive..."**

Did you hear that? It jammed you up there. It didn't just say, "...keeping your children submissive..." He said, **"...with all dignity keeping his children submissive..."** There's a way to keep your kid submissive that has no dignity in it at all, and there's a way to keep your kid submissive that is full of dignity, and Paul makes the distinction there because it's important. We'll camp on that one, friends. Let's keep going.

Verse 5:

"...for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil."

My intention in answering who the elders are is simply to go through this list and kind of combine some things and lay out for you the type of man who is an elder. What we already know is they are a member of a local church. So the 59 "one anothers"? They're working that out. They're not pushing away from the table. Here's what we learn about them early on, and I'm going to try to address some of the skepticism that exists in our day toward power structures and authority structures, because they exist. Let's talk.

1. *They have aspirations.* Did you see it there in the verse? They aspire to the office. They desire this. He says, **"If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."** People's default is, if they don't read their Bibles a lot, "What kind of man doesn't want power and authority?" But that's not the call of an elder. The call of an elder is not power and authority. The call of an elder is death, sacrifice, servant, and slavery.

I see you don't believe me, so let's do it. In Matthew, chapter 20, verses 25 through 28, Jesus teaching his disciples who got a little bit power hungry said, **"But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.'"**

Listen to verse 26. **"It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."**

Second Corinthians 4:12 says it this way. **"So death is at work in us, but life in you."** Do you hear the call? The call doesn't have anything to do with power. The call doesn't have anything to do with authority. Is authority granted to the elders? Yes. Why? Because they're the type of men who so love the local congregation and have so experienced the grace and mercy of God they're going, "I'll die for these people! I'll sacrifice for these people! I'll give myself to these people! I'll lay down my preferences for this group!"

The type of man who makes a good elder is the man who has answered the call to come and die, to give himself to the church for the church for the maturation of the people in the church for the glory of God. The cynic in us would look at power structures and go, "They can't be trusted." Life has taught you this? In the end, we've been trained to doubt authority, believe unchecked power leads to those in power taking advantage of those who are under them.

You might have even been a part of a church with elders who operated that way, but according to the Word of God, I have to help you understand what the Word of God sets up is what we should be running toward, who the people of God are, empowered by the Holy Spirit and informed by the Word of God. The Word of God says, "Don't let a man be an elder who is not willing to die for you."

If he's not willing to sacrifice for you, he has no business leading you. If he's not willing to give of himself so you might grow, then don't trust him. He has aspirations unto death, not aspirations unto power. A brother who wants to be in the elder room because he thinks it's going to get him power needs to get washed out in the process of a man becoming an elder.

There needs to be something in the process that reveals what he really wants is authority, because elders possess a type of authority they should be nervous about because of what we learned last week that Hebrews 13 said, which is we'll be judged for how we use that authority. They have aspirations. They're willing to die.

2. *They are above reproach.* This simply means what it says. There are no glaring signs of sin and dysfunction. They're not perfect men, but there are not glaring signs of... You should never present to the body, "This guy is going to be an elder," and have anybody in the room go, "No way. No way." That should never happen. Why? Because they're above reproach. People should be excited about the men who are leading them. They should trust them and love them and believe in them, and it would be easy for them to give the benefit of the doubt. That happens when a man is above reproach.

3. *They are one-woman men.* The phrase *husband of one wife* translates he's a one-woman man. Although there are arguments, I don't believe this means a man could have never been divorced in the past, but where he is he is a one-woman man. We would take that kind of case by case, but he thinks about that one woman. He's for that one woman. He's with that one woman. He is a one-woman man. He's not marked by fantasies around other women. He's not marked by flirtation. He's not marked by those things. He's a one-woman kind of man.

4. *They are temperate.* I'll help you with temperate. Temperate means he has discipline enough that he's not controlled by things. He's not a glutton, but he likes good food. He's not a drunkard, but he likes good

wine. He works out, but he hasn't freaked out and built his whole life around getting six-pack abs. He golfs, but he's not so obsessed with golf that he...

Maybe it's none of these things. Maybe he doesn't like good food, he doesn't like wine, and he doesn't golf. I'm trying to get examples for you to help you understand temperate. I just don't really enjoy the game of golf at all. I'm an elder, and I don't ever plan on golfing. If one of my little kids goes, "Let's golf," then maybe I'll go spend three hours chasing a ball with them, but until then, no intention.

In the end here, they're temperate men. They're not ruled by their stomachs. Do you understand what I mean by stomach? Their appetites and desires don't rule them; their love for the Lord rules them and their pursuit of the Lord rules them, but their other practices don't rule them. A man who can't control his stomach can't be an elder.

5. *They are sensible, prudent, and reasonable.* He has good judgment. This is simple. There is not a massive gap between how he sees himself and how he actually is. There are no first three episodes of *American Idol* for an elder. He has to see himself well, he has to understand where he's weak, he has to understand where he's strong, and he has to be dialed in to how God made him. There's not an, "I can sing," when the rest of the world is going, "Brother, don't sing!" He sees himself well.

6. *They are respectable and honorable.* He lives his life in such a way that draws respect from men and women, and he's honorable. Being honorable is a weird thing, because our culture is not high on it. We increasingly get more and more and more casual, and with that, understanding of how to give honor to whom honor is due and how to live an honorable life slips to the wayside.

Even little things. Like when I was a kid, if you were an adult and I called you by your first name, I might get knocked out clear from across the room, because we used "Mr." or "Mrs." Even if you gave me permission to call you by your first name, I'd better get a "Mr." or "Mrs." in front of that. You might have been John, but you were Mr. John to me. You might have been Stacey, but you were Miss Stacey to me. There wasn't, "What's up, Stace?" I mean, my daddy would have snatched my soul out, punched it, and put it back in me!

This idea of honor has fallen by the wayside as we become a more and more casual culture. This man? He's not only respectable, but he's honorable. The way he operates is honorable. This elder is doing this at church, but he's also marked like that in his business world. He's marked like that in his hobby. He's marked like that at home. He's a respectable, honorable man.

7. *They are hospitable.* I'll explain this. He loves lost people. He loves to minister to people. All hospitality really is (I know Martha Stewart kind of hijacked it) is saying, "I have a genuine concern for your soul, and I'm going to get around you to show it. I want you to come to my house for dinner. I want us to go out and connect. I want to know what's going on in your heart." That's hospitality. It has nothing to do with how you decorate the dining room table in season.

8. *They are skilled in teaching.* This just means they can answer you from the Word of God. If you have concerns, if you have questions, they can open up the Word of God and explain to you and show you why and how.

9. *They are not addicted to wine.* That sounds like a no-brainer, but it apparently needed to be in here. They can't be addicted to wine. We've already read he's temperate, but he's also not addicted to much wine. That doesn't mean a brother can't have a glass of cab if he wants. It just means he can't be addicted to it. He doesn't have to have it to go to bed at night.

10. *They are not pugnacious, but they are gentle, and they are peaceable.* Let me try to explain this to you. You can get yourself jammed up in a bad way as a church if you get guys who love conflict. If your elders love conflict, that's a bad thing, but if they're so gentle they refuse to get into conflict, that's really a bad thing too.

What you need are men who don't like conflict but aren't afraid to get into it if they have to. Are you tracking with me? They don't want war, but they'll go if they have to. If you get guys who just love conflict, then you're going to get a kind of varsity-level Gestapo that's always looking at everybody in the church waiting to pounce on them for their imperfections, all the while not being able to acknowledge they have some themselves.

But if you get a guy who is so gentle he won't shoot a wolf, then the sheep are going to get hurt. You need men who don't like conflict but aren't afraid of it. That's what those three words put together mean. You shoot the wolves, kick out the dogs, and love the sheep. That's why you can't be pugnacious, and you have to be gentle and peaceable.

11. *They are not lovers of money.* It doesn't mean he doesn't make money. It doesn't mean he doesn't have money. It means money doesn't control him. He's not a lover of money. He sees money for what it is.

12. *They are leaders of well-ordered homes.* Here's what the Bible teaches about the home. Are you ready? The home is a proving ground for ministry. Why? Because few things for a man, according to the

Word of God, are going to put the man against his flesh like the call to be a godly husband and a godly father. Here's the proving ground of ministry.

Work your day, and then you realize when you pull up into the driveway, second shift starts, and second shift is not really about your wife. Second shift is, if you have kids, about your kids. All of a sudden, you're going to be on the ground playing with the babies, going outside, chasing them around, and then it's their bedtime at 8:30 and it's still not your time. You don't have any time! Now 8:30 is Mama's time. Now you're with the queen. You're checking on her heart. You're encouraging her to grow and flourish as the woman God made her to be. Then it's bedtime.

"Where's my time?" Get up at 5:00. That's your time. From 5:00 until when the kid wakes up. That's you. That's your spot. "I don't like that." Stay single. Stay single if you don't like that, because that is what God has called you to be as a man, a servant to your wife and to your children. In fact, he says a woman who has a godly man who is married to her will flourish like a well-watered vine.

Part of our elder process is we're bringing the wife in on it. We're bringing the wife in. I need to see the wife of our elder has flourished in her gifting. I need to see. What is she gifted at? If she's not gifted, not serving, and doesn't have any of those, I have questions about her husband. How has he not identified and heard her heart and seen what her desires are, her loves are, and created space for her to grow in that? If he hasn't done that, he's disqualified.

Let me see his kids. Is he leading them with dignity? I don't think a man can control the conversion of his children, but he can love them in a way that's dignified, gracious, fair, and firm. Let me see his kids. You should want to see my kids. I'm an elder here. So this says home is going to be a test for whether or not I could touch the household of God. If I'm not willing to serve my wife and I'm not willing to serve my children or if I'm not willing to lay down my personal preference for my wife and kids, then you can dang well be sure I'm not going to do it for you.

Some of you are like, "Preference?" If I'm not going to lay down my life for my wife and kids, what makes you think I'd ever lay down my life for you? I haven't made any covenant vow before you. You're not fruit of my body. Why would I sacrifice for you if I'm not willing to sacrifice for those the Lord has put closest to me and has charged me explicitly to lead, love, serve, and die for? The household becomes a testing ground for ministry.

13. *They are mature believers.* There is a humbling necessary for an elder. I wish I could do this, but I don't have enough time. All of the guys on our elder board have been given little thorns in the flesh. We've had tragedy. We have things that currently press on us. We've had difficult days behind us. To the man there

has been loss. To the man there have been days of sorrow. To the man... Even now, there are some of us who are walking through things where the Lord binds us to himself.

He's not a new believer, because God doesn't want anybody to get puffed up with pride in this role. A man in this role needs to know he's weak, not know that he's strong. If he is strong, he acknowledges that strength is not in and of himself. You definitely don't swagger in the elder room. You're nervous in the elder room, in a good way. You understand again, as we covered last week in Hebrews 13, the Lord is watching how you treat his bride.

14. *They have a good reputation even with the outside world.* I found that to be so interesting in study for this. It's not those inside the church who have to like the guy, but even those outside the church go, "This guy is legit." Here's what that means. That doesn't mean they agree with us. Right? That doesn't mean we're all agreeing on what went down with the Supreme Court this week, lost and saved alike. No.

It just means when they look at an elder's life, they should respect how the man loves and serves his family, how he works hard at his job, and how he serves the community. They should look at how he lives his life and go, "He's a religious crackpot, but the dude is legit! He lives what he says he believes." If my neighbors were to come into this building and hear me talk about mission, then they should go, "Absolutely! That dude? Golly! Sometimes I don't even look across the street because I know he'll just be waiting." My neighbors should go, "That dude is going to share Christ with us."

In the end, we have a good reputation with outsiders. We work. I want to lay work out there, because elders had better work hard at their jobs. A good reputation with outsiders. That's who they are. Here's what I want you to notice. In that whole list, there was only one skill. Did you see that? Able to teach. The rest of it is all the type of man. We don't have gift set at all in there. We just have this is the type of man. It is character more than it is skill. It's the type of man rather than the gift set of a man.

Secondly, *what do they do?* In one text, we're going to answer what they do and how they do it. Let's flip over to 1 Peter, chapter 5. That's just going to be to your right there in your Bible. Starting in verse 1.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed..." Verse 2: "...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

If there was ever an argument against pride, it was that right there, that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. I mean, you just chew on that. I don't have time, but it's legit. We know who they are. What do they do? How do they do it? That's where we are now. What do they do? There are three things in this text they do.

1. *They govern.* Let me explain that. The New Testament is a missionary handbook. What I mean by that is it will play out in every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth, and because of that, the Word of God is extremely flexible. What I mean by that is it makes commands and gives wisdom but doesn't have a set, "Here's how you go about it."

Let me give you a perfect example. I've already given you some. The Bible says, "**...make disciples of all nations...**" We're going to talk about that at length here in a couple of weeks. Make disciples. That's the charge put on the church. How? You can do it with Sunday school. You can do it with groups. You can do it with worship services. You can do it with curriculum. You can do it with videos. On and on and on it goes.

What the elders are responsible for before God is going, "This is how we accomplish the commands of God in this place." There are places in the Metroplex that are extremely programmatic. That's not sinful or wrong. It's just what they are. They're programmatic. Does that make sense to you? There are a lot of programs for the kids. There are programs for the teenagers. There are programs for college.

Then there's Singles 1 and Singles 2 and Singles 3, because God knows if you put all the singles together, it's not going to go well. You're going to have Single Again. You're going to have Never Marrieds. You're going to have 52-year-old singles. You're going to have 22-year-old, just got out of college single. If you try to do one of those, immediately there will be complaints. "Can we just have a young people's single group?"

"Can we have an older people single's group? We don't like to be with the young 'uns."

"I'm single again. Is there a Single Again?" Then you have Young Marrieds and Adult 1 and Adult 2 and Adult 3. Then there's the Adult 4. They only have a couple of years left. On and on, you have all these programs. On top of those silos, you have men's ministry with retreats and Bible study, and you have women's retreats with a women's Bible study. You have these different segments.

That's how they plan to make disciples. Nothing wrong with that. In fact, some very good things have come out of that. In fact, if we had a chance to talk, many of you have powerfully encountered the living God in those things, but we're not a highly programmatic church at all. In fact, we are *very* stripped down in what

we do. We have taken a holistic approach to discipleship, which means we think you're going to get it in a bunch of different places, not just one.

We believe you're going to become a maturing disciple of Jesus Christ in worship as we gather, with others as you walk in community, serving one another with gospel intentions, not because you have to but because Christ has done a work that makes you want to serve others that eventually leads to multiplication, you being able to be the agent of that in other people's lives. It's not *one* of those for us; it's *all* of those for us. Again, more on that in a few weeks.

The elders are the ones who had to come in and say, "How do we want to do this? How do we want to approach it? How are we going to accomplish what Christ has asked us to accomplish?" Through the wisdom and the Word of God and through prayer and through a lot of studying, fasting, and seeking the Lord's face, we've said, "Here's how we're going to do it here." That's governing.

It also means we weigh in on theological issues, and it also means (people don't like this, but at times it means) elders weigh in on the gray. Do you follow me by what I mean by that? There are times there's not an explicit verse in the Bible that says, "You must do this," but because of where you find yourself and because of some of the things you have going on in your life, the elders will strongly recommend you take this approach.

In fact, I gave you an example of that in my sermon last week. If you missed it, I said we removed a man once who was preying on some of our young women. He was an older man, like literally late 50s or early 60s, but he kept throwing game at our young women, and they were very scared of him. We basically confined him to a service. We said, "You can come to this service. If we see you outside of this service, you're going to be removed from the church all together."

The Bible doesn't say I could tell him he could only come to one service, but what it does tell me is I'm to govern, protect, and shepherd the flock of God. Although the Bible doesn't say I can limit him, the Bible has made me an elder, and I can then rule in the gray, which says, "For the good of our people, for the protection of our young women, you're going to one, and if you jack with another one, you're out."

You might think that's too much power, but I'm saying you would do the same for your home if you felt your family was in danger. That's why it's so important, because elders are allowed to rule in this gray, they be the right men. If they're the wrong men, all of this breaks down. That's why elders need to be hard to get. Probably the biggest mistake I see in young church planters is they get elders too quickly. Elders are easy to get and hard to get rid of, so you need to have elders when you have elders and not before.

2. *They shepherd.* This is a huge part of an elder's job. In fact, the primary working of the elder's job is actually one of shepherding the people of God. That means care. That means protection. That means encouragement, edification, being the cheerleader toward maturity. That means, at times, shepherds lead you by still waters and green pastures, and sometimes, if you keep slipping away, the shepherd breaks your legs and puts you on his back and carries you. That's what God has called an elder to do: shepherd.

3. *They teach.* An elder also must be able to teach. I want to press on this one a little, because I think it's so huge. This doesn't just mean theologically speaking he understands doctrine, but he also actually understands the application of the doctrine. Let me flush that out, because I've already built it out for you. I just want to go back and connect the dots.

What I said at the beginning was elders are men. Then we moved on from there and showed an elder must be able to manage his household well, so as we interview elder candidates, I want to meet their wives. I want to see their children. I want to see their wives have grown up. To connect the dots, you have the Bible saying male headship in the home and the church are God's unique design for the protection of the church, for the protection of the home, and for the building up of the gifts and abilities and talents in women.

Now, what you have taking place here is, if a man understands that but doesn't understand how practically that works, he might get heavy-handed with his girl. A man of God, an elder, must not only know doctrine but must know the practical application of that doctrine that applies to every area of the life. To understand manhood and womanhood but not understand how it plays out in the home, how it plays out at work, how it plays out in your life, is really an exercise in futility. It becomes a bat rather than a bouquet.

God's ways should always smell good to us. It will grate against our flesh, but you should always be able to see the wisdom of God when it's done right. Where it's not done right, there's carnage. They are to govern, shepherd, and teach, but you also saw in this text how they're to go about that governing, shepherding, and teaching.

Thirdly, *how do they do it?* I love it.

1. *They elder eagerly.* They want to. Think about this. If we're still talking about covenant relationship, isn't *eagerly* a good thing? If it's date night and I'm eager about that, that's a pretty cool deal. If it's date night and I'm beaten down by that, that's a problem. Do you think Lauren's going to love that if I'm like, "Crud, it's Thursday. Okay. What do you want to do? I'm not eating Pei Wei."

No. If I'm eager, if I can't wait to get alone with her, if I can't wait to get away with her somewhere else where the kids aren't interrupting, if I can just get some face-to-face (not shoulder-to-shoulder but face-to-face) time with her. If I'm eager about that, she feels loved and delighted in, and I'm eager to get there. In the same way, your elders should eagerly long to serve you.

They should go, "I can serve." They should eagerly desire to get into this room and say hello to you. They should eagerly desire to get together at our elder meeting and talk about you and pray for you and consider you and walk with you and shepherd you and govern you. These things (governing, shepherding, teaching) we should eagerly long to do.

You don't want a guy who's like, "Oh! God has called me to this so I'd better..." No. It's not duty. It's delight driven. It's why the Bible puts the weight on you not to beat these men down, because if they are doing it out of duty and not delight, that is of no advantage to you. In fact, by chewing up your elders you simply attack your own delight. That's what makes it insane.

That's why Hebrews 13 presses on you, "Don't beat these guys up. They're serving you. They're here for you. They're slaves of yours." That's Hebrews 13, if you want to look that up later. It was in the sermon last week, if you want to go back.

2. *They elder by example.* Elders should never ask you to do things they don't do. They should model well for you what God has called us all to. Remember, they're just members of the church.

3. *They elder with patience.* There are several of you in here who are just very mature believers in Jesus Christ. You know the Word of God, have glad submission to the Word of God, and are following after him. Then there are some of us spiritually who are in diapers and still making a mess. The elders understand the continuum from new birth to maturity, and they exercise patience with all of God's children. That's why 1 Thessalonians says, **"...warn those who are idle...encourage the [timid], help the weak, be patient with everyone."** Everyone? Everyone. We are to be patient.

The last thing you see here is (with all the skills of who they are) now we're talking about gift set. If I think about our elder board, one of the things that becomes clear is there are guys who have certain gifts where they become a no-brainer in certain situations. I'll go through some of them. I don't have time to go through all of them.

When there is a marriage crisis in someone's world that requires elder insight and encouragement, Rik and Cindy Massengale are just beasts at that. Beasts in a good way. I don't know if you're following slang there,

but they're like good. "Beastly? Why would he let them work with people?" No. They're great at it. That's what I meant. Okay?

I think of finances. Steve Whitehead is down at the Dallas Campus and works closely with our CFO, Michael Honeycutt, and is brilliant at it. In fact, we're ECFA certified, which means there's an outside organization that says, "You can trust how this organization spends money." Steve Whitehead works with our finance department to make sure we're always way above reproach.

In fact, farther above reproach, to the point where no one can bring an accusation against us that could stand because of internal audits, external audits, and the fact all of that is posted online for you right now to get on your cell phone, if you wanted. You could see how we spent money last month.

Richard Patterson and his wife, Janie, sit in on almost all church discipline cases at this campus. Not all. There are too many, but on most of them they sit in. On and on and on I could go. This is where, when you're looking at a situation, a guy's gift sets in the room become, "Oh, yeah. This has you written all over it. Are you willing to take this?" "Absolutely. I'm willing to take this." This is how we function.

Let me tell you just as I begin to end... In fact, if you'll go ahead and put that slide of all of our elders up, I want to show you. These are your elders. I'd like to point out there are a ton of Anglos on here. I would like to fix that, but you don't have an elder until you have an elder. Are you tracking with me? A ton of Anglos. I hope one day it isn't so white, but for now, these are the men God has given us, so I delight in running with these men.

Let me tell you how we're built. We meet every Tuesday from 6:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. We are made up of paid elders or staff elders. Those are your campus pastors and your lead pastors. Then the rest of these men have jobs they work that are not at the church. I think a couple of them are retired now or semi-retired, but for the most part, these men work jobs and labor in other places in other ways.

On the third Wednesday night of every month, we all get together (wives and husbands and everybody) and we have dinner together. From there, we all are running point on various projects depending on how we build out the teams. That's kind of how we function. The lay elders will always outnumber the paid elders. That has nothing to do with the Word of God wiring in that way, but rather for financial protection. To be ECFA certified, our lay elders must always outnumber our paid elders.

This is a perfect example of me losing votes. I was like, "That's ridiculous," because when you have lay elders then it's slower getting things done, because the paid elders are here all the time. We're always

digging, always studying, always talking... It would be easier to run if you didn't have a majority of lay elders, but that serves as protection in a ton of different ways.

It guards against group-think. It guards from outside perception. I'm not a brother who gets concerned much about perception, because I learned a long time ago you simply can't control it, but there are safeguards for it and that's how we're wired. Your campus pastors and your lead pastors are elders. The rest of these men are just laymen here at The Village who give us hours and hours and hours every week to serve you, to protect you, to cheer you on toward love and good deeds, and I'm excited to call them brothers.

Let's do this for just a quick second. I've gone way too long already, but will you do me a favor? Just bow your heads where you are, or maybe you can keep looking at the screen. I just want us to pray for some of these men for just a couple of minutes here. Like I said, I've already gone way too long, but just for a few minutes here, can we pray for these men? You can just pick one out if you want.

These guys do premarital counseling. They lead trips overseas. They sit in on discipline cases. They work with our businessmen to teach them how to do business as mission. They lead our campuses. They build out our systems. They love on our staff. They literally give you hours and hours and hours of their week every week. They hear your complaints. They try to serve you in them. They make the hard calls.

Father, thank you for these men. I thank you for their wives. I thank you for how they have served us well, how they have been a beautiful picture of dying to self, a spectacular picture of not wanting to elder for power, prestige, or authority but rather being marked by the gospel and longing to serve you with the maturity you've graced them with. They've laid their lives at your feet and continue to love and serve this body well. It's through your beautiful name I pray, amen.