



Kerrville Bible Church

What We Teach – A Journey Through the KBC Doctrinal Statement The Church Part 1 of 2 – February 27, 2022

THE CHURCH: We teach that all who place their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ are immediately placed by the Holy Spirit into one spiritual Body, the Church, of which Christ is the Head (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; Colossians 1:18); also known as the Bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:23-32; Revelation 19:7-8). We teach that the formation of the Church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-21, 38-47) and will be completed at the coming of Christ for His own at the Rapture (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). We teach that the Church is therefore a unique spiritual organism designed and built by Christ, made up of all born-again believers in this present age (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:11-3:6). The Church is distinct from Israel (1 Corinthians 10:32) and a mystery not revealed until this age (Ephesians 3:1-6; 5:32). We teach that the establishment and continuity of local churches is clearly taught and defined in the New Testament (Acts 14:23, 27; 20:17, 28; Galatians 1:2; Philippians 1:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1) and that the members of the one spiritual Body are directed to associate themselves together in local assemblies (1 Corinthians 11:18-20; Hebrews 10:25).

We teach that the one supreme authority for the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18) and that church leadership, gifts, order, discipline and worship are all appointed under His lordship and through His sovereignty as found in the Scriptures. The biblically designated officers serving under Christ and over the assembly are elders (also called overseers, pastors, and shepherds) (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11) and deacons, both of whom must meet biblical qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5). We teach that elders lead and serve the body as servants of Christ (1 Timothy 5:17-22) and have His authority in directing and overseeing the local church. The congregation is to submit to their leadership (Hebrews 13:7, 17). Deacons are servants of the congregation and helpers to the elders, meeting practical and physical needs of both the church body as a whole and of individual members, freeing up the elders to fulfill their duties (Acts 6:1-6).

Renowned 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon said the church is “the dearest place on earth.” His statement captures a proper Christian perspective regarding the church and the subject of our discussion together the next two weeks.

For all who know and love the Lord Jesus Christ, no place in the world should be sweeter or more cherished than the church. The church is precious for many reasons, first and foremost because the Lord Jesus died on her behalf. Because the church is loved by Christ, it ought to be treasured by all who belong to him. As Spurgeon went on to explain, “Nothing in the world is dearer to God’s heart than his church; therefore, being his, let us also belong to it, that by our prayers, our gifts, and our labours, we may support and strengthen it. If those who are Christ’s refrained, even for a generation,

from numbering themselves with his people, there would be no visible church, no ordinances maintained, and, I fear, very little preaching of the gospel.”

Defining the Church and Considering Distinctives

Christ’s Design for His Church

The Church and the Kingdom

The Visible and Invisible Church

The Universal Church and Local Churches

The Distinction between the Church and Israel

Throughout the New Testament, the church is primarily designated by the Greek word *ekklēsia*, a term meaning “those who are called out.” In the ancient world, the *ekklēsia* referred to a group of citizens who had been “called out” to administrate civic affairs or to defend the community in battle. Used in a general way, the term came to refer to any “assembly” or “congregation.”

In a specific New Testament sense, the church of God refers to the community of those who have been called out by God from their slavery to sin through faith in Jesus Christ. They are those whom he predestined in eternity past, called and justified in this present life, and promised to glorify in the future.

So at the outset this morning, let us understand - the church is not the physical building where Christians meet, nor is it a religious institution, an ethical organization, or a social gathering club. The church is not a voting block of evangelicals holding similar political views.

Rather, the church is the assembly of the redeemed—those who have been called by God the Father to salvation as a gift to his Son. It is the corporate gathering of those who have been transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of Christ so that they are citizens of heaven and not of this world. The church was born on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–21, 38–47), having been purchased by the crucified and risen Christ, who ascended to the right hand of the Father, who “put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22).

Following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the church steadily increased in numbers as the gospel was faithfully proclaimed throughout the world. Souls were added to the church, one at a time, by the regenerating power of the Spirit as the Lord graciously drew individual sinners to himself. Thus, it was “the Lord [who] added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (2:47). On Paul’s first missionary journey, the Gentiles responded to the preaching of the gospel by “rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region” (Acts 13:48–49).

The advance of the gospel described in the book of Acts has continued throughout the centuries of church history, as the good news of salvation has been proclaimed by generations of faithful believers across the globe. One day, the church age will reach its glorious fullness when Christ comes to rapture his own.

From that point forward, the church will be in the presence of her Savior for all eternity.

Throughout its history, the church has endured seasons of severe persecution from outside forces, while also facing internal threats from false teachers. In spite of such dangers, both from without and from within, the true church can never be defeated or extinguished. The Lord Jesus assured his disciples that he would build his church and that the gates of Hades would not overcome it. Open your Bibles to Matthew 16:18. “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”

The “gates of Hades” are a metaphor for death and the power of Satan. Christ’s promise in Matthew 16:18 guarantees that the universal body of believers under his headship will have an enduring testimony that cannot be destroyed by this world, Satan, or even death. No matter what the church faces, Christ has promised that he will build his church. Though their outward circumstances may seem hopeless or impossible from a human perspective, God’s people belong to a cause that cannot fail. As the architect, builder, owner, and Lord of his church, Christ comforts us with the truth that we are his personal possession, the objects of his unfailing love and care.

Christ’s Design for His Church

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus provides several principles for building his church.

A Permanent Foundation

The initial characteristic involves a permanent foundation: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”. In his promise, he explicitly looked to an everlasting legacy. Jesus did not have in mind the temporary, or the “here today, gone tomorrow.” He pointed to the church as having a forever relevance. The foundation was not Peter because Christ here distinguishes between a movable, detached boulder and the unshakeable, immovable foundation suitable for the church. In 1 Corinthians, Paul wrote, “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (3:11). Interestingly, one verse earlier Paul had claimed, “I laid a foundation” (1 Cor. 3:10). How did Paul “lay” Christ as the foundation? It had to be in his preaching of Christ (1 Cor. 2:1–2). Paul’s testimony of Christ is that He is the foundation that no one else can lay, so we understand the bedrock foundation of the church to be Peter’s testimony of Christ: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16). It was Peter’s declaration that prompted Jesus’s promise. The “rock” is how Christ identifies himself in the fullness of his deity, his role as Redeemer, and his headship in the church. Christ alone is the rock of redemption on which the church is being built.

Personal Involvement

Second, Christ promised his personal involvement: “I will build my church” (Matt. 16:18). We have not been left to the task alone. Christ is with his people (Matt. 28:20) and in them (Col. 1:27). He is among his church constantly (Rev. 1:12–13, 20). Paul told the Corinthian church, “For we are God’s fellow workers” (1 Cor. 3:9). What a privilege to be partners with Christ in building his church. How comforting to know that he built the church throughout its history and will continue to build it throughout its future. Christ’s participation proves indispensable in raising up his church.

A Positive Expectation

"I **will** build my church" (Matt. 16:18). This is no idle dream about what might be. Christ's confident assertion guarantees that the church has a positive expectation. In times when the future of the church looks bleak and its condition uncertain, this powerful promise should lift believers' spirits. The church will be triumphant because Christ began building the church with the intention of completing her.

A Powerful Advance

Jesus claimed that his church would have a powerful advance: "I will **build** my church" (Matt. 16:18). The church experienced an explosive beginning with three thousand members being added the first day (Acts 2:41). "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). What is contained in one mere sentence in Matthew 16 mushrooms into an expansive reality by the time of John's Revelation. Before the New Testament ended, churches had spread across the face of the Roman Empire. They included locations such as Antioch, Berea, Caesarea, Colossae, Corinth, Crete, Cyprus, Derbe, Ephesus, Galatia, Iconium, Joppa, Laodicea, Lystra, Pergamum, Philadelphia, Philippi, Sardis, Smyrna, Thessalonica, and Thyatira—reaching from Jerusalem to Rome. Christ's building efforts continue to this very hour, everywhere in the world, just as he intended.

A Paid-in-Full Ownership

Christ bought the church with his own blood and therefore possesses the exclusive paid-in-full ownership of the church: "I will build **my** church". Christ is Lord; we are his servants. Paul writes to the believers in Rome, "All the churches of Christ greet you" (Rom. 16:16). Neither individually nor corporately do Christians have any ownership claim to the church. The church belongs uniquely to its Redeemer. Christ is Head of the church and as Chief Shepherd He owns the flock that he leads.

A People-Centered Priority

For Christ, the church has a people-centered priority: "I will build my **church**" (Matt. 16:18). The church comprises an assembly of people who have believed in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Jesus uses living stones—individual people—to build his church (1 Pet. 2:5). The mandate of evangelization is to take the gospel to all the nations. The goal of edification is to present every believer complete in Christ (Col. 1:28). As we said earlier, the Greek word translated "church" literally means the congregation that has been called out. The New Testament pictures the church as made up of those who have been delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ. The church has been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ and Christ has called his redeemed out of darkness into his marvelous light.

A Promise of Success

Jesus has promised success to the church: "I will build my church, **and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it**". Well, what is this success? In the Old Testament, "gates of" is used with Sheol and death, both referring to physical death. But as Jesus's

promise makes clear, even the threat of death cannot overpower his church. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to know that through death Christ rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the Devil (Heb. 2:14). Paul wrote this Christian victory song to the Corinthians: When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Let's consider now some distinctions between what the church is and what it is not.

The Church and the Kingdom

During his earthly ministry, the Lord Jesus repeatedly demonstrated himself to be Israel's promised Messiah and King. Yet the nation refused to receive him. Although the Jewish people had anticipated his arrival for centuries, they rejected their rightful King and the kingdom he offered. Consequently, Jesus said to the Jewish religious leaders of his day, "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits" (Matt. 21:43). Those words of rebuke clarify the divine judgment placed on Israel's hard hearted leaders and the nation they represented. However, Israel's rejection did not undermine the gracious promises God made in the Old Testament. Those kingdom promises will one day be literally fulfilled when the Jewish people embrace their King in saving faith. At the second coming of Christ, the nation will receive her Messiah and his kingdom will be physically established on the earth for a thousand years. That reality is yet future.

In the meantime, God is accomplishing his kingdom purposes through another people, as Christ's words in Matthew 21:43 make clear. That entity is the church. The Old Testament prophets foretold details about both the Messiah's suffering and his earthly kingdom, but they did not indicate that a prolonged period of time would transpire between those two. The understanding that an intermediate period between Christ's first and second comings, during which Gentiles would be incorporated into the people of God alongside Jewish believers, was a mystery not revealed until the New Testament.

Though the physical kingdom of Christ on earth awaits its future fulfillment, the Lord Jesus brought an internal, spiritual kingdom at his first coming. That kingdom can be defined as the realm of salvation. It is open only to those who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, having repented of their sin and embraced the Lord Jesus in faith. The New Testament describes believers as those who have been delivered "from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom [they] have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:13-14). In salvation, they become citizens of heaven and royal slaves in the service of their King. The Lord Jesus reigns in the hearts of his people as they submit to his will and honor him with their lives. The magnificent reality of salvation is that, through faith, sinners may enter this spiritual kingdom of God where the triune God himself takes up residence in our hearts. The gospel proclaimed by the church is nothing less than "good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ". After preaching the gospel in a number

of cities on their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas returned to strengthen “the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). Paul described himself as a worker for God’s kingdom (Col. 4:11), explaining that “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20) and warning that “the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9; cf. Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). As his spiritual kingdom, the church submits to Jesus Christ as her Head, Master, Lord, and King (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18).

The Visible and Invisible Church

The New Testament recognizes that not everyone who externally associates with the church is a true believer (Matt. 13:24–30; Jude 4). Consequently, not all who are part of the visible church (the company of those who outwardly profess faith in Christ) are actually members of the invisible church (the community of those who truly possess saving faith in him). There are always false professors and hypocrites who associate themselves with the visible church. Jesus himself warned that many will claim to know him who in reality do not: Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then will I declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”

The Universal Church and Local Churches

The universal church includes all genuine Christians throughout the entirety of the church age. They are members of “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” (Heb. 12:23), having been declared righteous because their sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ (Rev. 1:5). All true believers throughout church history—both those alive today and those already in heaven—make up the universal church. The New Testament instructs those who are part of the universal church in every generation, scattered throughout the world to meet together regularly in local assemblies. Such was clearly the pattern of the early church. In keeping with that paradigm, the author of Hebrews offers this directive, “Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Heb. 10:24–25). The local church is designed to equip believers by feeding them through the teaching of God’s Word (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 4:13), leading them in corporate praise and worship (Eph. 5:18–20; Heb. 13:15), protecting them under the shepherding oversight of godly leaders (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:1–4), and providing them with opportunities to serve one another (1 Pet. 4:10–11). In accordance with God’s design, active involvement in a local church is imperative for believers as they seek to live in a way that honors Jesus Christ. It is only through the ministry of the local church that Christians can receive the regular teaching, accountability, and encouragement necessary for them to stand firm in the faith they are called to proclaim. God has ordained the local church to provide the kind of environment where an uncompromising life can thrive as his people grow spiritually through the teaching of the Word (1 Pet. 2:2–3).

The Distinction between the Church and Israel

In defining the church, it is necessary to understand the relationship between the New Testament church and Old Testament Israel. Replacement theology insists that the church is the new Israel and therefore the blessings promised to the Jewish nation in the Old Testament have been entirely transferred to the church. But this position fails to recognize the distinction between the church and Israel that is maintained throughout the New Testament. The New Testament presents the church as a new entity, a mystery not fully revealed until this age. This is consistent with Jesus's description of the church as a reality that, prior to his death and resurrection, was yet future. Because the New Testament distinguishes between the church and Israel, it is necessary for believers to maintain that same distinction. Confusing the two can lead to significant problems interpreting scripture, in which promises and directives given specifically to the nation of Israel are spiritualized and incorrectly applied to Gentile believers in the church. Though God is working through the international church in this present age, and though the church shares in the blessings of the new covenant, in the future God will again turn his attention to the nation of Israel in fulfillment of his promises to them.

Biblical Metaphors for the Church

The New Testament uses many analogies to depict God's relationship to his people.
He is their King; they are his subjects,
He is the Creator; they are his creatures,
He is the Shepherd; they are his sheep
He is the Master; they are his slaves
He is their Father they are his adopted children and the members of his household

The church is further described as the bride of Christ and the body of Christ of which he is the Head

Both of these metaphors emphasize the spiritual union that exists between Christ and his own. Scripture speaks of believers being in Christ and of his being in them. The Lord Jesus is more than simply with his church; he is in his church, and his church is in him.

The imagery of the body is unique in illustrating the relationship between Christ and the church. God created the human body as a marvelously complex organism. As a unified whole that is entirely dependent on the other parts, it cannot function if divided into its parts. Likewise, the body of Christ is a unified whole. There are many religious organizations and functions, but only the church is the body of Christ, of which every true believer in Christ is a member. The Lord Jesus can be no more separated from his church than a head can be separated from its body. Conversely, those who are part of his church cannot be separated from him or each other.

Another New Testament metaphor that illustrates the vital union that believers share with Christ is that of the vine and the branches. In the same way that a branch is wholly dependent on the vine for its life, nourishment, and growth, so believers depend fully on

the Savior as the source of their spiritual vitality. A branch that is not connected to the vine cannot bear fruit. Likewise, apart from their union with Christ, believers are unable to bear spiritual fruit

Also, the New Testament reveals that believers themselves are the temple of God and that every Christian has access to God through Christ. Having been built on the foundation of the Lord Jesus. Christians are described as living stones who make up the temple of God (1 Pet. 2:4–8). Christ is the builder; believers are the building. The church, then, is a spiritual object, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. the place where God’s glory is most clearly made known on earth, and the nucleus of spiritual instruction and corporate worship for the redeemed. Unlike buildings made with stone, the church is a building made with living flesh. Believers are living stones in God’s temple, offering spiritual sacrifices to him

Spiritual Authority in the Church

Since the New Testament teaches that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, having had his sovereign lordship bestowed on him by his heavenly Father, he is the church’s supreme authority. As Jesus told his disciples when he commissioned them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18).

Submission to the sovereign lordship of Christ is not optional for believers. Rather, their highest calling and supreme obligation is to submit joyfully to his commands. That submission is expressed both individually and corporately. Each believer’s thoughts, attitudes, words, and actions ought to conform to the will of Christ as delineated in the Scriptures. The same should be true of everything that happens in the corporate gathering of the church, as the congregation submits itself to the word of Christ.

Gifted Leaders

The absolute rule of Christ as the Head of the church is administered through godly leaders whom he has given to lead his people. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul says of the ascended Christ, “He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds [pastors] and teachers”. Two of the groups delineated in that verse were limited to the beginning of church history—namely, the apostles and the prophets, whose ministry played a unique foundational role in the establishment of the church. Paul made that point earlier in Ephesians, when he explained that believers are part of God’s household, having been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). By identifying the apostles and prophets with the foundation laying stage of the church, Paul indicated that those offices were limited to the earliest stages of church history. The foundation of a building is laid once, at the beginning of construction. So also, the age of the apostles and prophets occurred at the outset of church history and has not been repeated since. In keeping with their foundational role, the apostles and the prophets declared the revelation of God’s Word (Eph. 3:5; cf. Acts 11:28; 21:10–11) and confirmed their message with miraculous signs (2 Cor. 12:12; cf. Acts 8:6–7; Heb. 2:3–4). Just as the superstructure of a building rests on its foundation, so all subsequent generations of the church have been built on the revelatory foundation laid by the apostles and prophets in the writing of the New Testament (cf. 2 Pet. 1:19–21). The other groups—evangelists and pastor-

teachers—have continued to build on that foundation throughout church history by fervently proclaiming the gospel of grace and faithfully preaching the word of truth.

Evangelists

Though all believers are commanded to take the good news of the gospel to the unconverted (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8), some are especially gifted as evangelists. Apart from Ephesians 4:11, the term “evangelist” occurs only twice in the New Testament. Philip is described as an evangelist in Acts 21:8, and Timothy is instructed to “do the work of an evangelist” in 2 Timothy 4:5. Nonetheless, evangelism is a significant New Testament theme. Evangelists are called to proclaim the good news of salvation through faith in Christ to the unbelieving world. The example of Philip demonstrates that early Christian evangelists sometimes preached the gospel to unreached people groups (like the Samaritans). In keeping with the Great Commission, their aim was to make disciples, incorporating them into the church through baptism and building them up in the faith through teaching (Matt. 28:18–20). The example of Timothy illustrates the close connection that ought to exist between the evangelist and the leadership of the local church. Evangelists are uniquely gifted by God at reaching lost sinners with the saving truth of the gospel. Their ministry is one that every church ought to prioritize—both by encouraging evangelism in the local community and by supporting missionary work around the world.

Pastor Teachers

In Ephesians 4:11, the Greek word *poimēn* can be translated as either “pastor” or “shepherd.” It describes the leadership, protection, and care that pastors exhibit toward the members of their flock. The Lord Jesus is the great Shepherd (Heb. 13:20–21; 1 Pet. 2:25); those whom he has given to the church as pastors are to be his undershepherds (1 Pet. 5:2). Their primary function is to feed the sheep, a responsibility that they accomplish through teaching the Word. Although teaching can be identified as its own ministry (1 Cor. 12:28), it is best to regard “shepherds and teachers” in Ephesians 4:11 as describing two facets of a single office of pastoral leadership. Other NT texts indicate that pastors are expected to be both shepherds (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2) and teachers (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17). Like the apostles, pastors ought to devote themselves primarily “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4), as they make it their mission to proclaim Christ, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that [they] may present everyone mature in Christ” (Col. 1:28). The diligent pastor teacher is a “good servant of Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 4:6), being approved as “a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15; cf. 4:2), and struggling in prayer on behalf of his people (cf. Col. 4:12). Though structure and administration have their place, true power in the church comes through prayer and the ministry of the Word. Consequently, the pastor teacher is to prioritize prayer and preaching rather than becoming overly encumbered with the management of other administrative issues. The image of a shepherd illustrates the spiritual care and biblical nourishment that pastors provide for their people as they lead them. A shepherd’s heart is essential in those who would aspire to be pastors and teachers of God’s people. The New Testament uses two other terms to denote the office of the pastor. The first is “bishop”, which means “overseer” or “guardian.” In the secular Greek speaking world,

the term designated a delegate appointed by the emperor to provide leadership and political oversight to a municipality that had been newly founded or recently captured. Similarly, in the church, bishops operate under the authority of King Jesus as they lead in the church, albeit through humble service rather than authoritarian control (Mark 10:42–43). The spiritual overseer is responsible for both feeding (1 Tim. 3:2) and protecting the flock (Acts 20:28) under his charge. The other term is “elder”, which speaks to the seasoned spiritual maturity of those who lead in the church. In the New Testament, presbyteros can be used in a generic sense to refer to people of advanced age (Acts 2:17; cf. 1 Tim. 5:2). It can also refer to the first century leaders of Israel (Matt. 15:2; 27:3,

Scriptural text indicates that all three New Testament terms (“pastor,” “bishop,” and “elder”) refer to the same office of church leadership. A comparison of 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 demonstrates that the qualifications for a bishop and an elder are the same, suggesting that the two offices are identical. In Titus 1:5–7, Paul even uses both titles to refer to the same person. All three terms are found together in 1 Peter 5:1–2: Acts 20 also illustrates the interchangeable nature of these three terms. After assembling the elders (plural of presbyteros , 20:17) of the Ephesian church together, Paul warns them with these words: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [plural of episkopos], to care for [poimainō] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (20:28). Though all three terms are synonymous, each has a unique emphasis within the biblical context: “elder” emphasizes a man’s maturity and personal character; “bishop” speaks to his leadership role as protector of the flock; and “pastor” emphasizes his sincere care for the people whom he serves. Regrettably, throughout church history, some of these titles (such as bishop and even pastor) have been abused by unbiblical ecclesiastical hierarchies and power hungry spiritual leaders. As a result, the title elder may be preferable in some contexts, because it does not generally carry the cultural connotations that have sometimes been imposed on the other two titles. We will explore the office of elder in more detail in the following section.

Elders

By God’s design, churches depend on faithful leadership in order to be strong, healthy, productive, and fruitful. Scripture teaches that God has given elders to each local congregation in order to oversee and lead his people. As those tasked with feeding and protecting the flock, elders will one day give an account before the Lord for the souls under their spiritual care. In fact, spiritual authority, unlike worldly leadership, is characterized by Christlike humility and a desire to serve (Mark 10:43–45). Any who wish to lead in the church must demonstrate personal holiness, doctrinal purity, self sacrifice, spiritual discipline, and Christ centered devotion. The office of elder entails a responsibility that must not be taken lightly (cf. Luke 12:48), as highlighted in the sober warning of James 3:1: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Responsibilities

In 1 Timothy 3:5, Paul indicates that one of the responsibilities of an elder is to “care for God’s church.” As part of that general responsibility, elders hold authority delegated to

them from Christ the Head to provide leadership and give oversight to local church affairs.

Paul writes, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). It designates the position of oversight that is entrusted to them by Christ himself, signifying that there is no earthly authority in the local church higher than theirs. Yet their authority is not coerced by force or intimidation; rather, it is an authority built on precept and example to which the church gladly submits. Though elders are called to lead the local church, it is important to emphasize that the congregation does not belong to them. It is not their flock. Rather, the members of the church constitute the “flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2), which he bought (Acts 20:28) and for which the elders serve as caretakers and stewards. The God given responsibility of preaching and teaching lies with the elders (1 Tim. 5:17). That is why elders must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2), exhibiting an aptitude to instruct in sound doctrine and refute error and falsehood (Titus 1:9). Such teaching necessarily involves the careful exposition of the Scriptures and is the primary means by which the flock is spiritually fed and nourished.

Beyond teaching, elders are also responsible to determine church governance, ordain other elders (1 Tim. 4:14), set an example for the sheep to follow (1 Pet. 5:1–3; Heb. 13:7), protect the flock from doctrinal error (Acts 20:28–30), and pray for the members of the church (James 5:14). By God’s design, elders play a central role in the health and function of the church.

There are many qualifications for elders provided in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. We won’t go into each and every one, but a sampling. Elders must be above reproach, husband of one wife (or a one-woman man), sober minded, self-controlled, respectable, able to teach, not arrogant, not quick tempered, not greedy for monetary gain or ambition, and have a well-managed household.

It should be noted that the New Testament makes no provision for women to serve as elders or pastors. As Paul explains in 1 Timothy 2:11–12, “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet.” The verb “to teach” in 1 Timothy 2:12 could be better translated as “to be a teacher.” It indicates that women are not to hold teaching positions over men in the church, thus excluding them from the office of elder (since teaching the congregation is one of the elders’ primary responsibilities). Thus, the biblical pattern is that only men may serve as elders and pastors. However, this would not preclude a woman from teaching in other appropriate contexts, such as teaching other women (Titus 2:3–4) or teaching children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14–15). The Bible clearly indicates that women are spiritual equals with men and that the ministry of women is essential to the body of Christ.

Within a group of elders, it is likely that some will be supported by the church while others will earn a living through other means. Both situations are biblically permissible, and neither affects a man’s qualification for pastoral leadership. Often, elders who are paid by the church are referred to as clergy or staff elders, while elders who support

themselves outside the church are called lay elders . While such designations can be useful no such distinction is found in Scripture. The Bible makes no qualitative difference between a lay pastor and a staff pastor. Every elder is responsible to provide leadership, care, oversight, protection, sound teaching, and a godly example to the flock. As those who have been set apart by God and ordained by the church, they are all called to the same standard of accountability before the Lord, whether or not they receive financial remuneration from the church.

In leading the local congregation, elders ought to operate on the principle of unanimity with their fellow elders. That kind of unity reflects the fact that they all have the mind of Christ and are guided by the same Spirit. On those occasions when they disagree over a decision, the elders should wait and seek God’s will through additional prayer and study until they are able to reach a consensus. In this way, the leadership team will not only display a unified front but also model the harmony that ought to characterize the entire congregation. Obviously, there will be diversity within the elder team—as each elder employs his unique giftedness for the benefit of all. The variety of gifts and skills serves to strengthen the church’s leadership, which in turn builds up the entire congregation. Some of the elders may be particularly gifted as counselors, others as preachers, and others as administrators. Some may minister in a highly visible role, while others serve behind the scenes. Both the diversity and the unity reflected within the group of elders illustrate the way the body of Christ as a whole ought to function.

Deacons

In defining the office of deacon, the New Testament puts primary weight on a person’s moral character. That is why Scripture reveals more about the spiritual qualifications for deacons than it does about the specific nature of their role in the local church. Biblically speaking, the emphasis is not on organizational structure but on the moral integrity, spiritual maturity, and doctrinal purity of those who serve in an official capacity. The Greek words *diakonos* (“servant”), *diakonia* (“service”), and *diakoneō* (“to serve”) are all used to describe the ministry of a deacon. Initially, this word group may have specifically applied to serving food and waiting tables, but it came to include any service or ministry that might be performed to meet the needs of other people. These words were also used to describe spiritual service to the Lord on the part of a believer, including acts of obedience or acts of service on behalf of the church.

Office

Beyond these general descriptions of service, 1 Timothy 3:8–13 uses the word “deacon” to also refer to a specific office within the church.

The word “likewise” in verse 8 points back to verse 1, where Paul introduces the qualifications for “the office of overseer.” The implication is that the deacons described in verses 8–13 occupy a recognized office in the church, just as the elders do. As the elders lead the church, they are assisted in their ministry by the deacons.

The office of elder is primarily one of spiritual oversight—leading and feeding the flock. The office of deacon is primarily one of spiritual service—assisting the elders in meeting the needs of church members. Though the two offices differ, the qualifications for both

clearly overlap. In reality, the qualifications outlined for both offices are ones which every believer should ascribe to in their own lives.