

Exodus 18

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[0 : 0 0] We're going to do something slightly different over the next few weeks. Normally our pattern is to take a passage from the Bible and to go through it sequentially! to kind of let God's word set the agenda. But sometimes we take a topic or a subject and kind of look at the kind of whole of the Bible.

What does the Bible teach about that? And we're going to spend the next three or four weeks looking at what does God say about how a church should be run? We're a Presbyterian church. We have elders. And so tonight I want to speak to you on why elders matter.

And I suppose the first thing I'd want to say on that is because we want to follow God's word. It's clear in the New Testament that God's church is governed by elders. It's led by elders.

And in this church, leaders are not imposed on you from outside. There's not some kind of special authority somewhere appointing leaders.

And we have the great privilege of choosing elders from our congregation. Of praying that God would raise up leaders from our midst.

[1 : 1 6] Of seeking to train them in what our church believes and what the Bible teaches. And then you get the opportunity as the people of God to recognize your elders. To vote on them.

There's a Presbytery. We're accountable to other IPC churches. And they have a role in examining our elders. But that privilege that we have, we must exercise that carefully and responsibly.

And I want to say to you elders, it's not a remote thing. These are people that will care for you.

These are people that will seek to teach you and shepherd you. So that you as God's people, that we as God's people might become more like the Lord Jesus.

Elders will have a major influence on the life and the ethos and the future of this congregation.

Elders are responsible for Christ's church.

And so it's important, isn't it, that as we think about this whole subject, about how Jesus' church acts, we need to be guided by God. I said to you, we're a Presbyterian church.

[2 : 2 4] The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word for elder. And so the elder is at the heart of how our church is governed.

We are ruled and governed by elders. Tragically, elders sometimes are elected as a popularity contest. Sometimes it might be the nicest men that are chosen.

It's good to be nice, isn't it? But elders are more than that. Tragically, some churches, elders are, it's like a long service reward. If you've been at a company for 25 years, they give you a gold watch.

If you've been at a church for 25 years, they make you an elder. But we want to let the Bible set the agenda. Elders are important for a number of reasons.

They're important because they will probably stay longer in a local congregation than the pastor will, than the minister will. Think of Graham Weeks, saw off countless ministers and stayed as an elder longer than most, well, nearly all of us have been in the church.

[3 : 2 8] Our preachers will be called elsewhere. But an elder will ordinarily spend decades in one congregation. As I've studied it this week and read about it, I'm convinced that we need to rediscover the beauty and the importance of eldership.

That this is how Jesus Christ has provided for his church to be governed. And if he has provided this for his church to be governed, we neglect it, don't we, at our peril.

If we think, oh, no, no, actually, we can think of a better way to govern churches, that's to the harm of ourselves. And so elders are Christ's gift to his church, and so we want to use those gifts to the full, and we impoverish ourselves.

Now, I've got seven reasons why the eldership is important, all right? And that will fill you with joy, won't it? They don't rhyme either, and they don't start with the same letter. And they are going to be

on the screen because we're all about the tech.

Why do elders matter? Why is eldership important? First of all, it's a long-established office. It's not a very good title, really. It's a long-established office.

[4 : 35] It's an ancient, long-established office. Not a recent innovation. Someone didn't come up in the 1960s with eldership. We actually don't know when elders were first recognized.

The first mention of them in the Bible is at the end of Genesis, where Joseph buries his dad, Jacob. And we're told that with him are all the elders of the people of Israel.

The end of Genesis, the start of Exodus. Moses, after he met with God at the burning bush, was sent back to lead the people out. And God said to him, go back to Egypt.

Meet with the elders of Israel. So even there, in Genesis and Exodus, there is a body of men right back at the start of the Bible, at the start of God's revelation, who were respected and who were recognized as having authority over the people of God.

And Moses was sent to gather those people, to speak with them, to inform them of his mission. And so it's important, when we think of eldership, we don't just immediately go to the New Testament.

[5 : 43] Because eldership is an ancient office. It is older than the office of apostle. It goes back almost to the beginning of Revelation.

For thousands of years, the people of God have had amongst them elders to guide and direct them. But secondly, eldership is important because it's a gift of God to the church.

In Acts 20, in verse 28, the apostle Paul is speaking to the Ephesian elders. He's been the pastor and the planter of that church. And he is entrusting that church into their care.

And he makes a very significant statement. He says to the elders there, he says this, Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer.

The flock, that is the group of people of which the Holy Spirit made you an overseer. That's a really solemn statement, isn't it?

[6 : 47] Paul sees that one of the persons of the Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, was involved in the appointing of elders in the local congregation.

You mustn't just think, oh, well, we vote for our leaders. It's a kind of democratic process. It's not just the people that appointed you overseers. Overseers. The apostle Paul doesn't say to them, actually, I made you an elder.

Or your fellow elders made you overseers. He said, no, God made you an overseer. The Holy Spirit appointed you to this flock.

That you should care and shepherd them. That you should guide them and feed them and care for them. He has given to you this congregation to watch over.

So Paul writes to Titus in Titus chapter 1 verse 8. And he says, the reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

[7 : 55] And so the apostle is speaking with divine authority. And he instructs Titus to do that.

Elders are to be appointed in every town, in every church, so that the eldership is a gift which God has been pleased to give to you for your benefit.

For your well-being. And so we mustn't despise that gift, must we? We mustn't treat it lightly. It's not a little thing.

That if God has chosen to give men to the church, if the Holy Spirit has taken it upon himself to appoint them, then surely this is an office of immense significance, isn't it?

Elders are God's gift to the church. Thirdly, eldership is important because of the laying on of hands, because of ordination.

That's a big word, isn't it? Elders are appointed by the laying on of hands. When an elder is appointed, they come up the front and the other elders gather around them and they place their hands on them.

[9 : 12] And you think, well, what is going on there? But actually, if you're familiar with your Bible, you will know that the laying on of hands has got a rich history in the Bible.

So in the Old Testament, when you went to the temple to worship, there was a lamb. And the priest would lay his hands upon the lamb.

Before the lamb was killed. He would identify with the lamb. He would say, this lamb represents me. This sacrifice is coming on my behalf.

What was the next thing that happened to the lamb? And so ordination. There is a sense in which you're giving your life. It's a rich picture.

When the Levites, the priests in the Old Testament, they were appointed. How were they appointed? They were appointed by the laying on of hands. When Joshua, the leader of God's people, hands were laid upon his head, it was a sign of being set apart.

[10:26] For the service of God. For consecration. Of putting that animal, that priest, that officer in a special category.

It was a sign of bestowing upon that person the gifts that they needed for their work. From the Holy Spirit.

And so when we come to the New Testament, we find that this practice still continued. In Acts 13, verses 2 and 3, God says to the church at Antioch, The Holy Spirit said, set apart from me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and set them off. In 1 Timothy 4, verse 14, Paul speaks to the apprehensive Timothy.

He's apprehensive in the face of all his responsibility and he reminds him of his ordination. He says to Timothy, don't neglect the gift which you've been given, which you have. It was given you by the prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

[11:37] And so Timothy, he knelt down and the elders gathered around him and laid their hands on his head. He was set apart for the service of God.

And when we, in God's good time, in God's providence, ordain men to the office of elder, we lay our hands on them to set them aside for God's work.

And in the faith that God will give to those men all of the gifts that are necessary and all of the graces. And the eldership is an important office because he's set apart by the laying on of hands. Number four, the eldership is important because of the qualifications which are necessary for this office. We're going to look again at this in a couple of weeks.

We'll look at 1 Timothy 3. You can go and read there. You can read from Titus chapter 1. And there's many other places where God has set out the qualifications that an elder must possess.

[12:42] Now let's say you go for a job interview tomorrow. You ring up the job and you say, for the job interview, you ring them up and you say, what qualifications are needed for this job?

And they say to you, there are no qualifications at all needed for this job. There are no qualifications that are necessary. Any Tom, Dick or Harry can do it.

What do you think? Can't be that important of a job, can it? If anyone can do it. But if somebody says, you actually know you need to be highly qualified to do it, here are a list of the qualifications. And you immediately think, well, this is a job of significance. Qualifications that the Bible sets out are important. God does not allow any man to become an elder.

He doesn't allow every good man. Not even every godly man is called to be an elder. There are qualifications that are required.

[13:47] And we dare not disregard them. We'll come back to that in a couple of weeks. Number five. The eldership is an important office because of the authority that is given to the elder.

Because of the authority that is given to the elder. I fear that lots of people have a rather kind of odd view of what an elder does.

They have this view that the elder is a bit like a member of parliament. And he represents his constituents. To the authorities. And so if you've got any grumbles or any complaints.

Or any injustice. Your MP will take it up with the authorities. And get something done about it. And a lot of people feel that the elder is to represent his constituents.

That is you, the congregation. So if you've got any complaints. You bring it to the elders. And the elders' task is to bring your complaint. To get it resolved. To get the church.

[14:52] The elders to act on your behalf. I want to say to you that is a complete reversal of the role of the elder. The elder does not represent the people.

The elder represents Jesus Christ to the people. The whole system works the other way around. The elder is not your representative to bring your complaints to God.

He is God's representative to bring Christ's care and leading to you. And so can you see the authority here?

The elders represent Christ as king over the congregation. The elders rule over all the activities of the congregation.

Let me give you one or two verses from scriptures that stress the authority of the elders. 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verses 12 and 13 says this. We ask you brothers, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you.

[16:04] And are over you in the Lord and admonish you. And to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Peace among yourselves.

So can you see that the elders are described as those who are over us in the Lord. And they admonish us. And they correct us.

And they speak to us about our faults. And they speak to us about our sins if necessary. They speak to us about our shortcomings. And so before you vote for an elder, you've got to ask yourself this question.

You've got to ask yourself the question, am I willing to be admonished by that person? Am I willing for that person to speak into my life about my sins?

None of us like that, do we? No one likes that. We detest it. But am I willing to accept his authority?

[17:16] He's over you. He's appointed to care and to admonish. 1 Corinthians 16 verse 16. Be subject to such as these, speaking of church leaders.

And to every fellow worker and labourer. Be subject. It's not a very popular word. Submit to the elders.

Hebrews 13 verse 17. Let me read it to you. This is the inspired word of God. Obey your leaders and submit to them. For they are keeping watch over your souls.

As those who will have to give an account. Of course in your mind you're thinking, steady on.

There are all sorts of caveats, aren't there? But just take scripture on surface value for a moment.

How many churches are there that claim to be Bible believing churches? And yet people in those churches have no intention at all in submitting to the elders.

[18:19] And yet they claim to believe that the word of God is the Bible. This is the scripture. Obey your leaders, submit to their authority. Apostle Peter was probably the leading apostle, wasn't he?

Certainly the most well known. But the apostle Peter, he was a man of great, great authority. And yet in 1 Peter 5 verse 1 he says, So I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder.

That's how Peter describes himself. Peter doesn't say, actually I'm the bishop of Rome. He doesn't say, now as a leading apostle, as one of the big three.

As one of Jesus' best friends. No, he says, as a fellow elder. Peter was a Presbyterian. Peter was an international Presbyterian, if you read Acts.

A fellow elder. Tragically, the authority that has been given to elders has often been misused.

[19:26] There will be some, maybe here, that have suffered at the hands of elders. Naturally, in our culture, we want to kick against it.

And yet as we read scripture and take scripture at face value, there is great authority given to this office. It's a serious thing, isn't it? Number six. And here's the balance, the wonderful balance of the Bible.

Why is eldership so important? It's important in office because the elder is accountable to God.

Hebrews 13 verse 17.

They keep watch over you as men that must give an account. It's a frightening verse, isn't it? It's a solemn verse for every elder.

That God on the day of judgment will look every elder in the eye and he will inquire. He will ask the elder to give an account of his stewardship and service. Have you kept watch over my people, Christ's people?

[20:33] Have you cared for them? Have you fed them? Have you protected them? Have you prayed for them? Have you set them an example?

Have you admonished them and guided them? They keep watch over you, says the writer. They are men who must give an account on day of reckoning.

When every elder will be asked on that day, have you discharged the ministry that I gave to you?

And so there's that little quaint saying, isn't it?

That I will be your servant, but you will never be my master. And I hope that we can say that as elders to you as the congregation.

We will be your servants, but you will never be our masters. More encouragingly, in 1 Peter 5, verse 4, Peter says this, And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive, you speak to the elders there, the unfading crown of glory.

[21 : 37] There's the positive reward. There is great, great reward for the faithful elder of God's people. There is a crown of glory from the chief shepherd, the chief pastor.

So the eldership, the elder is accountable to God. So we've reached number seven. And the eldership is important. Why?

Why? Because it's long established. It's been part of the people of God since the beginning. The eldership is important because it's a gift of God to the church. The elders are important because they are set apart by the laying on of hands.

They are appointed by King Jesus through his church. The eldership is important because the office has qualifications which are necessary. And not arbitrary.

The eldership is important because it's an office with great authority given to it by Christ. And the eldership is an office where the holder is accountable to God.

[22 : 40] And lastly, and this is common sense, the eldership is an important office because of the practical value of its work, of their work. Because of the practical value of their work. One day some church in California will come and offer me enormous amount of money and I will go off and have a TV ministry in California.

The elders will have no such luck. And ministers come and ministers go, don't they? Elders stay. That's been the story of this congregation in many, many ways.

It's certainly been the story of our denomination. And the role of elders to guide, to hold together, to teach, to keep the congregation strong, to encourage, to direct in the Lord's paths, to admonish, to rebuke.

In Exodus 18, which we read earlier, those judges, they are appointed from the eldership. Jethro gives Moses really good advice.

He says, delegate, give it away. Divide the responsibilities. Get some men to share the burden with you. Devote yourself to your own ministry, Moses.

[23 : 59] You must be the people's representative before God. You must teach them God's laws. You be the people's representative before God. You bring the disputes to God.

Admonish them about the statutes and the laws. Make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. But then he says, get these men to help you in that work, in this pastoral work. In the day-to-day dealing with people, so that they will share the burden.

The weight is too much for one man. So that you will be able to discharge the duties God has given you. So you'll not be worn out, and the needs of the people will be met.

Work together as a team in a congregation. How important that's been. How much we owe to those who've served as elders throughout the generations.

How thankful I am for the men that serve with me as elders. Men, don't resign yet. All right? Don't resign tonight.

[25 : 06] Certainly not. I've thought about this passage about myself, and I'm sure those who are elders feel the same. Tremendously unworthy and unable.

And so let me ask you to pray, to pray for your current leaders. I think we realize how unworthy we are.

Certainly realize how far short we fall. And yet the glorious truth is this, isn't it? God gives this work of eldership to weak, imperfect, sinful men.

He helps us to grow into the office. He gives us the strength that we don't have ourselves. And I do want to say as a congregation, as surprising as this might sound to you, you have on the whole made it an easy and a pleasant task to be an elder.

To be God's under-shepherd for you. And I'm very grateful for that. As we begin to think of appointing new elders, we recognize how important this is for Christ's church.

[26 : 16] Pray that God would lead us. Pray that God would raise up more elders for his church. Let's do that.