



Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, ² in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began ³ and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior;

⁴ To Titus, my true child in a common faith:

Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers^l and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

This past Monday I sat on an ordination council as I have been doing for about the past fifteen years. Brian Larrington has sat on the council for about the past five years and we enjoy doing that together. This time I brought Seth with me so he could see how the process works. Seth has started writing his paper to receive a ministry license in the EFCA. He has to write a 20 page paper about our doctrinal statement and then sit for a 3 hour oral defense of his paper. And yours truly will get to ask him questions. This should test our friendship, don't you think? 😊 Then he has to wait at least three years before he writes a 35 page paper and sits for a four hour oral defense. If we're still friends by then, I will get to ask him more questions that time as well. As Seth got to see on Monday, it's a pretty intense experience. We don't try to make it intense but when you have 6-10 people asking you challenging theological questions for four hours in a row, it can't help but be a challenging experience. I am very glad that the Free Church takes this process very seriously, as they should.

What we have in this process is almost exactly what is laid out in Titus chapter one. Our number one goal in an ordination council is to answer one simple question. Who is guarding the flock? Do we want the fox to guard the henhouse? Do we want the wolf to guard the sheep? These metaphors are crystal clear to us but I'm not sure we apply them to our churches and our denominations always take it seriously enough.

This is applicable to our church body because we are in the process of selecting the elders who will lead our church body. Just as the ordination council is on the lookout for wolves who could cause harm to the sheep, so our church should be doing the same.

Now you might think that choosing elders is an important task but is it really that big of a deal? I don't want to belabor an old illustration, but you only need to go back to Josh Harris' story to see how important this is. If you recall, Josh's ex-wife talked about the abuses and cover up at their former church. Josh seemed like a solid guy when he started but he was handed a powder keg of a church where the wolves and foxes were actually in charge. A few weeks ago he posted this on his Instagram page.

"It's hard to explain to someone who hasn't walked through it, but it's possible for the pain of an experience to be both traumatic and also a great gift in how it changes you. I won't name the people and institutions that broke me down because it would be misinterpreted as bitterness."¹

This seems to have had a huge impact on Josh's decision to walk away from Jesus. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. I have heard dozens of similar stories and I know they number in the thousands. All stories of foxes guarding the henhouses and wolves watching over the sheep. All because they did not use passages like this one to decide who should lead them. Yes, it really is that important.

First of all, let's see what's at stake.

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1. The Stewardship of God's gospel.

In short, what is at stake is the gospel itself. Did you notice when the gospel of eternal life was first given? The hope of eternal life was promised before the ages began. Have you pondered what it means for anything to happen before God created? God brought matter, time and space into existence but he has always existed. He is without beginning or end. Jesus is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, but he's more than that. He is beyond beginnings and ends. He exists outside of both. And what did the Father, Son and Spirit do before he created? They enjoyed fellowship with one another. They existed in infinite and eternal harmony without the messiness of sinners to manage. But while that was happening, they also promised us eternal life. They were predestining the elect. They were thinking about us and planning to redeem us. That's a staggering thought, isn't it? It's a wonderful and worshipful thought.

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1wUFIHTPo/>

But God did step into time and more than that, he tasked the apostle Paul with this good news. *“and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior”* So God entered time through his creation. At least four thousand years went by before he revealed himself through Jesus and then Paul was entrusted with the preaching of this good news. Imagine the weightiness of this responsibility.

What is the most valuable thing you have ever been entrusted with? My children are without a doubt the most important and valuable thing that God has ever entrusted to me. I guess you could say my house is the most valuable possession I own, but it's not like I can drop it and watch it shatter into a million pieces. I always wonder what it must be like to handle something priceless like the Mona Lisa. There's an entire Mr. Bean movie with that premise.



This 19th century painting of Jesus is hanging on the wall in a small town in northeastern Spain. You can see it was badly in need of restoration. So they hired an internationally renowned art restorer to handle the delicacies of the job. This was the result. It looks like something Mr. Bean would have done, don't you think? There have been a lot of really funny parodies of this disaster. It's safe to say that she was not faithful with that which was entrusted to her.

It's interesting that Paul chose a less common word for stewardship to communicate the idea of being entrusted with sharing the gospel. He used the word usually translated as faith or believe, which conveys the idea of trust. The Lord trusted Paul with the most valuable commodity in the universe, the good news of salvation. *“Here it is Paul. Don't mess it up. Don't turn my gospel that I promised before the ages into something grotesque and unrecognizable. Be faithful with it. I am trusting you.”* Not only was God trusting Paul with this object of infinite value, but he commanded him to do so.

2. The Stewardship of God's people.

But there's something else of great value Paul was entrusted with. It's more implicit in this text but no less clear. God entrusted Paul with the stewardship of God's people. *⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.* The basic job task as it were was to appoint elders, but that was not an end in itself. You don't appoint elders merely for the sake of appointing elders. It's not a position of prestige. Being an elder was not like being a Pharisee. These men were not appointed for political privilege and social status. Rather, you appoint elders to shepherd and care for God's people. And there were a lot of people to care for.

Notice that Paul said to appoint elders in every town. Titus was Paul's right-hand man in planting churches. Titus worked with Paul in Ephesus which became a hot house for planting churches. Did you ever notice that there are no letters to the church in Thyatira in our Bibles? Neither are there letters to Pergama, Laodicea, Smyrna, Philadelphia, or Sardis. Along with Ephesus, these make up the famous seven church in revelation. And Paul only wrote letters to one of the seven churches. Why? Because he only planted on of the seven churches. He only wrote letters to churches he had started or visited, the only exception being the book of Romans. He didn't plant those other six churches but most likely believers from Ephesus spread out over western Asia and started those churches. Titus was a very experienced pastor and disciplinemaker. Eventually he found his way with Paul to the island of Crete where Paul left him in charge. That's how we get to verse five: ⁵ *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.*

Crete is a small island in the Mediterranean Sea just a couple hundred miles south of Ephesus. Here you can see the relative size of the island compared to Wisconsin. It's small but it obviously has several towns throughout the island. Titus' task was to appoint elders in every town. Just as new churches were formed when believers left Ephesus to start the other six churches, in the same way, the gospel spread throughout the Island of Crete by faithful believers sharing the gospel. When Jesus said go make disciples of all nations, this is what he meant. They were to go into an area where the gospel had never been preached. Once the gospel was shared and God granted repentance, they would begin to gather those new believers into a local church. What do you do with all of those new believers? How do you disciple them and care for them? Answer? You appoint elders to shepherd them. *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.*

But you can't just throw anyone into that important of a role. Remember, just as Paul was, these elders will be entrusted with being good stewards of God's gospel and of God's people. Those two are inseparable. If you don't take care of the gospel, you don't have anything for the people. But if you don't care for the people, you can't give them the gospel. Just as there are two main tasks of an elder, so there are two tests for evaluating elders. There is a character test and a doctrinal test. Let's look at the doctrinal test first.

u might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.

Let me take a step back and remind you why this passage applies to everyone in the church. You might think that since this is a test for elders then it only applies to prospective elders, but this is not true.

First, almost all of these tests apply to every believer. How about this list? *not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain.* Who does that apply to, elders or everyone? These obviously apply to all believers.

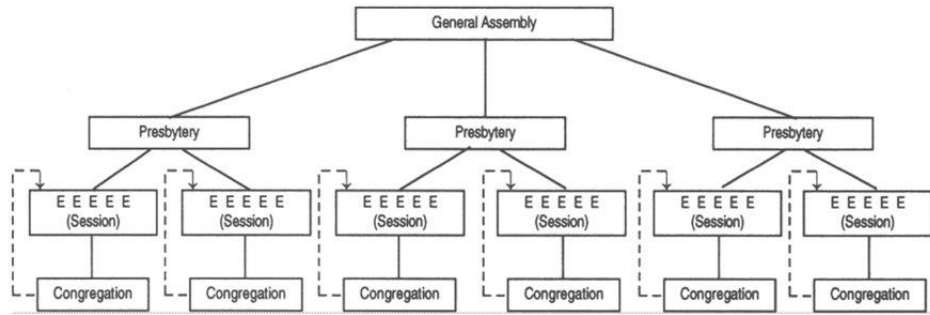
Second, the congregation as a whole is responsible for selecting elders who meet the tests of character and doctrine. And since it is your responsibility to choose our elders it follows that you must know how to evaluate each man according to the character test and the doctrinal test. The elders are entrusted with leading the church but you are entrusted with choosing the elders.

Now there's one word in this passage that might cause some confusion. Paul said that he tasked Titus with the responsibility to "appoint" elders in every town. If you just take that one word alone, it sounds like the job of one person and not the whole church. Let me ask a simple question to help here. How would you feel if I appointed all of the elders at Grace? Would you be OK with that? If not, why not? Honestly, I hope you would be very troubled by that. I hope that would bother you a great deal.

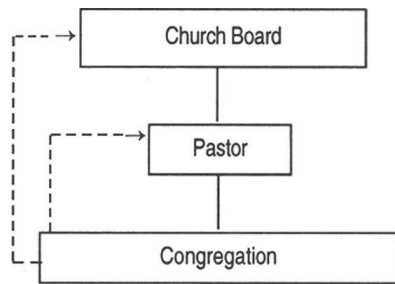
If I were to appoint all of the elders at Grace that would be called a dictatorship. If the elders alone chose the new elders, I would call this a modified dictatorship or what some would call a good ol' boys club. Titus alone was given this responsibility because there was no one else to do it. When he started, he was the only "elder" on the entire island of Crete. He could not assemble an elder selection committee to help him with this process. He had to do it himself. It was a one-time thing that was necessary with the early church. There was no other way.

But I strongly believe that the local church ought to be operated as a congregational government. We don't have time in this sermon to make a full Biblical argument why that's the best option but let me show you some other forms of church government as examples. Now before you yawn and nod off because we are talking about church government, let me say this. Men like Josh Harris lost their faith in part, due to poor church governance. James MacDonald harmed hundreds of people in his church and got away with millions of dollars due to poor church governance. Sometimes the church staff and elders are harmed. More often the people in the pews are harmed but either way, bad church governance harms the gospel and it harms the flock, because poor church governance, sometimes without realizing it, violates the two tests for elders in this passage and in 1 Timothy 3. Bad church governance violates the character test and the doctrinal test. Even though it may sound boring to you, it is one of the most important aspects of any church. Good church governance does not automatically make your church healthy, but it gives you a fighting chance, so this stuff matters.

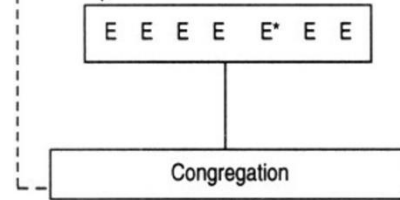
That being said, let me show you some boring charts to make my point. 😊 And let me take part of the character test and show you how it works in these various forms of governance. Let's take the standards of not being arrogant or quick tempered.



The first is Presbyterian. The issue here is that there is very little control within the congregation. The governance is very heavy at the top and it's all top down.

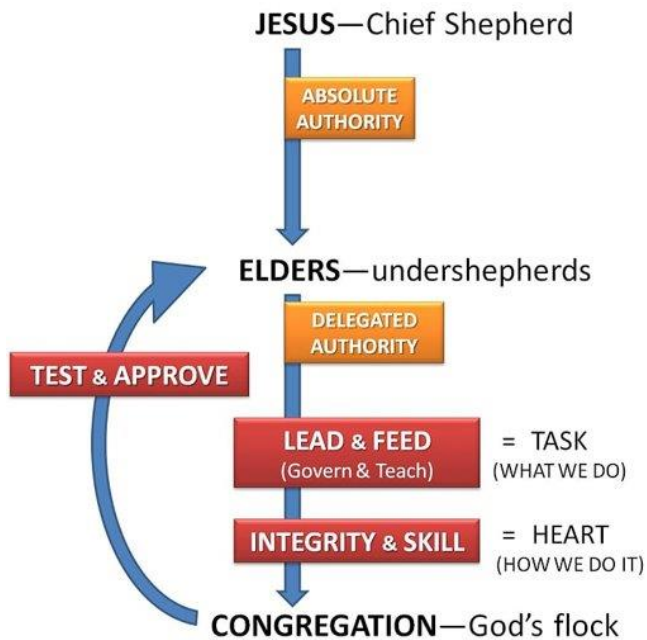


This next one is getting to be more common in evangelical churches which is running your church like a corporation. Generally speaking, the congregation may or may not have a say in choosing the board members. And board members are not necessarily chosen according to the character and doctrinal tests,



* Pastor

The next one is basically how we operate where the pastor is one of the elders and the elders are chosen by the congregation. Let me give you a more detailed version of this one.



This is the diagram we have been using for almost nineteen years but many of you have never seen it before. I like it because it defines Jesus as the Chief Shepherd who has absolute authority over the church. If you don't start there you are in trouble. Then the elders are given delegated authority to lead and feed the church, which is to say govern and teach. But in this organizational chart, humanly speaking, who is in charge? The elders lead the church but the congregation tests and approves the elders. Without the congregation, there are no elders. This testing and approving is where we apply the character test and the doctrinal test. We talk about this at some level every year when it is time to select and approve our elders but I think we lose sight of its fundamental importance.

As I have often said, as go the leaders, so goes the church. I have never seen good governance and good leaders in an unhealthy church. And I have never seen bad governance and bad leaders in a healthy church. The gospel was promised to us before the ages began and good stewardship requires healthy leadership. May God grant us wisdom and power to do so.

Rich Maurer
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