

The Discipline of the Local Church, Part 1

Selected Scriptures

Does the local church have authority? Do local church leaders have any right to insist upon anything with its members? The Bible answers that question with the definitive yes. First outline point this morning is: Live under the authority of the local church. Live under the authority of the local church. Now I'm gonna have you turn to a few passages this morning, just to set a foundation.

This series of a, messages we're doing on local church membership and involvement, it's not really expositional per se, but it is faithful to the Scripture, I think. But it's more of a topical treatment. It's not typically what we do in the pulpit here, but whuh, is a topical treatment. We just want to lay some groundwork to help you understand why we insist on the priority of the local church. So vital to the health, the growth of all of us. So again, ask the question, does the local church have authority?

I want you to turn first to 1 Thessalonians chapter 5. First Thessalonians chapter 5. And I want you to see there in 1 Thessalonians, this is one of Paul's earliest epistles. It's preceded only, by his, letter to the Galatians. In 1 Thessalonians 5:12, notice there that Paul encourages the church with these words, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, he says, "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you, and who are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves."

You see here, in this passage, that Paul acknowledges the existence of local church authority. There are those "who are over you in the Lord." He doesn't defend the concept, he doesn't really explain it there, unpack it. He just simply assumes it, just acknowledges it. The fact of submission to leadership was plain to those early Christians. Paul says, "Look around. The ones you see laboring, doing the difficult and uncomfortable work of admonishing; respect them, esteem them very highly in love because of their work."

That pattern of eldership had been established very early on, when Paul and Barnabas returned from their first missionary journey, having planted churches in Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derby. Says in Acts 14:23, Acts 14:23, it says, "They appointed elders for them in every church." "Appointed elders in every church [...]and they committed them to the Lord." So they ordained and installed elders, leadership, authority. From the earliest days of the Christian Church, there were elders in authority over the church, those who were "over them in the Lord."

And notice that Paul says "Respect those who labor," what does this say? "among you." Among you. He's not calling them to submit to church leaders in Jerusalem, to authorities who are remote, governing the entire church universal. Paul's commanding submission to local church authority. What governs every Christian, local churches, and individual Christians universally? The Word of God, right? The Word of God. So any individual Christian or local church that drifts from the Word of God is drifting from the church universal. But Paul doesn't command submission to elders in Jerusalem. He commands

submission to the church leaders, "respect for them who labor among you."

You say, Well, look, I'm reading 1 Thessalonians 5 there. Paul doesn't command the church to submit to them, he just asks them to. Just asks it. It's a request. You can pay attention to if you want to. You can neglect it if you want to. Is that true? Is this more like a suggestion? Just a good idea, one among many equally good ideas, and structure how we want to? You know the answer, but turn anyway to, just a few pages to your right, to Hebrews 13:17. Lest you make the mistake of seeing the gentleness of the apostle Paul for a permissive attitude about this, let's consider the writer to the Hebrews.

This verse, Hebrews 13:17, is on our membership application, so the people entering membership can see how they benefit from what this verse teaches. Take a look at it. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." Did you get that? It's of no advantage to you to make your leaders groan. It's not to your

benefit to make their lives difficult as they, get this, as they serve you. As they provide loving oversight to your souls.

Don't miss the imperatives there, though; the commands, obey, submit. The writer here is calling for obedience and submission. And again, it's obedience and submission to your leaders. Your leaders. They're in the local church. You're to submit to them, not some remote authority thousands of miles away. They are the ones who know you. They know your family. They know your context. They watch over your souls. It's a local church authority, not some hierarchal authority of a Catholic or universal church.

The Bible does command obedience to local church authority, point one, but it also puts boundaries around the exercise of church authority. And that's why, point two, you're responsible to, point two, to look after the leadership of the local church. Look after the leadership of the local church. Let me tell you what I mean by that. It's your responsibility as a Christian, as a local church member, to look after your leadership.

Every local church is an autonomous body. It's a self-governing group of believers. It's a local expression of the universal church, the Body of Christ. And as such, every local church needs to qualify its leadership. Qualify its leadership. Once you've established a biblically-qualified leadership, you're not only duty-bound to submit to that leadership, but also to continue looking after your leadership. You need to make sure your leadership remains faithful to the boundaries of biblical authority. That's your job.

Does that mean the congregation has its hands in every decision, micromanaging, hovering? Does it mean the, the membership is watching over the leadership like a hawk, just waiting for a single slip-up, ready to pounce, ready to dive in? Aha, gotcha! You're outta here, fella. No. Church is not a democracy, it's not governed by the people but by Christ, through the mediation of the eldership. And church members need to trust the leadership Christ has put in place, and trust the processes that Christ has put in place, put in place for getting rid of bad leadership. But, at the same time, Christians need to make sure leadership is staying faithful to its biblical mandate.

I like how Mark Dever put it one time, he said, "The congregation makes a terrible steering wheel for the church, but it's very useful as an emergency brake." The elders steer the church according to Scripture. Can you imagine driving your car and letting all the kids get a hand on the steering wheel? It's, car'd be turning all over the place. You need to have one driver. That's safe, depending on the driver.

But to illustrate my point right, make sure you got a qualified, licensed driver in the driver's seat. The elders steer the church according to the Scripture, according to principles of love and truth found in the Scripture. Congregation submits to that direction, but it sounds the alarm when leadership is veering from its biblical course.

The problem is, in so many churches we have so many uninformed congregations. They're biblically ignorant church members, and they have no idea what the biblical mandate for leadership is. And they make one of two mistakes: Congregation either sounds the alarm falsely, through uninformed criticism,

like hyperactive poodles, watch dogs that are barking at every passerby, most of them not dangerous at all or on the other hand, the congregation becomes passive. They're like passengers on the bus, not noticing that the church is driving off of a cliff.

Again, that is why Bible teaching in the church is so crucial, beloved. So crucial. You need to know what it says so you can hold yourselves and your leadership accountable to the biblical mandate. That is your job. So with that in mind, let me get you started. Take a look at 1 Peter chapter 5, 1 Peter chapter 5. We've actually been going through these kinds of issues as elders because we wanna make sure, we fear the Lord and we wanna make sure that we're using our authority in a biblical way.

Peter tells all pastors and elders, those who are in positions of spiritual leadership in the church and authority, 1 Peter 5:1-3, he says this, "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: 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, "dominating, uh, "domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." Stop there for a second.

Shepherding involves oversight. And that means there is a heavy administrative aspect to shepherding. It's not all Bible study, not all preaching and teaching. It also involves exercising administrative oversight. And this administrative aspect of sep, shepherding is something that shepherds embrace cheerfully. It's part of the job. We exercise that oversight that we have in a, in a certain way.

Notice Peter says here, nobody forces leaders, church leaders to serve. Nobody compels them, twists their arms into shepherding the church. Shepherding is a privilege granted by a gracious God, so shepherds are to embrace that role willingly. Willingly. There's nothing shepherds should stand to gain out of overseeing the church here on this earth.

Working for the orderly organization and management of the church is hard work. It's often thankless work. It's sometimes inglorious work. Difficult. But because it serves Christ and others, you know what? As Peter says, we embrace it eagerly, eagerly. If someone seeks personal gain, whether it's pride of place, money, personal ambition, they got some kind of a Napoleon complex, listen, that's a man who's not qualified for leadership.

Shepherding is not about dominating others. It's not about domineering over the flock, and that's why the metaphor used to illustrate the church leadership, it's not a cowboy, Coloradans. It's not a cowboy. It's a shepherd. Cowboys drive the herd, shepherds, Middle Eastern shepherds, anyway, shepherds lead their flocks. Shepherds don't drive people. They don't command obedience to themselves, they don't Lord it over people's consciences with their own preferences. Shepherds get out in front. They teach the Word, doing first in their own lives what they ask others to do. And they lead by example.

Where'd Peter get all this? From our Lord. In John 21:15-17, when Jesus restored Peter back into ministry, he commanded

Peter, "Feed my lambs," "Shepherd my sheep," "Feed my sheep." Feed, shepherd, feed, that's shepherding language there. It's tender. It's sacrificial. It's compassionate. Listen, that's why qualification for church leadership, for leadership in the local church, absolutely imperative. Men must be qualified. As a church, it's your responsibility to look after the qualification of local church authority.

Take a look at 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 3:1-7. I could also point you to Titus 1:5-9, but it's kind, of a parallel to this, so let's just read this passage. As a local church congregation, you have to insist that your leadership submits itself to the qualifications listed in this passage. That's your responsibility. You neglect it at your own peril, and it's not just at your own peril, but it's also the spiritual peril of many others, along with your church's testimony of Christ before the entire community. So notice what Paul commands Timothy, 1 Timothy 3, "This saying is trustworthy. If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach."

Above reproach is the, is the overarching concern here in the text. Can anyone bring a charge against this guy in his character? Well, with regard to what? Well, here it says, "The husband of one wife," or ih, ih, tha, that is, is he a one-woman man? Or is he known to be a philanderer, someone who's flirtatious? "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. 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 and into a snare of the devil."

Notice the emphasis, not a new convert, not a young person. In this juvenization of American Christianity, we're violating that all over the place. Again, all of this here that Paul is commanding Timothy is practiced at the local church level.

There's no practical way to look after the qualification of universal church authority. You may suspect some of the people on the national, uh, church stage, but you really don't know for sure. Not until the scandal breaks, right?

Even if there is no scandal, you're not close enough to this man's life and ministry, his family, his community, to know whether the guy's biblically qualified or not. All we're, all we can do is read what's in the media like everyone else. The current evangelical moment is so out-of-hand, some think it's time for another reformation. But you go back into church history, read about the character of some of those medieval Popes. Absolutely horrendous. Unbelievable.

Get a copy of William Manchester's little book called, *A World Lit Only by Fire*. You can read it yourself. But the Evangelical Church has laid its own bad eggs. I mean, we're not, we're not without blame. Veritable litany of big-name celebrities have fallen morally, bringing shame to the name of Christ. So many that don't make the front pages, you find that too. So much heartache and disgrace would be avoided if we paid

stricter attention to these character qualifications. They're here for our good, beloved. They're here for the church's good.

We need to insist also upon the one skill required of pastors and elders, that they truly can handle the Word of God. That they can teach from it, and exhort the flock from it toward love and good works. You gotta insist upon it, folks, that's your duty. One of my favorite texts on the mindset of a shepherd is in 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. Turn over there just quickly. I want to show you this.

Such a wonderful passage, because Paul certainly understood the pattern set by our Lord Jesus Christ, the one that Peter called the, Chief Shepherd, 1 Peter 5:4. And here in 1 Thessalonians 2:1 and following, you see Paul describing exactly what church leadership ought to look like. He says this, starting in verse 1, 1 Thessalonians 2, "You yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the Gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.

"For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive, but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel, so we speak; not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts. For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor the pretext for greed. God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others.

"Though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ, but we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the Gospel of God but also our own selves, because you'd become very dear to us. For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil.

"We worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the Gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how like a father with his own children, we exhorted each one of

you, and encouraged you, and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own Kingdom and glory.”

Boy, just love to camp there for another few days, wouldn't you? Notice how many times Paul appeals to what the Thessalonians knew about him. What they saw in his conduct, what they were able to observe about his life. Verse 1, “You yourselves know, brothers.” Verse 2, “We had already suffered and been shamefully treated in Philippi, as you know.” Verse 5, “We never came with words of flattery, as you know.”

Verse 9, “You remember, brothers, our labor and toil.” “You remember it.” Verse 10, “You're witnesses, God also, how we acted.” Verse 11, “You know like a father with his own children, we exhorted each one of you, encouraged, charged you.” What is that, six times there? Paul is appealing to personal familiarity with him. The whole passage presupposes their knowledge and observation of Paul's conduct in the ministry. They knew him. They saw his life.



Listen, the Bible commands your obedience to local church authority. But it also commands you to look after your local church authority. The men that God places in authority over you, these are men you know, whose lives you can see, whose families are part of your church. You've been in their homes. You've watched them parent their children. You've seen how they interact with their wives. You, you see how they react to trials, to difficult situations, to difficult people.

Are they perfect people? No. But their behavior is exemplary. It's worthy of emulation, as Paul said several times throughout his epistles. Just a few, 2 Thessalonians 3, sev, 3:7, "You yourselves know how you ought to imitate us." And in verse 9, he's, Paul said he wanted to give them "an example for you to imitate." He told the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." And I love this, in Hebrews 3, 13:7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." Those are the people you need to put before you as examples, so you can follow in their steps.

The men in authority over you are not two-dimensional images on a projection screen. They aren't bios you read on a website. They're not highly polished promo pieces that are written by clever marketers who know exactly what to say to get you to trust. These men are flesh-and-blood people whose lives and character you know. They're men you can see. Men you can observe. Men you can imitate. And if they aren't qualified, then they shouldn't be in leadership, right?

But if they are qualified, then you're responsible before God to obey and submit to their loving leadership. You need to recognize; you didn't put them there. God did. Christ did. Christ gave them as gifts to the church. And they're, they're Christ's gifts to you for your spiritual good. If you don't submit to your leadership, or their leadership, then you're not submitting to Christ.