

The Church: God's Prized Possession

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What is the church?

The church is an assembly of believers in Jesus Christ (Eph 2:11–22), led and equipped by scriptural officers (Eph 4:11–12), gathering together to help each other grow into Christlikeness (Eph 4:13–14) by ministering the Word of God to each other (Eph 4:15–16).

Universal (invisible) church: all believers in Jesus Christ, from Pentecost to the Rapture, on heaven and on earth, assembled for the first time in heaven at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Local (visible) church: subsets of the universal church (assemblies of believers) in a specific geographical place and chronological period, gathering weekly on the first day of the week.

Church militant/triumphant: The church militant is still fighting sin on earth; the church triumphant has completed their course and has entered God's eternal rest.

Distinct from Israel: The church is made of believers in Jesus Christ from every tribe, tongue, ethnic group, and social standing (Col 3:11), worshiping God in spirit and truth in many locations around the world (John 4:24).

What Is a Local Church? What Makes a Church a Church?

- Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:47)—members of the Body of Christ/universal church
- Organized with scriptural officers (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1–13) – see “Church Polity”
- Sharing a common body of doctrine (Acts 2:42) – see “Importance of a Doctrinal Statement”
- Meeting regularly (Heb 10:25)

What Does a Local Church Gather to Do?

- Fellowship with Jesus' body: mutual encouragement around a shared faith in Jesus Christ.
- Unite in prayer in Jesus' name: praying for each other and with each other (cf. Rom 15:30).
- Teaching: receiving instruction toward Christlikeness (Eph 4:11–16).
- Fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20): pointing those who are not disciples of Christ to faith in Him and encouraging those who are disciples of Jesus to a more complete submission to His lordship.
- Obedience: observing the two ordinances of baptism and communion (Acts 2:41–42).
- Giving: to the needs of Jesus' church (1 Cor 16:1–2) and supporting the spread of the gospel (Phil 4:10–19).

What Does a Local Church Have Freedom to Decide for Itself?

- Meeting time and place, service order
- Ministries and programs
- Officers – see “Congregational Authority”
- Finances (2 Cor 9:5)
- Associations and degrees of fellowship with other churches/organizations – see “Cooperation and Partnership in Ministry”

The importance of a doctrinal statement

Most churches have a doctrinal statement, but few have any idea what it says. Fewer know what it means. Even fewer still know what it says, what it means, and why it exists.

The Purposes of a Doctrinal Statement: Why Have One?

A doctrinal statement has two main purposes, one positive and one negative. First, a doctrinal statement provides a touchstone, a rallying point for a church. It denotes the beliefs, standards, and ideals the church body holds in common. It is the least common denominator of the church's beliefs, the essential minimum one must believe in order to gain membership. It says, "We the members all hold this core of beliefs. This is who we are. We may be more, but we are not less." Positively, then, a doctrinal statement proclaims unity.

Second, a church's doctrinal statement provides a sort of "fence" or boundary that limits the amount of disagreement allowed within the membership. Disagreement always accompanies any partnership since no two people think exactly alike. The doctrinal statement marks the outer boundaries of that disagreement. It says, "We may disagree on a great deal many things, but on these issues, there can be no disagreement." Negatively, then, a doctrinal statement silences disagreement.

A doctrinal statement does not, nor does it aspire to, define who is or is not a Christian. It is necessarily time-bound, language-specific, suited for individual needs, and oftentimes, reactionary, being crafted to combat a certain need or threat. Therefore, for someone to be placed outside the "fence" of a church's doctrinal statement does not necessarily mean someone cannot be a Christian; they simply cannot be a member of that church. Some points may not be essential to the Christian faith, but by including them in the doctrinal statement, they are deemed essential to the unity and purposes of the church. In conclusion, a church's doctrinal statement marks who is "in" (the minimum essential beliefs) as well as who is "out" (the areas on which there can be no disagreement).

The Necessity of a Doctrinal Statement: Who Needs It?

It should be evident that for any church to maintain its membership, it needs some sort of protection to make sure those who join the church share the values and ideals of the body. A doctrinal statement does just that. It insures that the church members are in agreement with the beliefs and principles of the body.

The Use of a Doctrinal Statement: What do we do with it?

First, a doctrinal statement is useless if it is ignored. If members are unfamiliar with the statement, do not understand the spirit in which it was composed, or never refer to it, it is of little or no value.

Second, a doctrinal statement is useless if it is not used honestly. If it is treated lightly or with contempt, it has no practical value. Members must affirm the doctrinal statement when they join the church, but there must be an honest willingness to admit when one has a difference of opinion with the doctrinal statement.

Third, a doctrinal statement sets the tone and specific course of a church by emphasizing certain points and issues. The church that ignores its doctrinal statement risks losing its very reason for existence, or at the very least, losing touch with its founding principles.

Love Jesus, love His Word, love His church

We must love Jesus—worship him because he is God, believe in him because he is our Savior, and obey him because he is our Lord and Example. If we love Jesus, then we love the Bible, because it tells us about God, how we can be right with him, and how we ought to live. If we love Jesus, then we love his church. We love it because God loves it, because Jesus himself loves it, and because God's children love the church.

Love Jesus

- Because He is fully God and perfect Man – *worship him.* What is God like?
- Because He is our Savior – *believe on him.* What is the gospel?
- Because He is our Lord – *obey him.* How should I live?

Love Jesus' Word (the Bible)

- Because it tells us about God – *hear it.* What is God like?
- Because it tells us how to be right with God – *believe it.* What is the gospel?
- Because it tells us how to please God – *obey it.* How should I live?

Love Jesus' Church (His Body)

- Because God loves it – *thank God for it.* What is God like?
- Because Jesus loves it – *thank Jesus for dying for it.* What is the gospel?
- Because God's children love it – *love it like Jesus does.* How should I live?

Love Jesus' Church Because God Loves It

The church is God's idea. The church is not an idea that people have made up. "I wonder what we could do on Sundays?" "I wonder how we could get money from people?" God is the one who conceived the idea of the church, a spiritual body of believers in Jesus Christ, taken from every tribe, language, and people group (Eph 3:1–6). God was the one who chose those individuals in eternity past to be his children (Eph 1:3–5). The church is God's brainchild.

The church belongs to God. The church does not belong to a group of investors, a corporation, or even to its members, as if it was "employee-owned." It belongs to God (Acts 20:28). It is God's flock (1 Peter 5:2). It is God's field and God's building (1 Cor 3:9). It is God's temple (1 Cor 3:16). It belongs to God.

The church was bought at the cost of the life of God's Son. Just as something we have personally sacrificed and paid for is precious to us, so the church is precious to God. He purchased it with the death of his Son (Acts 20:28). God loved the world so much he sent his Son (John 3:16). God's Son's death on the cross paid the cost to make the church God's own.

The church is protected by God himself. God jealously protects his church because it is precious to him. It is a "holy temple," or an exclusive dwelling, a special place for God and him alone (1 Cor 3:16–17). Those who would tear apart God's church or seek to use it for their own gain will face God's wrath (2 Pet 2:1–3), because if you love God, you love his precious possession, his church (1 Pet 2:9).

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- Why is it sometimes hard to remember that the church is God's idea? To whom do we sometimes think the church belongs? How does remembering that it is God's idea and that it belongs to God change your attitude toward his church?
- What is the most valuable thing you own? Why is it so special to you? What is the most precious thing to God? How valuable is the church to you? How does that show on Sundays?
- How do people destroy God's church? Do they always mean to hurt it? What are some ways we can make sure we are not guilty of harming God's church?

Love Jesus' Church Because Jesus Loves It

Jesus loves his church. When Paul exhorts Christian husbands to love their wives, there is no higher love to which he can call them than Christ's love for his church (Eph 5:25). The universe's ultimate love is that of Jesus Christ for his Bride, the church.

Jesus died for his church. Jesus' love for his church was played out in his sacrificial life and death for her. The church's praise will ring out eternally to Jesus Christ because "he was slain, and by his blood he ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). You and I are part of Jesus' church and will live eternally because he died for us.

Jesus builds his church. Jesus did not simply die for his church and then abandon her. Jesus cares for his church, lovingly making her more holy through his Word (Eph 5:26). But even before the church came into existence, before Jesus had even gone to the cross, he promised, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt 16:18). We may be concerned with attendance numbers, finances, auditorium size, or even spiritual growth in our church, but Jesus has promised to build his church (cf. 1 Cor 3:6-7).

Jesus protects his church. What Jesus is building, he protects and oversees. In Revelation 1, John sees a vision of the ascended Jesus Christ, terrifyingly powerful in his glorified state. What was Jesus doing? He was walking among the lampstands, which represented the small, persecuted, struggling churches of Asia Minor (Rev 1:12, 20) and holding in his hand the messengers of those churches, saying, "Fear not..." (Rev 1:18). Our church may seem small, weak, and lacking in resources, but Jesus, the risen Lord of the Universe, holds us in his hand. He cares for his church.

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- How does your love for Jesus' church compare to his love for her? Could you ever love the church more than Jesus? What makes us realize we don't love the church like he does?
- How important is it that your church seems powerful, large, secure, or progressive? Where does church growth come from? Who makes that happen? How?

Love Jesus' Church Because God's Children Love It

God's children love God's children/Jesus' church (1 John 3-5).

- God has loved us and made us his children (3:1).
- We show we are God's children when we love God's children (3:10).
- The devil's children hate each other; God's children love each other (3:12-15).
- Jesus gave his life for his church; Jesus' followers give their lives for his church (3:16-18).
- We obey God when we love Jesus' church (3:23).
- Love characterizes God and his children (4:7-12).
- God's love for us motivates our love for each other (4:19).
- You cannot love God and hate God's children (4:20).
- If you love God, you love his children (5:1).
- We love our church by pursuing obedience (5:2).

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- What does it mean to love Jesus' church? How is that difficult sometimes?
- Does your attendance at the gatherings of Jesus' church show that you love the church? What about your attitude toward meeting with Jesus' church?
- Do you love Jesus' church by praying for it? What do you pray for your brothers and sisters in Christ? What are some ways you can do a better job praying for your church?
- What are some ways you can put the spiritual needs of Jesus' church above your own preferences?

Do you love the church like Jesus does?

It is not popular today to love the church. A friend wrote on her Facebook profile under religious views, “I love Jesus, but I don’t like the church.” But is it possible to love Jesus and yet not love his church?

What Is the Church?

We use the word “church” in many different ways. How can we pinpoint what that means? In Ephesians we are told that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). We can identify the church by asking for which “church” Jesus died.

The church is not the building in which believers assemble. We often use the word church to refer to the building: “What a lovely church!” or “The church could use a new coat of paint.” But surely this is not the church for which Jesus died. In fact, New Testament congregations met in members’ homes (e.g., Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2). In many parts of the world today, our brothers and sisters in Christ meet in homes, parks, or public locations. It is not necessary to own property or have a physical building dedicated to the regular assembling of Jesus’ body.

The church is not the meetings or ministry programming. Another way we use the word church is to refer to a worship service or ministry program: “Church was great this morning; I really enjoyed the sermon.” “My church has so many ministry opportunities available.” Many people see the church as the sum of services or ministries offered: children’s ministries, fellowship opportunities, teaching and preaching, or other benefits offered to members or adherents. But did Jesus die to secure singles’ ministries, Vacation Bible School, and youth groups? Did Jesus love a certain style of music or preaching so much that he left heaven to give his life? Every generation of believers since the book of Acts has had to work out how to obey Jesus’ command to make disciples in their culture.

The church is the regular assembly of believers in Jesus. We often say, “The church is the people” and we are right—almost. On one hand, the universal church includes all believers in Jesus from the Day of Pentecost until the Rapture. At the moment of Jesus’ return in the air, the universal church will be assembled for the first time: “those who have fallen asleep” and “we who are alive, who are left” (1 Thess 4:14, 17). But until that time, the church exists on earth in localized assemblies of believers who meet regularly for prayer, Scripture reading, teaching of apostolic doctrine, and fellowship (Acts 2:42). The Greek word translated “church” (ἐκκλησία) means assembly or gathering and sometimes in the New Testament it even refers to groups of unbelievers (e.g., Acts 19:32, 39, 41). The church is the church when it is assembled. It is those believers who regularly gather in Jesus’ name. *Therefore, the church that Jesus loves and for which he died is the gathering of believers.* These local assemblies or gatherings of believers are the only church we can know this side of heaven.

What Does It Mean to Love the Church?

We are commanded to “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2). In other words, we are to love the church just as Jesus does. The command to love Jesus’ church is the same as the oft-repeated New Testament command to “love one another” (e.g., Rom 12:10; 13:8; 1 Thess 3:12; 4:9; 2 Thess 1:3; 1 Pet 1:22; 4:8; 1 John 3:11; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 5). *So we love Jesus’ church when we love the brothers and sisters in our local assembly.*

And this is where it gets difficult. We may love our church’s beautiful building, we may be enraptured by our favorite preacher’s sermon series, or we may appreciate the array of ministries

and opportunities our church offers, but loving these difficult, obnoxious, unkind, and sinful people is a different matter entirely! Jesus' love for us is our example to love his church. What about the sinful people in my church? Jesus loved me while I was a sinner (Rom 5:6–8). What about the cantankerous or antagonistic people in my church? Jesus loved me while I was his enemy (Rom 5:10). What about the people who have weak consciences or unreasonable standards in my church? Jesus served others, not himself (Rom 15:3; Mark 10:45).

How Can We Love the Church?

How then can we “walk in love” and serve one another through love (Gal 5:13)? Here are four practical ways.

Meet regularly with Jesus' church. Don't turn your back on Jesus' church because you don't like the facilities or prefer a different ministry emphasis. Don't abandon Jesus' church for something that is not the church. Jesus has promised his presence with his church until the end of the age (Matt 28:20). Jesus meets with his church—do you?

Pray for Jesus' church. ~~If you see problems~~ When you see problems in your church, pray for your church. Are you concerned about your church? Remember Jesus loves his church—he died for her—and he cares for your church more than you ever could (Rev 1:12,20). We pray with confidence when we pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14), and we know what God's will is for the church—that she become like Jesus! This is what God is at work doing (Phil 1:6; 2:13). Pray the God-breathed prayers of the New Testament for your church (e.g., Eph 3:14–21; Phil 1:9–11; Rom 15:5–6; 1 Thess 5:23–24). Jesus prayed for his church (John 17:20–26)—do you?

Follow the spiritual leaders Jesus has placed over his church. If you don't like or don't “click with” your church leadership, you might be tempted to turn your back on Jesus' church. In fact, disagreement with the teaching or ministry direction of our leaders is a very spiritual-sounding reason for abandoning the group of brothers and sisters to whom we have committed ourselves. But if Jesus was going to show us something new from his Word or to correct a misunderstanding we had about the Bible, how would he do that? Wouldn't he use the leaders and teachers he has given to his church for that very purpose (Eph 4:11–14)? It seems the Chief Shepherd would use the shepherds he has set up over his church (1 Pet 5:4–5) to “keep watch over your souls” (Heb 13:17). Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, entrusted the church for which he died to your elders (Heb 13:20–21; Acts 20:28)—do you follow them?

Put the spiritual needs of Jesus' church above your own preferences. Often our opinions about how the building should be decorated or the way in which the meetings or programs should be set up are more important to us than the spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters. If anyone could have lobbied for his own interests instead of giving himself for his church, it was Jesus (Phil 2:3–8). Jesus gave up his rights and reputation for his church—do you?

Next Lord's Day, as you gather in Jesus' name with that group of believers you call your brothers and sisters in Christ, look around and ask yourself this question: “Do I love this church like Jesus does?”

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Local church membership

The New Testament contains ample evidence about membership in local churches even in those days. Practically speaking, membership is essential for a local church to carry out its God-given mandate. Finally, church membership is an important part of the sanctification process for every Christian.

Did New Testament Churches Have Membership Rolls?

- In New Testament times, the only believers in the world were part of local churches (like Jerusalem, Antioch, etc.). Believers “at-large” simply did not exist (cf. 1 John 2:19).
- When believers were saved and baptized, they were “added to the number” of local churches, strongly suggesting an official record (Acts 2:47).
- The fact that many of the New Testament epistles were written to local churches implies that those assemblies were recognizable bodies (e.g., 1 Cor 1:2). For example, Paul’s epistles deal with specific individuals who were part of those assemblies (e.g., 1 Cor 5:1; Phil 4:2). His promise to return in discipline (1 Cor 4:21) loses its teeth if the offenders could simply say, “Don’t look at me—I just attend here!”
- The administration of church discipline presupposes an official membership. Paul commanded that the immoral man should “be removed from among you” (1 Cor 5:2) and that the Corinthians should “purge the evil person from among [them]” (1 Cor 5:13). This does not mean he was barred from the premises; rather he was removed from the official membership.
- A New Testament church is not a building, nor is it the regular services, but it is the people—more specifically, the members of that church.

How Does Membership Help a Local Church?

Church membership enables the church to fulfill its God-ordained commission of making disciples of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:18–20). See Wayne A. Mack & David Swavely, *Life in the Father’s House: A Member’s Guide to the Local Church*, pp. 18–31.

- Membership causes the visible church to better reflect the invisible church.
- Membership clarifies the difference between believers and unbelievers (Matt 18:15–17).
- Membership is essential to an orderly administration (1 Cor 14:40; 1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28).
- Membership provides an opportunity for education about the nature, purpose, and responsibilities of the church.
- Membership provides accountability for those involved in the church’s ministries.

How Does Membership Help an Individual Christian?

Several clear New Testament commands simply cannot be obeyed outside of a local assembly of believers.

- Membership provides a forum for a believer to display his love for God and His children (1 John 3:16, 23–24).
- Membership makes it possible to submit to biblical authority (1 Thess 5:12–13; Heb 13:17).
- Membership opens the door to minister in the assembly and it provides opportunities to be ministered to by other members (e.g., Rom 13:8).

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- What objections to church membership are commonly given by Christians in your church?
- What have been your feelings about church membership? If they have changed, what influenced that change?
- What blessings have you received from being a member of a local church?
- What priority do you place on your relationship to your church body? How does this compare to other relationships in your life (spouse, immediate family, extended family, employer, etc.)?
- Romans 12:10 commands us to “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Is our commitment and love to be directed toward other members of our assembly or to the organization? How might those two ideas differ from each other?
- If a local church is indeed comprised of its members, what would this church look like if every member’s involvement in the lives of others was like yours?

Church polity

The Officers: Who are they?

A church may have many positions for ministry (e.g., Sunday School superintendent, secretary, congregational clerk, etc.), but the Bible only mentions two offices: elders and deacons (Phil 1:1).

There are at least three titles for elders given in the New Testament. The Bible refers to these leaders as “pastors” (shepherds), “overseers,” and “elders.” While these three terms are interchangeable, the Bible most often uses the term “elder.”

- Elders are overseers (Titus 1:5, 7).
- Elders are overseers (KJV, bishops) who shepherd the church (Acts 20:17, 28).
- Elders shepherd (Latin, *pastor*) and oversee the church (1 Pet 5:1–2).
- Elders are the leaders of a church (1 Thess 5:12; cf. 1 Tim 5:17; 3:4–5).

The Elders

Their Office: What do they do?

- As elders, they rule (govern) the church (1 Thess 5:12).
- As overseers, they administer the affairs of the church (1 Pet 5:2; Titus 1:7).
- As shepherds, they lead the church (Acts 20:28–29; 1 Pet 5:2–3; Jas 5:14).

Their Qualifications: What must they be?

- Personal qualifications: They must be mature, Spirit-filled believers.
- Public qualifications: They must be above reproach.
- Family qualifications: They must be godly leaders.
- Ministry qualifications: They must be teachers of the Word.

Their Selection: How do they become elders?

- God plants a genuine desire in the heart of qualified men for this office (1 Tim 3:1; 1 Pet 5:1–2). The church, a local assembly, recognizes that desire and appoints them to the office.
- In the early church, elders were appointed by the apostles (Acts 14:23) or their representatives (1 Tim 5:22; Titus 1:5).
- Today, each congregation elects its own officers, as New Testament churches did (Acts 6:1–6; 2 Cor 8:19; Acts 15:2–3, 22).

Their Number: How many elders are there?

- There may be a plurality of elders (Acts 11:30; 1 Pet 5:1–5; Acts 20:17; 14:23). This is not necessary (e.g., a small church), but it is biblical that the number of elders be increased to meet the increased ministry.
- There is not necessarily a parity or absolute equality of elders (1 Tim 5:17). All elders do not have the same gifts and abilities; all elders do not have the same areas of oversight.

The Deacons

Deacons arose out of a need in the church (Acts 6:1–6; cf. 1 Tim 5:3–16). Their role is to serve the church, ministering especially to the physical needs of the fellowship. Their qualifications are similar to elders', but without the requirement of the gift of teaching (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:8–13).

Congregational authority

Who Holds the Authority over a Local Church?

In the New Testament, we have several examples of congregational authority or autonomy.

- The assembled congregation in Jerusalem chose its deacons (Acts 6:3)
- It sent representatives to other churches (Acts 15:2–3) and received messengers from other churches (Acts 15:4).
- It defined doctrine and offered counsel (Acts 15:22–23).
- The local assembly in Corinth disciplined members out of its membership (1 Cor 5:2, 13), evidently by majority vote (2 Cor 2:6), and then restored a repentant member (2 Cor 2:7–11).
- It held its representatives accountable (2 Cor 8:18–19).
- It was given apostolic liberty to determine its own financial affairs (2 Cor 9:7).
- It adjudicated disputes between its members (1 Cor 6:1–6).

Who Chooses the Congregation's Leadership?

- Apostles and their representatives (e.g., Timothy and Titus) selected and/or appointed elders in young churches following the qualifications given by Paul in 1 Timothy 3 (e.g., Titus 1:5).
- However, even apostles sometimes called on the assembled church to select and appoint leaders or representatives and to make decisions (Acts 6:3; 2 Cor 8:19; Acts 15:2–3, 22).
- Since we no longer have apostles with us, the assembled church holds the authority to select its leadership and make its decisions (cf. Matt 18:17; Acts 5:3; 1 Cor 5:12).
- This means that the responsibility of choosing elders belongs to the church, because the elders are part of the flock. They lead by example, not by holding absolute sway over the church (cf. 1 Pet 5:3). They belong to the body; they are not outside of it.

How is the Congregation's Leadership Chosen?

- Congregational elections are in keeping with a local church's autonomy. Each local assembly is free to choose its own leaders, determine its own affairs, and deal with its members.
- Congregational elections remind church officers that their authority is a delegated authority. Elected leaders are ultimately accountable to the congregation to remain faithful to their scriptural responsibilities and can be removed by majority vote of the congregation.

What is the Purpose of the Congregational Election of an Elder?

We are asking God to make clear his will for our church through the will of the body of believers. It is clearly not a popularity contest, but a prayerful answer to the question, "Which man does God want to serve as a shepherd of this church?" In electing a man, we are making at least three commitments:

- We recognize his qualifications and desire to serve as an elder (cf. 1 Tim 3:1–7).
- We acknowledge our responsibility to submit to his leadership (Heb 13:17). We understand that the elders' ministry requires them to watch over our souls, and we desire that ministry to be a joyful one, not sorrowful. Therefore, we commit to listen to his teaching and follow his example (Heb 13:7).
- We take responsibility to hold him accountable to his ministry. We know elders are justified sinners just as we are; we want to encourage them in their task (1 Thess 5:12–13) and pray for them as they shepherd us.

Elders' responsibilities to the congregation

In Paul's first epistle to Timothy, he instructs Timothy to put things in order at Ephesus. He encourages Timothy to stand in correct doctrine (1 Tim 1). He gives instructions on prayer and decorum in the church (1 Tim 2). He gives qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Tim 3). He warns Timothy about increasing ungodliness in the world, and then calls Timothy to set his hope on the living God (1 Tim 4:1–10). Finally, he calls Timothy to be a faithful shepherd of God's flock.

1 Timothy 4:11–16 is peppered with imperatives: command, teach, devote, practice, immerse yourself, keep a close watch. These imperatives are not complex and unfamiliar ground for Timothy—they are points of reminder. They are also warnings, because these are things that can easily be forgotten or overlooked.

Elders must stay focused on following Jesus Christ wholeheartedly and encouraging the church to do the same (1 Timothy 4:11–16).

We must be faithful stewards of the authority of God's Word (vv. 11, 13–14).

- We must command God's sheep to follow their Shepherd (cf. 1 Pet 5:2; Matt 28:18–20).
- We must explain and apply God's Word.
- We must give special attention to the public reading of God's Word.
- This ability and desire to teach God's Word is our responsibility and privilege (cf. 1 Tim 3:2). This ministry is a stewardship from God (cf. 2 Tim 1:6–7).

We must be faithful examples of the application of God's Word (v. 12).

- Our lives must match our teaching (cf. Titus 2:7–8).
- Because of our regular exposure to the Word of God, we must allow it to change us first.
- We must demonstrate spiritual maturity—Christlikeness—in our speech, our behavior, our love, our faithfulness, and our purity.

We must be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ (v. 15).

- Our lives must show a devotion to persevering faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.
- Our lives must show progress in persevering faith and obedience to Jesus Christ.

We must be faithful shepherds of Jesus' church (v. 16).

- We must pay careful attention to our own hearts, because eternal lives are at stake.
- We must pay careful attention to our doctrine, because eternal lives are at stake.

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- Who are the people that elders are to shepherd, oversee, and lead?
- What does the word *pastor* mean? What connotations does that have for us? How does the word *shepherd* help us see elders differently?
- Who is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4; Heb 13:20) and the Overseer of our souls (1 Pet 2:25)? How does this inform the work that elders are to do?
- Are elders required to be sinless? Are their children required to be sinless? What is the significance of “above reproach” and “managing his own household well”?

The congregation's responsibilities to its elders

The topic of our responsibility as a church to our elders may be addressed infrequently by pastors because it may seem self-serving. However, there are at least two biblical reasons it should be addressed. First, it is an elder's responsibility to teach God's Word faithfully, and not just the parts that are comfortable or well-received. If an elder is to see God's flock mature and fully equipped, he should be teaching "all Scripture" (cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17). Second, every church member will have an account given by those who are responsible for his or her spiritual care, and we desire that report be a joyful one (cf. Heb 13:17).

On the other hand, pastors and elders have abused their authority, so what is the limit of an elder's authority? As we said previously, the elder is to be a faithful steward of the authority of God's Word. Therefore, their authority extends to what the Bible teaches.

Our responsibility to our elders mirrors the elders' responsibility to the church. As they are called to be faithful stewards and examples of God's Word, we are called to submit to the authority of God's Word and follow their examples. As they are called to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ and shepherds of his church, we are called to encourage them in their spiritual growth and follow their leadership.

We should submit to the authority of God's Word.

Since we believe the Bible is God's Word (2 Tim 3:16), it is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice. While we may learn the Bible by reading it for ourselves, the New Testament teaches us that Jesus has graciously gifted the church with "shepherds and teachers" to equip us to do the work of ministry: building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11–12).

We should follow their faithful examples of the application of God's Word.

Elders are those who have established a good testimony in the assembly of believers as well as outside of it (1 Tim 3:2, 7). The writer of Hebrews calls on his readers to follow the teaching and the example of their leaders (Heb 13:7).

We should encourage them to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

God has charged elders with a difficult task: ministering to sinful people in need of grace. But elders are also sinners in need of grace! They may be tempted not to show grace to those under their care and become harsh and overbearing, or they may forget God's grace to themselves and become discouraged and despondent. We are called to respect them for their work and esteem them very highly in love (1 Thess 5:12–13).

We should follow their leadership as we follow our chief Shepherd.

God has given elders a position of authority and responsibility in his church. They are to lead Jesus' church to follow him more closely. He calls those under their spiritual care to submit humbly to their leadership (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 5:5).

Questions to Ask Ourselves

- How do we approach the teaching ministry of God's Word? Are we teachable? Do we listen well? Are we quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger? To whom are we willing to listen to tell us we are wrong?
- What are some of the ways we can thank God for the example of our elders? How can we see God working in their lives? How specifically can we "follow their faith"?
- How can we encourage our elders and remind them of God's grace? What things might be most encouraging to them in their task? What things might be most discouraging?
- What things might cause a shepherd to give account for us with joy? With groaning?
- In what areas are we to obey and submit to our elders? Are there times when we need not submit to their authority?

Toward an understanding of biblical separation

Holiness: Personal Separation

- Positively, Christians are commanded to be holy because God is holy (1 Pet 1:15–16). Since God has redeemed them body, soul, and spirit, every area of a believer's life should be set apart to God (1 Cor 6:19–20).
- Negatively, Christians are commanded to be separated from sin. They must not love the world's system of thinking because love for God and love for the world are mutually exclusive (1 John 2:15–17; Jas 4:4). Their goal is not to be as close to the world as possible, but as much like Jesus Christ as possible (Rom 12:1–2).

Fellowship–Recognition and Cooperation: Ecclesiastical Separation

- Bible-believing churches must maintain a saved membership (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor 1:2). Local churches should be a subset of the Body of Christ, which includes all true believers, in heaven and on earth, from the Day of Pentecost until the Rapture. Believers find their fellowship in the person and work of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3, 7), and therefore, one who does not share a relationship with Jesus Christ is necessarily excluded.
- Bible-believing churches must practice biblical church discipline of members who continue in unrepentant sin even after being confronted by the church (Matt 18:15–17; 1 Cor 5:1–11). These offenders cannot continue in fellowship with the church; instead, they must be officially removed from the body. The purpose of this separation is not punitive; rather, it is the sad recognition that a person's refusal to repent is indicative of an unregenerate heart. The hope is that the offender will realize his sinfulness and return in repentance and be restored (Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Thess 3:14–15).
- Bible-believing churches must mark and avoid those who teach false doctrine (Rom 16:17–18). The leadership has a special responsibility in this regard (Acts 20:28–31). Those who recognize false teachers as genuine will incur the same severe punishment as the false teachers themselves (2 John 10–11).
- Bible-believing churches cannot partner in spiritual activity (cooperation) with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14–7:1). The reason this separation is necessary is because believers and unbelievers have nothing in common spiritually (1 Cor 10:16–17).
- Bible-believing churches cannot partner in spiritual activity (cooperation) with disobedient brothers (2 Thess 3:6–15; 1 Cor 5:11). Since even members who knowingly persist in sin must be removed, it follows that the church cannot join in spiritual activity with those outside the local body who are disobedient. The reason this separation is necessary is to avoid confusion and contamination (Rom 16:18; 1 Cor 15:33).

Comparing and Contrasting Personal and Ecclesiastical Separation

- Personal separation is the individual responsibility of every believer; ecclesiastical separation is the corporate responsibility of every local church.
- Both personal and ecclesiastical separation are based in God's holiness and separation from sin.
- Personal separation is absolute; ecclesiastical separation is graded. Not all ecclesiastical separation is equal; not all ecclesiastical fellowship is equal.
- Personal separation involves the application of biblical commands and principles; ecclesiastical separation involves recognition and participation.
- Fellowship (ecclesiastical) takes at least two forms: recognition as a brother and cooperation as partners in spiritual ministry. These are not identical; however, recognition is required in order to cooperate in spiritual ministry.

Connecting Separation to the Gospel (from Dr. David Doran)

- For the sake of the *purity* of the gospel, believers and churches must separate from those who deny essential doctrines of the faith (Jude 3; 2 John 9-11; Rom 16:17).
- For the sake of the *clarity* of the gospel, believers and churches must separate from those who compromise the faith by granting Christian recognition and fellowship to those who have denied essential doctrines of the faith (Rom 16:17; Phil 3:17-19; cf. 2 Thess 3:6-15).
- For the sake of the *credibility* of the gospel, believers and churches must strive to reflect God's holiness and to live differently than those who have not experienced the saving grace of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:15-16; Eph 4:17-19).

Levels of cooperation/partnership in church ministry

