

Eldership Watching Over the Lord's Heritage

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We live in a time when we're seeing the emergence of the kingdom of our God in reality and in truth. I was praying the other day, and the words came back to me: **"for Yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever."** (Mt. 6:13) And it was so wonderful just to release to Him all the cares of everything that is His. It was a simple little thing. It just washed me like a rain. When I was a child, a young, young child, the rains that came in the Caribbean were warm rains. We loved to run and play in the rain. And it was like a warm rain just to remember **"for Yours is the kingdom."** It is His, His kingdom. Consequently, it's His power at work within us and to God be the glory. Amen.

In many respects, this message represents a culmination. It represents a culmination of foundations laid and the faithfulness of men and women of God to pursue a vision in God. And so, establishing what God has done is the joy of everyone who labors in the kingdom of our God.

The Foundation

I want to teach now on the subject of elders. And I want to preface these remarks by reminding you of the operations of the gifts of God's grace in the body of Christ. The kingdom of our God exists as the vehicle through which the Lord Jesus Christ pursues the interests of the Father Who gave Him all authority in heaven and on earth. (Mt. 28:18)

I want to place what we're doing within the context of the authority and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Jesus, upon His resurrection, presented to His disciples the great commission and told them to go into all the world and to make disciples of the nations. Before He did that, however, He said to His disciples, **"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."** (Mt. 28:18)

It is in this authority that was given to the Lord Jesus Christ that the foundation of the kingdom of our God is established.

A kingdom - the term in the Greek for kingdom is "basilica," like Saint Peter's Basilica - and it means a foundation of power and rule. It means the authority by which you do something.

The Roman church, by contrast, is foundationed on the theory that there are successors to Peter in an apostolic line of succession. And that is why the seat of the papacy is called "Saint Peter's foundation of power and rule." And so, the succession in the Roman church is from this. Since there is no such thing as apostolic succession in the Word of God, then it begs the question, but it illustrates the point of a foundation of authority by which you rule.

The foundation of power and rule that elders have oversight of, and upon which their authority is based, is that absolute authority that Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, was given by the Father. He delegated this authority to the Holy Spirit. And He told His disciples, **"But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on His own; He will speak only what He hears, and He will tell you what is yet to come."** (Jn. 16:13) It is so important that we visit again the work of the delegate of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has the complete authority that belongs to Christ, to present Jesus Christ upon the earth.

Truth and Freedom

He's called the Spirit of Truth because the freedom that we have in the Lord Jesus Christ is the freedom foundationed upon the truth. We talk about being free in the Spirit, but often that just simply means free to do whatever we want. But it isn't that at all. It is freedom to walk in the truth for you shall know the truth, and the truth makes you free. John recorded, **"To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to My teaching, you are really My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"** (Jn. 8:31-32) Your freedom is in the truth.

The Holy Spirit is at once freedom and restraint because He only does what He sees the Lord Jesus Christ doing. So He takes, the Holy Spirit does, of the authority of Jesus Christ and distributes these gifts to men. But this distribution of gifts is always consistent with the purposes for which the Lord God gave to the Lord Jesus Christ the authority to establish this kingdom. It is not freedom to do whatever we want to. It is the freedom to walk in the restraint of the Holy Spirit. And that's a term we don't hear a lot about. We associate the Holy Spirit with just doing whatever we want to and calling it good and God. But I'm here to assure you that the exercise of the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is an absolute restraint upon the church. It restrains us and constrains us to the purposes of the kingdom of God. That's the function of the Spirit of truth. Our liberty in Christ is in the truth.

He's also called the *Holy* Spirit for He embodies the holiness of God. And to good end, because the purposes that are to

be pursued in the kingdom of our God are purposes that are holy purposes. These purposes represent the holiness of God upon the earth. So that it comes as no surprise to us when the people of the kingdom are referred to as a holy nation, a royal priesthood, a people set apart for the interests and purposes of God. Peter wrote, **"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light."** (1 Pet. 2:9) This people is called the Lord's house.

And over His house, He sets those in authority to watch for and to care for His people. It is always to be understood that the work of elders, in watching over God's heritage, is the work of those who *serve* the Lord among the people. You cannot possibly think of leadership in the kingdom of God, apart from the attitude and character of those who serve the Lord. It's an inconsistent view.

Gifts to Men

Now, the foundation of the Lord's power and rule upon the earth, having been delegated by the Lord Jesus Christ to the Holy Spirit, is taken upon the earth in the form of gifts to men. These gifts are given to equip the saints for the work of the ministry so that the body of Christ might grow up, ultimately, into the fullness of the stature that belongs to Christ. Paul wrote,

"It was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." (Eph. 4:11- 13) So the purpose of His power upon the earth is that the Lord God might have a people formed again in the image of the firstborn. The fullness, the full expression of what God intends to do among human beings, being personified in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. That people being called a holy people.

The more I travel around, and the more I talk to ministers, and people in politics, and all other groups of people that I touch, the more I see the crying need for a holy people in a decadent, lawless age. It's spinning out of control - this age. And God's answer is, in the midst of the decay, to cause a city to rise up upon a hill, to cause light to come in the world of darkness. That is God's intent. And those who serve in the body of Christ, in any capacity, must keep the vision of this high calling ever before our eyes, ever before our faces. The answer to a lawless, dying generation is a holy, righteous people. God knew that all along. And that's what He wants. And He sets those to watch over His household. I want to assure you, when you view it from that perspective, there's nothing more occupying of the interest of God than this holy people.

Now I'll tell you something. Even though, in the day to day struggles that you face in the trenches, you might be worn down somewhat by the pressures of the problems around you, you ought to see the hollow eyes and the empty faces of people who don't have what you have. Sometimes, we think, "Well, God has restrained me. God is always requiring something else of me." We need only to gaze into the lives of people without purpose, plodding through to the ignominy of an end without God to be reassured of how grand and wonderful the God we serve truly is. There's something wonderful about being a holy people. Something grand in the scheme of God that He should *answer* the violence of decaying society with the hope, buoyant in the lives and hearts of the people of God, of the people who belong to God.

So I want to stir you up to lay hold, in a fresh way, of this heritage that we have in Christ Jesus. I want you to appreciate the work of the Holy Spirit for He has produced a people growing in holiness and in righteous conduct. He has been faithful to the charge that has been given Him, to cause a people to ask of the Lord that He should possess them in a greater and greater way.

Called to Watch

And those who watch over this heritage are men and women whose names, in eternity, will be written over the gates of cities. For they've earned a place of distinction and honor in the kingdom of our God. It is no small calling, in this, in this world of uncertainty, to watch over and to steward that in which God invests the hope of man's redemption. It is no small calling. You should be called of the Lord to watch over His household. It's a place of extreme honor and distinction.

As I was praying over this message, I thought of all the technical kingdom things I could say to you. Well, the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, to instruct me to remind the people who are to serve, what God sees in being called to this. To remind you and to encourage you. Run with patience, this race that is set before you to its completion, that you, with Paul, might say, "I have, Lord, I have fought a good fight. I have finished the assignment, and I have been faithful to the charge of my stewardship." (**2 Tim. 4:7**) And watch, even, as angels assist in having placed upon your brow the laurel leaves signifying one who has done well before men and angels.

The last time I was in Mexico, I was confronted with another world. And the reality of the world of angels and demons, and those things came home to me in an experiential way. And the more the Lord allows me to come to understandings experientially of the unseen, the greater this desire in me has come to be to do the Lord's bidding in this present age. Because I can already see the end of my own life from where I stand. I can look ahead, and I believe it's less than forty years. Unless I borrow some of your time which, as far as I know, you're not willing to willingly loan to me. But I can already look ahead and see the end of this life.

And as I think about it, at the end of it, what account would I desire to give to the Lord? I know that it wouldn't have mattered whether or not I became wealthy. I know it would not have mattered if I had gained great prominence and stature among men. I know what would be important is whether or not I had faithfully pursued the charge that God gave me while I was here. I know that. And so it is my intent to run this race to completion looking to Christ Who is the author and the finisher of our faith - just as the writer of Hebrews encourages us to do. **"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."** (Heb. 12:2) And I believe that these men, who serve you in the capacities as elders, have in their hearts a desire to so serve the Lord, that at the end of their tenure, when they look back, they would be welcome in the presence of the Lord with these words: "Well done, good and faithful servants." (Mt. 25:21)

Apostles Then Elders

The rule of elders replaces, in a city, the rule of apostles. The rule of elders comes after and replaces the rule of apostles. In the beginning of the church, when it's time to lay a foundation, and before elders have been qualified by their faithful service, the Lord empowers apostles, together with the faithful working of prophets, to lay a foundation for the kingdom of God. The work of the apostle, typically, is that of telling the people who they are in the Lord. And the work of the prophet, in conjunction with the apostle - for the foundation is laid with apostles and prophets - is to teach the people how to hear God.

In these works, a holy people begin to be formed out of those who are not a people. A people understanding the distinctiveness of being called into the kingdom of the Son of God, a people who have been translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of God. Paul wrote, **"For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves"** (Col. 1:13) And in the work of prophets, alongside apostles, in laying this foundation, this same people learn how to hear the voice of God. As they move on from that place, they start to become mature, knowing they're God's people, knowing they have God's purposes entrusted to them, beginning to understand what gifts and callings they have in the Lord, and individually wanting to respond to the Almighty.

And as that time comes, they emerge from the body of believers, those who have been gifted with the grace of leading the people into the next phase. These, typically, tend to be older men, hence the term "elder." Their rule is over a locality, hence the term "presbytery." And their function is the oversight of God's people, therefore, the term "bishop." So, older men, who rule together in overseeing the Lord's heritage, rise up. And as they rise up, the apostle, who was laboring with them in the first place, says, "I see what God is doing." Because, see, they can't just rise up, and say, "We're here. Receive

us." The apostle says, "I see what God's doing." And it delights the apostolic gift to see the heritage of God take root, take a firm foundation within a city. And there comes the time when there's the end of the work of the apostle in governing in the church in that fashion, and the rising up of elders to take the church into the next setting.

I use terms, like rule and govern, deliberately because they have to do with the kingdom. And in a kingdom, there is rule. But in the kingdom of our God, the rule is different. Because the ones raised up serve the Lord among the people and are always mindful that the Lord Himself served everyone. They submit to the view that the greatest among you are the servants and that whoever is greatest is the servant of all. **"Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.'" (Mk. 9:35)** And so there's a mold of leadership that is related not to the kingdoms of this world because we're not presenting the kingdoms of this world. The rule and model of leadership is related to Christ because it is His kingdom, His character, and His purposes that are being presented by His Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth, and the Spirit of holiness, and other things. So those who lead tend to model in a more mature way what it is that everyone else is being called to walk in. And it is their example of serving the brethren as unto the Lord that sets the foundation and the pace for how the people understand they need to walk with God.

So there comes a time then, when the mantle, in a sense, is passed from the apostles, who together with the prophets, laid the foundation, to those who responded and came up in maturity by the Holy Spirit and now it's time for them to take the reins. And the release is a complete release. Whenever the apostle speaks to the church, primarily, it is to encourage the elders. If the elders simply ignore the counsel of God, then the apostle has the freedom, in that occasion, to come in and to speak a corrective word, but not to overthrow the elders and go back to "square one." Nobody wants to do that. You're laboring in vain if you do that. Because the next level of the work of elders is to take the people on to the next level in God.

Raising Up Workers

When the young apostle, Timothy, was recommended to Paul, at the point where he and Silas were about to go out on the second apostolic journey, the recommendation came from elders in two cities (**Acts 16:1-2**). Because, among these elders, Timothy had labored in the kingdom of our God. And when it was time for another apostle to rise up to take the place of John Mark, they had one waiting. So Paul would later write back to Timothy and would say to him, **"Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you."** (1 Tim. 4:14)

One of the things we know then, that the elders have charge to do in watching over the flock, is to begin to recognize the

gifts of the people, and help them to come into their place in the kingdom, so that they can come into the fullness of who they are in the Lord, and they can pursue the work of the ministry. And the example I cite to you is when Timothy had done so, and Paul was looking for the replacement to John Mark, it was the elders who recommended this young man that he accompany Paul.

They would not have known the functionings and the giftings of this young man, but for the fact that they were already watching over him, and they could see what he was doing. And when it was time to entrust someone into this vital work of laying the foundation of the kingdom of God among the Greeks, they had the man. God had already called him, and they provided opportunities by which he could, in fact, pursue his gifting. And when his time had come, when he was ready, he was released into the work, and the elders confirmed that he was, and sent him on. So in watching over the flock, the elders watch to see what God is doing, and direct the heritage of God into the paths that God is taking them, individually and corporately.

One of the reasons why so many people in the church today are lost - you heard me correctly. So many people don't know where they belong, they don't know who they are, they don't know where they're going, they don't know what their vision is. And that's the norm for the church. It's frankly because there are very few qualified shepherds watching over God's household. All the authority to watch over the people in our present model of the church is vested in one man, and he's called a pastor.

Shepherds

When the truth is, the use of that term in **Ephesians**, the **4th chapter**, is actually the term "shepherd." I think it's eighteen times in the Scriptures that the word for pastor exists. *Once* it is translated "pastor" and seventeen times it's translated "shepherd" or "shepherds." The word is "poimen." And *once* it's translated "pastor," and what we've done is we've selected that one usage and made out of that context a bizarre thing, that everybody who gathers together should look to that one person, when even in the usage of that term, it was used in the plural. If you use the word "pastor" or "poimen" in **Ephesians**, the **4th chapter** - if you use it consistently with the seventeen other usages - this is what it will mean: **"He gave some to be apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers."** (**Eph. 4:11**) When you use the term as shepherds, nobody is left in doubt as to what it means. Because everywhere else in the Scripture where the term "shepherds" or "shepherd" exists, it is clear that it's a plurality entrusted with God's heritage. And even in the one occurrence where it's used "pastors," that, too, is a plurality.

And if you apply it within that context, and like Paul, as he spoke to the church, to the elders of the church of Ephesus, in

the **20th chapter** of the book of **Acts**, his charge would be: **"Take heed to yourselves and to the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you,"** (plural,) **"the overseers, to feed the church of God which He has purchased with His own blood. Because,"** he said, **"after My departure shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock, and there will arise, of your own selves, men speaking perverse things to draw away disciples after them."**

That's my paraphrase. Luke records Paul as saying, **"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."** (Acts 20:28- 31)

Isn't it ironic that the body of Christ in our city, and in any city on the face of the earth you want to name, the body of Christ is divided among the pastors? Shall I say that again? It seems to me that the principal cause of division in the body of Christ, the cause is by those who are charged with the responsibility of watching over it. What an indictment. And because of that, the wolves have a "field day" with the people of God. Doesn't it strike us? The reality of this almost overwhelms us. That the people who are given the charge to watch over God's heritage, to present her to the Lord as that bride without spot, wrinkle, or blemish (**Eph. 5:25-27**), are the very ones responsible in the main for her blemishes.

So the responsibility of godly elders, and the need for them is overwhelming. The funny thing is, most of the men qualified to be elders, most of the men qualified to be pastors - that's the work that elders do at that level - have no opportunity in the present system of the church to do their work. They're forbidden to do so by a model of the church that is heavily focused and centered upon one man as the pastor. And in practical terms, how does any man take care of three hundred sheep? How does he? Let alone a thousand. And all you do beyond that, is you multiply the problem.

Sheep Without a Shepherd

The truth is that, with rare exceptions, nobody is watching over God's heritage. It'll astonish you that in churches the same kind of conduct that goes on in the world goes on in the church. And there's no one reprimanding it. No one speaking to it. In fact, most in charge of the responsibility are primarily afraid of being sued. I run into people all the time who say, "It'll take me three months to get an appointment with my pastor." And I run into people all the time, who, when I ask them "Does your pastor know you?" will answer, "No, I've never met him." And the Lord Jesus said, **"My sheep hear My voice, and they know Me, and I know them."** (**Jn. 10:27**)

We're playing games, and we're calling it God because it feels good. It looks good. It's popular. The greatest need in the body of Christ today, in my opinion, is not of new teaching but of responsible shepherds to care for and guard God's heritage. It is silly and absurd and unbiblical to think that your qualification, that the qualification to be a shepherd, is that you've gone to Bible college. And yet, unless you have, or have been given credentials by some group or denomination, you're considered unfit to be a pastor in the body of Christ. Now I'm speaking, in part to the problem, having told you what a grand and glorious thing it is to be selected by the Lord, by the Holy Spirit, to watch over God's heritage. Men are qualified to watch over the heritage of God by the Holy Spirit. And so, Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "**Take heed to yourselves, and to the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you the overseers.**" (Acts 20:28)

There are character terms set forth in Paul's teaching, Paul's letters to two young apostles, to Timothy and to Titus (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9), concerning the character of those who should rule over God's heritage. In the main, these characteristics of men called say, "These men are mature examples of what Christians should be like." So if you meet those qualifications, and desire the office pursuant to God's calling, that's what qualifies you to be a pastor.

Because a pastor is a shepherd. There's no other meaning to the term in Scripture and yet, today, it virtually means everything else. As the rule, if you like, of apostles end, the rule of elders begin because there is a flock growing in maturity requiring oversight. And God, knowing the need, raises up men to serve in that capacity. And, to them is entrusted the result that Jesus died for, and the purposes to which the Holy Spirit was sent. It is impossible for men to rule as elders without being led by the Holy Spirit.

Typically, churches are run by businessmen because we're more anxious and concerned about the money and other worldly and material things. And, in some churches, it is such that if a man is actually led by the Holy Spirit, it's the most telling grounds for his disqualification. So far have we stumbled in the darkness and walked away from God. It is, therefore, no small honor and no small occasion of rejoicing that when the time does come for the recognition of those who have already served in this capacity in faithfulness over a term of years, whose character is known, whose calling is not in doubt, whose desire to serve is a well-established issue. It's no small occasion of rejoicing because it represents, in some small way, the restoration of a holy thing, and the hope that that brings of the church being renewed.

Recognition

Young men, in particular, I encourage you to aspire, as you grow up in the Lord, to being elders. I can think of virtually no greater call, no greater accomplishment to your life than that of ruling well in the house of God. All you have to do is sit on a park bench as an old man, and look back over a life that is largely spent facing God for the perspective of what is

really important to come home to.

When an apostle appoints elders, it is imperative that he has known the men who will be recognized . And the apostle is not installing men in the office of the elder. He is merely recognizing what the Holy Spirit has already done. Their authority to rule in this fashion is not conferred by the apostle. It is merely recognized on earth that which has already been imparted from heaven.

To those of you who are already elders, and who have ruled well, I want again to commend you to the Lord. I want to commend you to His grace and remind you of the lofty place among the sanctified that you hold because of the faithfulness with which you pursue the mysteries of God in presenting Christ's church to Him as a chaste bride. And once again, I wish to remind you of how important this function is. This calling of the Lord is as God's very answer to the gloom that is closing in around us as the culmination of evil and the end of the age arrive upon us. Amen. I'm Sam Soleyn and I'll see you next time.