

Title: The Elders and the Congregation  
Text: 1 Timothy 3.1, 14-15  
Theme: The relationship between the elders and the congregation  
Series: 1 Timothy  
Prop Stmt: The Elders set the mark, the congregation keeps the pace and together we help one another follow Jesus better.

Read text:

Years ago I read the tragic account of a young couple who invited family and friends over to their home to celebrate their infant's christening. As the party progressed, one of the guests asked where the baby was. Only then it was discovered that the infant, who had been sleeping on a bed, had suffocated under the coats of the guests that had been tossed there without realizing the baby was sleeping there. That same kind of tragedy is repeated in the life of a church that loses sight of why it exists. The coats and jackets of routine and habit can suffocate the very reason for the church in the first place if we are not careful. It is a constant danger. So, let me ask you some questions this morning:

1. Why does the church exist?
2. Why are you here this morning?
3. What determines if church was "good" or not?
4. Why are you a Christian?
5. How is the church supposed to help you be a Christian?
6. Can you be what God intends without the church?

If we do not agree on the answer to the first question (why does the church exist?) then we are going to have competing ideas of what we are attempting to accomplish.

There's a man in our church whose wife wanted a particular gift for Christmas, but this gift was in limited supply because it was in such high demand. But, this man, was able to get the gift, but his wife didn't know it and he couldn't let on. So, she decided to help him, help her. She found out that a store near them was going to get a small shipment of these in, and would be available on a first come first serve basis. So, at her prompting he got up at 4.30a and went and stood in line for 3 hours in 15 degrees for a gift that he already purchased, just so she wouldn't know. So, who else is crazy enough to do that? Well, actually a lot of people, and he ended up in line with a bunch of people each hoping to get this item. It was kind of funny and everyone had this sense of camaraderie because we all in this together. About an hour before the store opened up, employees showed up and started handing out tickets to the people in line. The employees had a limited supply of tickets because they had a limited supply of these items in the store. At this point, all civility, camaraderie, Christmas cheer, peace on earth, and good will toward men went right out the window, and the scene quickly deteriorated into a church business meeting. In other words, people who a moment before acted as if they were friends, now viewed others as enemies because the others threatened their goal.

So, here is my point. Unless we agree on the purpose of the church, then we will each bring our own goals with us and will be tempted to fight and argue with one another if we each do not get our way. This is why our study of I Timothy is so very important. This book is about the church. We learn that Christ is the head of the church. We do not own the church. We do not get to make the rules. We are all under the authority of our ruler.

My goal this morning is to remind you how the true purpose of the church informs our view of the responsibility of the members and leaders of the church.

### I. **The church exists as a preview of the kingdom to come.**

The entire story of creation is the story of the Father's love for his Son and because the Father delights in the Son, he created a universe in order to have a kingdom and a people that would reflect the glory of his Son. Within this universe, is a world where humans, made in the image of God, are called to image, reflect and mirror the Son, in a way that no other aspect of his creation can. Therefore, God's plan from the beginning was to have a people who would live with and enjoy the glorious and joyful reign of his Son.

The story of this world is the story of fallenness, brokenness, and sinfulness. The intended kingdom did not happen because the human race rebelled against her king. But that is not the end of the story. God is determined to have a people for his Son. So, he called a man named Abraham to be the father of a new nation. This nation, called Israel was to be a people who would be a light to the other nations. They were intended by God to show the rest of the world what it was like to be a people who followed God. But, the story of Israel essentially repeated the story of the world. Israel repeatedly rejected God. In spite all that God had done for this nation, she kept turning to other gods. But, God is determined to have a people for his Son. So, God sent his own Son to this world and specifically to Israel to love them, heal them, teach them and call them to himself. While some believed, the nation, representing the rest of the world, rejected him, condemned him and killed him. God's Son, Jesus Christ, died because he was rejected, yet his death was also ordained by God as the means by which the sins of every single person who would ever trust in him, would be atoned for. The proof that Christ's death paid the debt of our sin was evidenced by the fact that Christ rose again from the dead three days later. He ascended back to heaven 40 days after that and will one day return to this earth to finish the plan of establishing his kingdom where he will live and enjoy a people who love him and trust him. Every single person who comes to faith in Christ is declared righteous and born into the family of God and made a member of his kingdom. These believers are made part of his church. The true church is made up of genuine believers whose purpose is to be a preview to the world of the Kingdom of Christ that is yet to come in its fullness. We are a preview. We are a sampling. We are to be a taste of what is going to happen. So,

### II. **What happens in the kingdom that is coming?**

We rule and reign with Christ. Romans 8.17 says that those who are born into the family of God are the children of God and as children of God, we are fellow heirs with Christ. A

fellow heir shares in the same inheritance. Christ is the King of the Kingdom and we share in the inheritance of the kingdom. That means more than just sharing in the benefits of the kingdom, we share in the authority of the Kingdom. We will rule, under the ruler.

2 Timothy 2.12 gives this promise to the believer that “we will also reign with him.” This same promise is repeated in Revelation 20.4. But, this is not a new concept. In fact, this idea of sharing in the authority of God is something that started in the very beginning. God shared his authority with the first man, Adam. God made Adam, not only as the first human, but as the first human God made him to be a ruler under God. As such, Adam was to exercise dominion over his domain, even as Adam was under the dominion of God. God’s plan in having a kingdom is to have a kingdom where he shares his authority.

So, here is what I want you to see. The church is an embassy of the Kingdom of God. We represent our King and life in the embassy is to reflect the culture of the kingdom that we belong to. In the kingdom of God, God delights to share his authority with his subjects. In the kingdom we will perfectly love him, trust him, respect him, worship him, obey him and follow him so much that we would never dream of using the authority that he shares with us in a sinful or self-centered manner. Our life together as believers in this church is to be a preview of what life is going to be like. We all have authority and we are to use that authority as ones who are under authority.

### **III. We are under authority and in authority at the same time.**

It is very common for people to view the organization of a church based on what has worked in business, government or the military. But, the church is unique. And our ultimate and therefore, pre-eminent concern is what do the Scriptures teach about this. Is what I am saying about God sharing his authority with us in the kingdom, and the church called to display that now reflected at all in the NT teaching on the church? Yes!

#### **A. The congregation is the final court of appeals on earth.**

There are many organizations that call themselves churches that are only churches in a cultural sense but are not churches in a biblical sense. But I am talking about churches as the NT defines a church. NT churches are comprised of members who are followers of Christ. That is different than how some define the church. Some view the church as the leader or the leaders and therefore, the members have very little voice.

But, that is not what the NT teaches. In Matthew 18 (turn), Jesus tells his disciples that when one believer sins against another, that the believer who was sinned against, should go, just to the offender and address the matter with him. If the offender repents, then forgive him and be done with the matter. If the offender doesn’t, then take 2 or 3 witnesses and try to get the matter resolved. If the offender still doesn’t repent, then you take the matter to the church. The church is called to make the final call. If a person has sinned against someone else, and repeatedly refuses to confess, repent and get the matter resolved, that person is not living like a follower of Christ and the congregation is called upon to say that. “You are not living as a follower of Christ.” The pastor does not have

the authority to remove anyone from the church, neither do the elders. Only the congregation can, because Christ gives the congregation this authority.

There is an example of this in 1 Corinthians 5. A member of the church was involved in unrepentant immorality. The church was not doing anything about it. The members of the church were not exercising their God-given authority. They were supposed to say to this man that he was living like an unbeliever but by refusing to address this, they were giving him the dangerously false impression that you can confess Christ, but you do not have to live like it. So, the text says (v.4) to the church, “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus ...you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.” “When you are assembled” is talking about when the congregation gathers together. It is the congregation that votes to remove this man from the membership of the church. The congregation is to treat this man, as Jesus said, like an outsider. That means that you treat him as one who needs to hear and respond to the gospel. That means that you do not allow him to participate in the Lord’s Supper because he is not living as a believer. It means that your relationship with him has fundamentally changed. You are still kind, nice, and pleasant, but you no longer view him as a fellow believer, but one who needs Christ, because he most likely needs Christ. There are cases, (and the situation in 1 Corinthians appears to be one), when the unrepentant offender really is a believer, and the action of the church is used by God to help the person see the seriousness of their actions. But, the point I am trying to make is that the authority to say, who is in and who isn’t, is in the hands of the congregation. Jesus was talking about the congregation when he said that what they bind on earth will have been bound in heaven and what they loose will have been loosed in heaven. But, the congregation is not the only ones who have authority.

#### **B. The elders have vested authority.**

The elders in each congregation also have authority. 1 Timothy speaks of the polity of the church. Specifically chapter 3 talks about the elders, deacons and deaconesses. Elders are called overseers. Everywhere that Paul went and planted churches, he appointed elders to lead those congregations. In Acts 20.28, Paul is meeting with the elders from the church in Ephesus and he tells them to “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*” Being an overseer is one who has oversight. Specifically elders are to rule (1 Timothy 5.17) and those who rule well are to be honored. The elders are to keep watch over the souls of the members (Hebrews 13.17) and the congregation is to obey and submit to the elders. So, who is in charge? Is it the elders or the congregation? Since the congregation has the charge of binding and loosing (Matthew 18), the congregation is the final court of appeals, but what the congregation does, is they are to vest authority into a group of men who meet the qualifications of an elder and the elders are to use that vested authority for the good of and the growth of the congregation.

We are used to chains of command and organizational flow charts. We are accustomed to policies, laws, rules and tensions between management and workers, or between politicians and their constituency. But, the church is to operate on the basis of the gospel.

Therefore, even our governance is to be different. And it is. Christ shares his authority with his people (Matthew 28.19-20). His people, organized into local congregations, share that authority with elders who use that authority in order to help lead the congregation to follow Jesus better so that together we present a more accurate picture of what life is going to be like in the kingdom of Jesus.

So, the congregation has authority and the elders have authority. Therefore...

#### IV. We are to humbly and faithfully exercise our authority in a way that reflects Christ.

##### A. What does this look like for an elder?

I.e. how does the life and ministry of Christ set a pattern of life and ministry for an elder?

Christ laid down his life for his sheep. He did not come to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom. An elder or pastor is not to use his position in order for people to serve him or to make much of him, but to rather look for ways to help others take another step in becoming more like Jesus. As the elders care for the church by faithfully feeding the flock the Word of God, caring for the flock by praying, encouraging, and counseling, then when times arise that issues need to be addressed and corrections made, the congregation is going to be more inclined to support it.

Christ also lived a rather transparent life. Want to see how he spends his time? Go with him. His life was very open. The lives and actions of elders should be the same way.

Christ also focused his life on giving away his authority which is a wonderful mission for the elders. The elders should look for ways to train other brothers for ministry, elevate the spiritual growth of the congregation so that all of us are more prepared to rule and reign with Christ.

Christ was not a law unto himself and no elder (pastor) is a law unto himself. Every elder is subject to the other elders and together the elders are accountable to the congregation. As an elder, I am one of seventeen elders. I have a voice, but it is only one voice. We work together as one group and give careful attention to the perspective of each elder. You have given us the authority to advance and protect the doctrine of the church. Every year, we publicly sign the doctrinal statement as a way of reminding all of us of what we believe and what binds us together. We are not free to believe differently than our doctrinal statement, and if any of us ever would, then we would necessarily resign because our authority as an elder only extends to what the congregation has vested in us.

Christ values the life of every single lamb. He did it perfectly. We won't do it perfectly, but we need to pursue this.

By the way, I have never known a time when a member of the congregation became upset with a decision that the elders came up with on their own. The elders only put into

practice the stated convictions of the congregation. All we do is carry out what we all agreed upon from the Scriptures. There are times when individual members get upset with that, but we are only doing what we all said that we believe and what we said we would do.

Our Members' Meetings are the times when formal updates are provided for the congregation, because the leadership of this church is seeking to share with you information about the church because the leadership is accountable to you. This information helps provide some of the answer to the question of: What are we doing with the authority that you have vested in us?

### **B. What does this look like for the members who are not elders?**

How does the life of Christ inform and guide a member's view of the elders?

Christ exercised his authority as one who was under authority. He ruled as one who was ruled by the Father. You have authority as part of the congregation. You are to seek to use that authority as one under authority in harmony with others, so that together the congregation can speak and move as clearly and unified as possible. You have ideas that need to be heard and ideas that need to be humbly shared. You share the authority that has been given to you with the elders who in return share that authority back. We are all accountable to Christ and that accountability is good and it is real.

Christ knew that his earthly authorities were not perfect. Joseph and Mary were imperfect parents. Herod, Pilate, the Sanhedrin, and priests were deeply flawed and yet Christ submitted himself to his earthly authorities and gave them respect unless they asked him to do something that was wrong. As members of this congregation, you know that the elders and pastors are not perfect. They want to care for you well, but they are not Jesus. Just as their relationship toward you needs to be filled with grace, love, hope and encouragement, so too your relationship with them should be with grace, love, hope and encouragement. How can you help them care well for your soul? How can you help them help the congregation look more like Jesus?

Christ loved others. And Cornerstone, here is one of the many areas that I think you do well in. The leaders of this church are often reminded that you care for us. You pray for us. You trust us. That trust is a treasure that we guard with care. But, we also know that together we have a trust from Christ. We are each to help this church look more like Jesus and you are to help this church look more like Jesus. So, we are trying to constantly answer the question of how can we help you and others take another step in looking more like Jesus? It is our mission, just as we are hoping that you will constantly be thinking about how can you help others in the church look more like Jesus and those outside of Christ take a step toward following Christ?