

Ordination Service: Steve Tong & Jeff Palen

June 6, 2021

Every time we gather as a church, we celebrate the fact that every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights. Or in other words, God enjoys giving his people great gifts.

Today we celebrate a significant gift to our church in the ordination of Steve Tong and Jeff Palen.

If you are a guest with us today or new our typical practice is to preach through books of the Bible or sections as they come, but today is a happy exception.

Instead of considering one passage of the Bible—we are going to consider what the Bible says about elders. Most specifically,

What is an elder?

And as we tackle that question, I'm going to be explaining why Steve and Jeff is qualified to be an elder at Center Church. We are going to survey much of what the NT has to say about the office of elder this morning, so this sermon will be a little different.

To introduce the topic I'm going to read to you words from an old, grizzled pastor who speaks with mix of wisdom, love but with scars to as well. We are going to hear from Peter,

"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: [2] 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; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. [4] And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." 1 Peter 5:1-4

PRAY

I'm going to say 4 things about an elder as we answer the questions: What is an elder?

What is an elder?

1. An elder is a pastor is an overseer.

Elder, pastor and overseer are all synonyms in the Bible. The New Testament gives clear evidence that an Elder = Overseer = Pastor. They are all the same office describing the same role.

You might be used to a type of church government that has a pastor or pastors and then

a board of elders who govern. We don't see that distinction in the Bible. Elders, overseers, Pastors all mean the same thing, shepherds.

Maybe this is a new thought for you—where do we get this from? I'll show you.

I'm going to show you the classic text from where all three words are used and you can judge for yourself what you think—ACTS 20:

"Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders of the church** to come to him. [18] And when they came to him, he said to them:

Something to notice, elders is plural. I'm not going to get time to develop this but elders serve the church in a plurality. One elder does not have more authority than another. Some elders may have more influence than others, but not more authority.

I'm not the boss. I serve with these men and I get overruled on a regular basis. They have as much responsibility at our church as I do. Our responsibilities in the church are different but our responsibility for the church is the same.

Okay back to Acts 20—you see what Paul does—he calls the elders. Let's see who comes:

"You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, [19] serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; [20] how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, [21] testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. [22] And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, [23] except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. [24] But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. [25] And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. [26] Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, [27] for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.

The elders come but I want you to see what Paul said to them,

[28] 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."

Verse 17 says he called the elders and then in verse 28 we see another word used—overseers.

Clearly, an overseer and elder mean the same thing. You might be familiar with the

older English way of translating that word—bishop.

What does an elder/overseer do? He cares for the church of God. The word there is to pastor the church of God. Pastor just comes from the Latin word to shepherd.

Let's try and make it clear—Verse 28 again,

[28] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers (bishops)**, to **shepherd (pastor) the church of God**, which he obtained with his own blood." Acts 20:28

Elder = Pastor = Overseer

We typically use the word elder & pastor and not often overseer probably because we are Americans.

I hope I have not belabored that point too much but I always run into people who have questions. I hope that makes it clearer.

What is an elder?

2. An elder IS before he does

What does that mean?

In two places Paul tells a pair of young men what to look for when they set in elders. He did not say:

- Most Money
- Most gifted
- Most time
- Mostly liked
- Wicked Smart

He says—look for men of character. Look at 1 Timothy 3:1—

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

Elders are not Christian nobility. The task is noble but the man need not be. Again, watch as he tunes Timothy's eyes to the kind of men to find to serve as elders.

[2] Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, [3] not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. [4] He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, [5] for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? [6] He

must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. [7] Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Do you see it?

There is only one gift listed in this instruction. Able to teach. Now, there are other sections of scripture that add to what elders do, but this section makes a massive statement as to what is important.

An elder is to be marked first by strength of character before depth of gifting is considered. We know this. Who a man IS is more important than what a man does.

There are many gifted men who could string together a few sentences and were thrown against many a pulpit—who shipwrecked many churches on the rocks of their own character disqualification.

That is why we must consider who a man IS before we consider what he can DO.

This list is not some super-charged, other-worldly, souped-up qualifications that don’t apply to other Christians. This list ought to describe us all BUT especially elders.

We should all aspire to this description.

This is why it takes time to set someone in as an elder. We are in no rush to lay hands on anyone. I can testify to Steve and Jeff’s character.

I have served alongside Steve for a decade. Steve has served our church tirelessly as our Administrator. Throughout his time at Center Church, he has exhibited a pastoral gifting, especially in the area of discipleship. He has come alongside many and helped them to follow and love Jesus more.

About 5 years ago, Steve started studying for what is a rigorous ordination test. This examination takes place in four parts and preparation meant over 3000 pages of reading. Steve faithfully chipped away at it for years.

What I appreciate about Steve is his steadiness. You can set your watch to Steve Tong. He is the epitome of being ready in season and out of season. He serves all of us in a ton of ways, but many that might not be obvious. He is the glue in our office.

And he loves the savior, and you. Steve would tell you that he was not much of a studier or reader when he joined our team but now he is. He has worked hard not just to become an elder, but to become an elder to serve us.

You know all this, because we have talked about Steve and his efforts toward ordination for years. Steve will still be responsible for our church operations and serve bi-vocationally as an elder.

Jeff has been a part of our church since 2016 and has distinguished himself leading the youth ministry over the last year plus. Jeff is married to Barb and they have three girls and a boy. Right now, Jeff is an engineer at Verizon but his heartbeat and passion is this local church.

Jeff is about a year away from graduating from Phoenix Seminary with his Masters of Divinity degree. Before this he received his bachelor's degree, all while raising a family and working a nine to five. In all Jeff has been working hard in school for about a decade. Jeff has a passion for rightly dividing the word of God.

But Jeff loves Jesus. There are some people who get into the vagaries of theology just to show you how smart they are. Jeff is smart, but he loves theology because he loves Jesus. His passion is evident. And he has a passion for you.

In our church, Jeff has served as a small group leader and currently is leading our youth ministry, and doing a great job.

These men love you. These men are willing to serve and give their lives for you.

- I have seen them lead and care many of you without lording it over.
- I have seen them sacrifice and serve in secret with no desire for recognition.
- I have heard how they each pray for you.
- I have seen how they love you.
- I have seen how they eagerly desire to serve you.
- I have seen how they want to spend and be spent for you.

What is an elder?

Is a pastor/overseer.

Is an elder before he elders.

Steve and Jeff ARE elders.

3. An elder: is a Shepherd

Not a consultant

Not an advisor

Not a guru

An elder is a shepherd did you see that in what Peter said?

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: [2] shepherd the flock of God that is among you,

How is an elder to shepherd?

He watches himself & he watches the Church.

No one can watch himself by himself—that never works. An elder MUST live in community ensure that the character sketch of 1 Timothy 3 still applies. Paul says it this way to Timothy:

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” 1 Timothy 4:16

Ordination is not a message that a man has arrived—it is the beginning of a continual, never ending, always demanding journey of life watching.

Elders must watch their lives and their teaching closely—because if they don’t they can swerve off just like anyone else.

Robert Robinson says it just right in the fourth stanza of Come Thou Fount,

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I’m constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee.
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here’s my heart, O take and seal it,
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

We are all prone to wander from truth and from what is right. An elder is no different.

Oh but we will fail. The call is not to perfection but to faithfulness. We will do our best not to fail but we will. There will be times we sin against you—and other times we will just make mistakes (not all mistakes are sins).

That said, an elder must watch himself with others.

But also an elder must watch over you. Scripture guides us with some clear particulars. Let me just give a few examples of how we try and shepherd—

Teach the Scriptures

We want to speak God’s words after him. In every venue we can we seek to teach and apply and encourage the scriptures. This is not just during Sunday morning—

- We teach as we sing
- We teach as we pray
- We teach baptize
- We teach in counseling

- We teach in classroom settings
- We teach in every ministry setting

Govern & Lead

With the scriptures as our guide we will seek to govern and lead the church well. This is why we pray so much as a team. It takes great wisdom to govern and lead well. There are so many issues of wisdom and decisions to make that the scriptures don't speak directly about.

Like—

How can we serve our small group leaders?
 How can we do justice to the horrors of hell?
 How can we represent eternity as important as it is?
 How can we train folks to evangelize?
 What seminars do we need?
 How can we faithfully practice church discipline here?
 And a thousand more.

Protect

None of us like to think that we need protection—but we all do. Remember what we read earlier in Acts 20—

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” Acts 20:29-30

Wolves come into every church to try and gain an influence and do all sorts of twisted things. The evil of wolves is that they say things that are close to the truth but twisted.

Wolves are hard to spot. They don't come in and say—“I'm here to eat some sheep because I am a wolf.”

Elders are called to throw themselves in front of the wolves and get them out of the church. And by the way—the greatest threat to any church always comes from within.

You might be most afraid of what the government will do to compromise freedom of religion (not illegitimate) I'm most afraid of the fire that gossip and slander can do. Inside threats are ALWAYS greater than outside.

Listen, this a free glimpse into the future: The US is going to be less and less friendly to Christians. If you put your hope into making the US a city set on a hill, you will be down in the dumps. Our greatest threat is not from jack-booted government officials but from within.

This means there are going to be times when we warn you of things that you might not see. OR we will tell you things you don't want to hear. But I would rather be trusted than loved. All of us would be.

The Word of God it wounds and it heals (Isaiah 19). There will be times you just don't want to hear it. But we have nothing else to say. We preach the word whether it be in season (popular, exciting) or out of season (archaic, intolerant).

Love & Care

Everything an elder is supposed to do is under this heading. That is what Peter talks about when he says, "Shepherd the flock that is among you..."

Shepherd means care and care means love. To love you means that elders will put your interests above their own. Usually this care and love is most often seen behind closed doors.

Late night texts.
Walking Hospital halls.
Patient counseling
Tears no one sees
Prayers only God hears
Accompaniment to court hearings
Sitting with sobbing parents
Whispered prayers before a funeral.
Receiving a call that its cancer.
Walking alongside the weak
Weeping with those who weep

And so many more.

We love you but Paul reminds us that someone else loves you more,

"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." Acts 20:28

We love you but we have not died for you. We would do anything for you but there many things we can't do for you. Jesus is the chief elder. We are under-shepherds.

No elder however gifted has:

- Sweat blood
- Crown of thorns pressed
- Beaten to expose internal organs
- Taken the place of sinners
- Carried wrath

- Became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God

An elder is called to a lot but not that stuff.

But every elder MUST always talk about the one who:

- Sweat blood
- Crown of thorns pressed
- Beaten to expose internal organs
- Taken the place of sinners
- Carried wrath
- Became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God

You will live with Jesus forever and you will have us as elders for a brief time. Our lives and yours are a vapor. A quick and passing thing. Jesus has risen to an indestructible life.

We are just under-shepherds, weaker than you think. Less confident than you think. We want very much to show you Jesus again and again and again and be forgotten.

We may serve you with tears and sweat but we have not purchased you. We do not own you. This is not our church.

An elder:

Is a pastor is an overseer
He must have character
IS a Shepherd

4. An elder: He will give an account

“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.” Hebrews 13:17

Every elder will give an account of how he shepherded the Lord’s church to Jesus himself.

I imagine looking into the eyes of the risen one—those eyes of fire—that face that radiates grace and truth and hear him ask for an account of how I served you.

I can imagine he would say something like—how did you care for my people my beloved people those that I died for at Center Church?

Did you lord your authority over them?
Did you shrink from unpopular themes?
Did you build up the weak?
Did you chase the wandering?

Did you challenge the idle?
Did you tickle their eyes or burn their hearts?
Did you protect them from themselves & false teachers?
Did you challenge their idols?
Did you love me most in front of them?
Did you try to be their savior?
Did you pray for them?
Did you train them?
Did you warn them of the dangers in the world?
Did you tell them the love of money was a snare?
Did you see to their security or your comfort?
Did you warn them of the perils of comfort?
Did you fight legalism?
Did you confront license?
Was Grace amazing to you?
Did you work hard to be a faithful Biblical workman?
Did you work harder for them not to think too highly of you?
Did you love me more than them?
Did you say hard things that they could only appreciate in eternity?

All elders will give an account not to you, but to our savior. All elders ultimately serve him—not any church.

An elder = pastor
An elder has character
An elder is a shepherd
An elder will give an account

Welcome Steve and Jeff—

I am going to ask Steve and Jeff a series of questions in your hearing. It will seem formal, but this is an important moment. This carries the formality of a wedding. They are binding themselves to us.

After then I will ask you 4 questions.

1. Do you promise to shepherd the flock of God not under compulsion but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge but being an example to the flock? (1 Pet. 5:1-4)
2. Do you promise to faithfully guard the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you an overseer, and do you promise to protect that flock from false teaching, division, and dissension? (Acts 20:28-31)
3. Do you promise to care for the flock of God, not as a hireling, but as an under shepherd of the Great Shepherd, caring for his sheep as the precious ones for whom he died? (Ezek. 34)
4. Do you, in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and this congregation, promise to preach the Word in season and out of season, and do you promise to

reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience, enduring suffering, while remaining sober-minded in all of your preaching and teaching, and will you do the work of an evangelist among those whom God has given you charge? (2 Tim. 4:1-5)

5. Do you declare sincerely before God that you believe all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith fully agree with the Scriptures? Do you own that Statement as the statement and confession of your faith? And do you promise to teach and defend these doctrines in public and private?
6. Do you promise further that if in the future you come to have reservations about any of these doctrines, you will share these reservations with your eldership and the Regional Assembly of Elders?
7. Do you promise to keep a close watch on yourself and to walk humbly before others, to be self-suspicious of your own motives, to invite criticism from others, and to make yourself accountable to those whom God has put in your life?
8. Do you submit without exception to the explicitly mandated practices of the Sovereign Grace Book of Church Order, affirming that that form of government is a wise and suitable application of Scriptural principles?
9. Do you promise to walk in a manner worthy of the gospel and to show yourself in all respects, in action and in speech, to be a model of good works, integrity, and dignity so that neither the church, nor our Savior Jesus Christ, nor the gospel may be brought into reproach? (Titus 2:7-8)
10. Do you promise to continually seek the gifts of the Spirit that you might serve God's people, not in the energy of the flesh, but in the power of the Holy Spirit and to carry out your ministry without fear of man?

To the church:

1. Do you, the people of Center Church, receive Steve and Jeff as your pastors?
2. Do you promise to receive the word of truth from them with meekness and love and to submit to them in the due biblical exercise of their leadership?
3. Do you promise to supply them with whatever material support they may need to fulfill their ministry among you?
4. Do you promise to encourage them in their labors and to assist their ministry and leadership for your spiritual edification, the evangelization of the lost, and the promotion of God's glory?

PRAY—Lay hands on and commission Jeff/Steve