

XXV. Timeless Truth for Timely Topics in Biblical Perspective

What Does the Bible Say?

“How Christ Governs His Church”

Acts 20:17–34

Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

November 8, 2015 – Evening sermon

This is one of these topical sermons that is expositional in that a number of texts will be marshalled together to deal with our subject matter of how Christ governs the church. I will do two more sermons on how Christ governs – how Christ governs the state and how Christ governs the family. I believe what is clear from the Bible is that God made man to live in those three spheres – the sphere of the family, then because of the fall the sphere of the state and then because of redemption the sphere of the church. God made man, male and female, with their children of their families to live in family. Then because of the fall God introduced government to restrain evil and then because of redemption, the Redeemer has purchased His Church. So how does Christ call us to be governed in those three spheres?

In this study we'll look at how Christ governs the church. This is a subject that I know does not have an exotic appeal so it doesn't call a lot of people to attention but it's important. It is a secondary doctrine. It's not that it isn't important but some are more important than others and that's why Paul said he delivered to us of first importance – the Gospel. So if there are some things of first importance then that means there are some of secondary importance. This just means they're not as important. Secondary doctrines are those things we can miss and get wrong and still get to heaven. Church government belongs in this category so that means you can get church government wrong. You don't have to be a Presbyterian to get to heaven but you'll lose out on a lot of fun. Then perhaps you'll get to be a Presbyterian when you get to heaven (smile).

I say those things half-jokingly because I wasn't born into being a Presbyterian. I came into it by conviction. In my preparation for ministry I was a reformed Baptist and now as soon as I say I'm a Presbyterian they say 'that means you believe in election, predestination and the sovereignty of God.' Yes I do but that is not what distinguishes a Presbyterian. I believed in all that long before I became a Presbyterian in fact you can go check the Philadelphia Confession of 1743 from the Reformed Baptists or London's Confession that was Spurgeon's confession of 1689. You can't get stronger statements on predestination and election. Read the 39 Articles of the historic Anglican Church which is strong reformation theology.

Presbyterian is specifically looking at the matter of government. The word *Presbyter* is the word for elder. Presbyterian means government by elders. Why do we have elders? Where are the bishops? Where are the stewards? The Bible talks about all these, doesn't it? This matter of church government is important and hopefully I'll clarify some of this for you. You'll see why I think this whole matter of church government is important for the well-being of God's people and longevity of faithfulness in the church. It doesn't ensure it but it certainly is an asset to it. So what were the things that convinced me to become a Presbyterian?

I will give you two major reasons I became a Presbyterian. One is when I studied the Bible I saw this need for accountability and the Biblical admonition to be accountable. It says 'submit yourself to one another.' It seems to me if we're supposed to submit ourselves to each other then there ought to be a system of government from Christ that is given to His church that facilitates, allows and encourages where everybody can be submitted to somebody. As I looked at the various forms of church government I only saw one form of church government where

every pastor, elder, leader and member in every church was accountable to somebody and therefore had to submit to somebody. That was in the Presbyterian Church.

Then I began to see in the Bible everywhere it had Presbyter in Greek and translated in the Bible as elder and church, elder was plural and church was singular. I had more work to do but that was clearly drawing me. The Bible says ‘if any among you are sick let them call for the elders (plural) of the church (singular).’ Paul called for the elders at the church in Ephesus as well in the same way. Paul appointed elders in every church in the city. So what about a plurality of elders in the church and what do elders actually do? What do deacons do? So what is this matter of church government?

If you are an evangelical you have encountered one of three types of church government in the church. One is the bishop system. In this system you would do a pyramid. At the top would be the leadership and at the bottom would be the membership or the fellowship. So it’s a top down authority structure. The ones that use the bishop system are the Roman Catholic which are the most consistent because they have two equal authorities – magisterial authority which are co-regents in the Bible – and out of the church comes the notion of papal infallibility when the pope speaks ex-cathedra from the throne. So there are the popes, the cardinals, the bishops, priests and the various orders of ministry in this pyramid structure. In the Church of England, the Anglican Church there is the same kind of structure working up to an arch bishop. The Methodist Church has a hierarchical form of government as well. Spin offs from the Methodist church are some of the Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God that are set up this way as well. The Lutheran church is this way as well. I could go on with churches that have the bishop system. These kind of reflect national governments of monarchy.

Then there is the reflection of democracy which is a congregational form of government. Bible, Baptist and Independent churches would all say we are a congregational style form of government. Theoretically you kind of flip the pyramid the other way in this style of church government. This is where the membership gives direction to the leadership. In the congregational system it is illogical to think that the sheep are going to lead the shepherd. In this system one of two things usually happens and that is the pastor becomes the unannounced bishop of the church or an unelected, un-ordained group of people like an oligarchy get control of the church and kind of run it from the back room. I’ve been there done that and it just doesn’t work.

Secondly is the bishop system. My problem with this is that you not only get the strengths of that man but you get the weaknesses of that man as well. That man needs to be accountable and there is no one for him to be accountable to. As I look in the Bible I don’t see any singular leadership in any one church. There is always plurality of leadership. I know I still haven’t really answered the bishop part of this so let’s start in our study by first looking at Philippians 1. How does Christ govern His Church?

Philippians 1:1–2 says [1] *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* What do you see here? Here is a mature church that is giving to support Paul and Paul is writing back to them. He wants all of the members of this church to read it but he especially wants the leadership of the overseers and deacons to read it. In the King James Version the word overseers is translated as bishops. Why was it translated bishops? It was because when they translated the Bible into English that was the best English word to point out monarchical rule. So they would translate it *episcopas* – *episcopal* which is government by bishops. *Episcopas* is actually a contracted word in the Greek where *epi* means over and *scopas* is scope for sight so the right translation should be oversight – overseers of the

church. So there are overseers at the church at Philippi and notice it is plural. It doesn't say bishop at the church of Philippi.

So there are not only overseers but there are deacons plural. So a mature church should have a plurality of leadership – overseers – and of diaconal servant leadership – a plurality of the two. Overseer is being treated here like the word elder. Where are the Presbyterian overseers or bishops? Here I am. As the pastor of this church I am one of these. The elders in our church fall into this category. The word overseer and elder are interchangeable in your Bible. Not only that sometimes the spiritual leadership of the church is not called simply elders or overseers but sometimes they are called shepherds or pastors or even stewards. Those are not multiple offices in the church but they are multiple titles of the same office in the church.

Why doesn't Jesus use one title for the spiritual oversight of the church? It is because the office is multifaceted in its responsibilities. Because it is multifaceted one of the ways to communicate its multifaceted responsibilities is by multiple titles. All are assigned to the same office/officer and those who occupy the office. If what I'm saying is not supported by God's Word then dismiss it and go find bishops but I think in this study you'll see that elders are stewards, bishops, overseers, pastors and shepherds. Let's see this in Acts 20. Here Paul is giving a charge to the elders at the church of Ephesus.

Acts 20:17–18a says [17] *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:* So he is speaking to or addressing the Presbyters of the church, the session of the church at Ephesus. I'm not going to go through everything he says to them but look how he interchanges the terms. Acts 20:28 says [28] *Pay careful attention to yourselves(as **shepherds**) 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.* He is now addressing their responsibilities whereas he was talking about their positions as rulers, elders in the church. They are to oversee, watch over the church and then he tells them to shepherd the flock of God. As shepherds they are to take care of the flock, grow the grass, defend and tend the flock. They are to be elders, in the position of ruling as shepherd elders. So in one address three different titles are given to the same group of people.

Now let's look at Titus 1. Here you see qualifications for the office of elder. Paul sends Titus to reclaim proper leadership to the churches at Crete. Titus 1:5–9 says [5] *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you—[6] if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. [7] For an **overseer**, as God's **steward**, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, [8] but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. [9] He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

They are to oversee the policies, processes and people of the church. They are to shepherd the flock of God and provide nourishment for them, care for them, tend them and defend them. They are to be stewards for God has handed this church off to you. It is required of a steward to be faithful and to hold fast to the church's message, mission and ministry. That is what an elder is supposed to be and do. So you have this one office with multiple titles.

You are seeing what elders do and we're in the middle of an election. I Timothy 3:1 says [1] *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.* It is not the aspiring that is the fine work. He is aspiring to the office for a fine work. What is the work? The work is to oversee the flock, the policies, the processes and to shepherd the

people. That is why the shepherd has a staff. It has a point and a crook. It has a crook to rescue the sheep when they wander. It has a point to defend the sheep from anyone that would come against them. They are to tend and defend the flock. Elders are to be stewards. God has handed something off to them. Be faithful to hand it off to the next generation and those who come after you. That is what you want to find – those with a heart to oversee, shepherd and minister by protecting the leadership of the church and to protect the leadership to protect the membership of the church.

Peter emphasizes this in I Peter 5. Here Peter has a very specific word he wants to give to the elders. He is an Apostle but he is also functioning as an elder. I Peter 5:1–4 says *[1] 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.*

What is the emphasis of those multiple titles that Peter ceases upon? Shepherding is one of them. Do you remember when Peter was restored after denying Jesus three times and then he confessed Jesus three times at the Sea of Galilee? That was in John 21. What did Jesus say every time Peter said ‘You know I love You’? Jesus said “Tend My sheep, feed My flock” and it never left him. I believe the primary call upon elders of the church is to shepherd the flock of God and that is what Paul brings an emphasis too as well. He tells the elders the people of God need them to shepherd them. Teach them rightly. Feed the sheep. Protect them for that is what God has called you to do. That is the emphasis he places upon them.

I’ve been in the ministry with the Presbyterian Church a long time and I think our favorite verse is I Corinthians 14:40 which says *[40] But all things should be done decently and in order.* The tendency is to see the eldership as a board of directors than a gathering of shepherds. I don’t want to diminish this for the elders are responsible before God and that’s why that word overseer is there. They are responsible for the policies and processes but all the people. How do you oversee the people? It is by shepherding the people and that is what God has called us to be. If I’m missing it then bring me the Bible. Show me from the Bible if I’m missing it.

There is a segment of the elders that not only shepherd but there is another responsibility and that is to work hard at preaching and teaching. We have the ruling shepherding elders and then there are the teaching elders. Let’s look at I Timothy 5:17–18 which says *[17] Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor (work hard) in preaching and teaching. [18] For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”* So to support this premise there are some elders that get a double honor. Honor number one is the office of elder. Leadership and ordained leadership is not a right. It is an honor bestowed because of the calling of God and the progress of sanctification in someone’s life. They are gifted to rule over, watch over and shepherd the church of God but there are some who get a second honor.

That honor is support in the office. Something so sacred as the tithe is used to support this honor. Aiken put his hands on the tithe in Jericho and it cost him his life. The tithe is the Lord’s and if we really mean that it is sacred. So the elders in their oversight of the church are being instructed by Paul to set aside a certain amount of that tithe to support a certain group of elders and those who work hard at preaching and teaching. Why? Is it because they are above

you? No for all elders are equal but it's because of what they do. Faith comes by hearing and preaching is so important that God says He is going to take some of the tithe to support those whom He has gifted and called to preach and you called them as a congregation. So elders support them so they can give the time they need for the preaching and teaching of the Word. Sermons don't just happen. They take preparation. So when there is someone who is called as a teaching elder or a pastor teacher in the church then support them so that they can work hard at preaching and teaching. They get into the Word so that the Word gets into them and the Word gets through them to God's people.

So we have two categories of elders – the teaching elders and ruling elders – and both are equal before the Lord. One group is supported so that they can give themselves to a very special function in the church which is the preaching and teaching ministry of the Word and that pulls the trigger for everything else. That is why Paul said “I did not come to baptize but to preach.” He isn't saying that baptism is not important but that the preaching of the Word sets the thermostat for everything. If you lose the pulpit everything down stream is gone. When there was a complaint that the widows weren't being properly cared for they said ‘we must not do this but we must do this’ and this leads me to another office.

This is the office of deacons. How did the office of deacon come about? Let's look at Acts 6. The office of deacon evolves in the midst of a controversy. Acts 6:1–7 says *[1] Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. [2] And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. [3] Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. [4] But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” [5] And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. [6] These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. [7] And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*

I believe this is an example of Satan's infiltration of the church causing a fervor among the membership against the leadership, very much the way when Moses led the people out and all the grumbling came back against him. The church is growing like crazy here and do you think Satan is going to retreat? No, he is going to try and find a way to attack. Here he tries to infiltrate the leadership and the membership. Basically in this passage they're complaining that they are being led by some racists. They are prejudice and partial. All that money is going to their widows and none to ours. So the twelve heard it and with great maturity of leadership they realize they aren't racists. The problem is how big their church is there and people are being added every day from 3,000 to 5,000 and that's just counting the men. Here is a church of about 18,000 to 20,000 with only twelve elders. They are leading the church with prayer and the Word and the likely widows they would know about are Jewish ones because they are all Jews.

They were wrong that they weren't racist but they were right in that they weren't doing a good job at the mercy ministry for all. They had a solution. They raised up seven deacons and here are the qualifications and they will be in charge of the tables. The congregation liked the idea so seven are selected and ordained and the church keeps growing. The problem was solved

through good leadership and that was the birth of the New Testament deacons. So what do they do? They do three things in the text.

One is they administered the tables. The word table in the Greek means bank. Jesus turned over the money tables, the banks that they were profiteering from in the temple. So he is saying that the deacons will take care of the resources – the stewardship of the church, the administration of the church – and lead the mercy ministry of the church so that we will not neglect prayer and the Word. We are back to the importance of prayer and the Word and shepherding. If we give more attention to administration, stewardship and mercy ministry then we'll have to neglect prayer and the Word. Two times they say this and if you neglect prayer and the Word there won't be any resources to administer and there won't be a heart or outreach to do mercy ministry. To make sure there are resources we have to stay on what the elders do, focused on the lifelines of prayer and the Word. This frees up the elders to shepherd and oversee because the deacons are administering, doing stewardship and leading mercy.

I have stepped into many churches where the pastors are doing the work of the elders and the elders are doing the work of deacons and the deacons are just kind of doing some work. You don't have to be ordained to hand out a bulletin or take up the offering or watch the parking lot. Those are good things for deacons to do but why do we ordain them? It is because they have authority to carry out the policies established by the elders which frees up the elders to shepherd the flock which frees up the teaching elders to focus on prayer and the Word and the teaching and preaching of the Word of God for the congregation. What are the teaching elders supposed to do? Let's look at Ephesians 4.

Ephesians 4:11–14 says [11] *And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, [13] until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, [14] so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*

In other words, how does the church get mature? How does the church function as the body? It is because Christ the head has determined how it's to be governed and as He governs the church through shepherding elders and deacons He also has these pastor teachers. Look back at verse 11. The Apostles are gone for they are the ones who were eye witnesses of Christ from His baptism to His resurrection and ascension. The only exception to this was the Apostle Paul and that is why he calls himself the apostle that was untimely born. Prophets are gone for God has given us His Word. The Apostles and Prophets give us the Word. Evangelists spread the Word and pastor (shepherd) teachers equip with the Word.

Chronologically they would start off with Prophets in this verse but they don't because an Apostle can be a Prophet, an evangelist, a pastor (shepherd) and a teacher. Can a Prophet be an Apostle? No, because they would have had to been an eye witness of the resurrected Christ. A Prophet can be an evangelist and we have an example of this in Jonah. A Prophet could also be a pastor teacher. A pastor teacher equips the saints to do the work of the ministry and those who minister are those in the congregation. You minister worship to God, the Gospel to the world, love to one another, and small group disciple making. You are the ministers and I am supposed to be the equipment manager. I am so weak and incompetent that we have to get another 13 pastors to help me out here so that pastoral staff extends and expands and that is the way it is supposed to function. That's how Christ governs its church for its well-being.

People ask me if I believe the church is an organization or an organism and my answer is yes. The body of Christ is an organism and not just an organization. It is also an organized organism, just like your own body. The head, Christ, causes us to grow up. It grows up because of the skeleton but that is internal but the government of the church internally is there to guide us upward toward Jesus and to bring unity out of diversity with the Word of God and the Spirit of God as people stay on the mission and in ministry together.

The Greek word for church is ecclesia which means assembly, the called together ones. The Presbyterian Church believes the Bible teaches the church meets locally, regionally and nationally. The local church is very clear. Briarwood is a local church pastored by Harry Reeder, helped out with a pastoral staff who report to the elders of the church and the elders of the church are served by the deacons of the church. The local church functions with people being submissive to one another but we are not an independent church for we are submissive to other churches in our Presbytery. Timothy was ordained through the laying on of hands from the Presbytery. Those are the churches in a region who have agreed to our confession and have submitted themselves to it. So we are united to them in that Presbytery.

We see an example of this in the book of Revelation. There is the church local and then the church is being described as seven churches. Also in Revelation there is a vision of Jesus where He is standing in the middle of seven lamp stands which represent the churches. Each church is called a church and the seven churches are called a church. That is the regional church in the area and they were all within 35 miles of each other. They have responsibilities to each other. If Jesus is in the middle of seven lamp stands what does that tell you about the seven churches in that configuration? The seven churches have to be in a circle if Jesus is in the middle and that means each church has direct access to Jesus. Then they have a relationship with each other and together have a relationship with Jesus. So they can hold each other accountable and encourage one another. That's why He deals with each church individually and all seven of them together.

In Acts 15 there were two or three theological problems so they brought representatives, elders not simply to a Presbytery but they brought all together in Jerusalem and there was a General Assembly of the church. The church assembled and handled its issues and then the elders went back and reported what was recommended. So we have a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America every June to handle the issues brought there by the Presbytery and Presbyteries bring what the local churches have brought to them. God has made for us this wonderful system of accountability, nurturing and responsibility. Every church in our denomination can send two elders to every Presbytery meeting and all of their teaching elders. If you're a bigger church you get to send more so we get to send ten elders along with our teaching elders to the General Assembly.

Another illustration is if one elder thinks another is off target in his teaching then he goes to him like is says in Matthew 18. If the one thinks his teaching is right then the other can bring one or two more with him the next time he confronts him trying to win him. The elder is still convinced he is right in his teaching so the other elder can appeal to the session and the session has specific things that it is supposed to do. When the session has done what it is supposed to do they can go back to the elder that brought it before them and tell him the other is okay because they haven't departed from the faith. If that one elder thinks the session is wrong then he can appeal to the Presbytery. If the Presbytery sides with the session then that one can appeal to the General Assembly but that one elder has all of that available to them because of accountability, submission and all those things available for us.

Every time you get the strength of one person you also get their weaknesses and that's why God has a singular head of the church, Jesus Christ and then He entrusts leadership through plurality of elders and deacons. There are ministers of the Word who are shepherding elders and there are deacons. They are supposed to work together according to their roles and responsibilities. The congregation is to uphold them in prayer and receive from them their leadership so that they lead with joy and not with despair. As we move forward we are to be like minded with our other fellow churches in our area and support one another, work together and hold each other accountable before the Lord. So I as a pastor have to give a record by turning in a report to my elders every month and every year to the Presbytery. This church has to turn in a report to this Presbytery. Our Presbytery has to have their records reviewed at the General Assembly so that we're submissive to one another.

Is this a fool proof system? No because there are too many fools in it but it's the best system I know and it's the most faithful to the Word of God and principles I can find. By God's grace it can continue and continues to move ahead with faithfulness. A church that is committed to covenant theology, a church that is connectional and committed to our confession not that it is inerrant but dealt with by the Word of God we can tell the world what we believe. To be a member of this church you don't have to embrace the Westminster Confession of Faith, you only have to have a credible confession of faith but to lead this church you have to embrace it as that system of doctrine most faithfully taught for God's people. There is so much more I could say on this but I don't have time now.

In the Old Testament we had Prophet, Priest and King and the reflection in the New Testament was the prophet is reflected in the teaching elder, the priest is reflected in the deacons and the king is reflected in our elders (shepherd rulers of the church). In our next study we'll look at how Christ governs the state. We live in a very interesting situation. I had said when one has a problem then they can appeal it to the session, the Presbytery and the General Assembly and that there are three kinds of functional offices and every church gets two representatives and more if it larger. Does that sound familiar? There is a reason why when America started someone in England stood up and said "Cousin America has just run off with a Presbyterian parson." The man that put our Constitution together was James Madison who studied under John Witherspoon along with 50 other members of the Constitutional Congress.

You live in the only system of national government I know that borrowed its system of government from the church. The Episcopal Church borrowed its government from a monarchical system where it resided. Congregational borrows from the notion of democracy – rule by majority. The Presbyterian system is government by confession and covenant and a voluntary relationship. Then because all men are fallen we have checks and balances everywhere and we have systems of appeals. So they put this system into our nation but there are more things you need to know about that government and I'll give you that, Lord willing from Romans 13, in the next study. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You so much for the privilege to be in Your Word. Thank You for the wonderful way You have designed Your church as the head of the church. You are the Redeemer, Protector, Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd, the Head of the church and You have designed how the church is to be governed. Give us where we fall short and help us to keep growing before You and in submission to one another. Then Father govern Your people well through sinners saved by grace called to lead – protect us from those who need to lead and give us those You have

called to lead who need to fulfill their call before You. Father, please protect this flock and I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.