

Planting Presbyterian Churches

Exodus 3:1–18, Acts 14:19–23

Some people’s eyes glaze over when they hear about biblical church government. It does not seem as exciting as evangelism, miracles, the gifts of the Spirit, or end-times prophecies. Yet the Bible has much to say about church government. Why? Because Jesus is the good Shepherd, and he cares about his sheep. He knows that sheep get along best when they are gathered into flocks. The sheep that is wandering alone in the wilderness is likely to get lost or fall prey to wolves. The good Shepherd seeks the lost sheep and brings him back to the safety of the flock.

There are three basic types of church government: *prelacy*, where a whole denomination is ruled by one man (a bishop or pope); *independency*, where a local congregation is ruled by one man (usually the pastor); and *presbyterianism* (small *p*), where the congregation is ruled by elders chosen by the people, and members have the right of appeal to higher church courts. The Bible is clear that “all authority” has been given to Jesus Christ alone (Matt. 28:18); anyone else who tries to exercise sole authority in the church is a usurper. Christ has no “vicar” who rules in Christ’s place in the world. All human authority is derivative and limited; ultimately, the only supreme court is the court of heaven where Christ will rule eternally. To understand this principle is the basis of true liberty. Only in Christ is a people “free indeed” (John 8:36). If any human authority says, “You must obey me unquestioningly,” that is tyranny. The apostle Peter—styled by some as the first pope—said, “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3 ESV). To “domineer” is seek to usurp the place that belongs to Jesus Christ.

In our New Testament text, missionaries Paul and Barnabas have been run out of two cities—Pisidian Antioch and Iconium—for preaching the gospel. In a third, smaller city—Lystra—Paul was attacked by a mob, stoned, dragged out of the city and left for dead, but when the new converts gathered around him to pray, he miraculously rose up and went back into the city in which he had been attacked, where he spent the night, and left for Derbe the next morning. Let us consider our text this morning under three points: *strengthening converts*, *organizing churches* and *appointing elders*, first,

1. Strengthening converts

The historian Luke records that when Paul and Barnabas “had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples.” This is an absolutely remarkable statement. What courage! What persistence! What tenacity! To return to places they had been run out of, and where Paul had been attacked and stoned by a frenzied mob. Clearly, these missionaries were not motivated by a desire for glory,

fame or ease. They were not seeking the good life. They did not travel by private jet and own mansions in affluent suburbs. They were not chauffeured around in fine automobiles. They were motivated by one thing: a desire to be faithful to the Lord who had called them, who himself left the ivory palaces of heaven to come to a sin-cursed earth, to be born of a poor virgin, to live a perfect life, to be our Prophet, Priest and King.

This is the season of the year when many people celebrate the birth of Christ, the incarnation, when “the Word was made flesh.” It is proper to do this as families and individuals, but the Bible does not make this a church holiday; under the New Testament the only holiday (holy day) is the weekly Sabbath, the first day of the week, the day that the church comes together to worship and experience our liberty in Christ. As followers of Christ we set aside our regular labors of the other six days and rest unto the Lord, which is a type of our eternal rest in heaven.

As Paul and Barnabas traveled around the ancient world they told people about Christ, the long-promised Messiah, the second Person of the holy Trinity who was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary and came into this world to be our Savior, to “save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Here is the Holy One of God who went to the cross to die for our sins according to the Scripture, to be buried in a borrowed tomb, and to rise again the third day for our justification. He is the only Savior, and all who put their trust in him are saved eternally. This is the gospel, the “good news.” It was the message proclaimed by Paul and Barnabas, and the message proclaimed in faithful churches today. Do you know that you are a sinner and have no hope of salvation apart from Christ? If so, then commit your life to him today and become part of the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed Christ as they went through Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. Now, they returned to these cities, strengthening the souls of the disciples and exhorting them to continue in the faith. Essentially, what they told them was “You have come to the truth. The Holy Spirit has opened your eyes to the truth of the gospel. You have been brought from darkness to light. ‘This is the way, walk ye in it.’ Don’t stray, don’t turn from the holy commandment given unto you. Resolve to be faithful unto death, and the Lord will give you the crown of life. Don’t ever lose your focus on Christ.”

The church has essentially one message—Christ. The church is commissioned to “go into all the world and preach the gospel” (Mark 16:15). This is the message that every soul the world over needs to hear. The lost need to hear it. The saved need to hear it. New Christians need to hear it. Those who have known the Lord for years need to hear it. “Tell me the old, old story of Jesus and his love.” The church has no authority to teach and preach anything else. “You can save yourself if you try hard enough” is not the gospel. The gospel is not about what *you* can do, it is

about what Christ *has done*. He has done what nobody else can ever do, and that is to save his people from their sins.

It is significant that in the Bible we are compared to sheep. Sheep need a shepherd, and that shepherd is Christ. Sheep are prone to get lost, to stray, to get into trouble. Christ is the good Shepherd. He protects his sheep from wolves, who want to have them for dinner. This is why it is God's will that Christ's sheep be gathered into flocks. God is our Father, but the church is our mother—birthing, nurturing and feeding us. The church must stay on point, preaching the gospel. It must never become distracted from that central message.

Christ's sheep not only need to hear the gospel, but they also need the church. They need the care and supervision and protection of the body. The young sheep need the example and testimony of the older, more experienced sheep. They need to know that if they stay in the church, they will be safe; if they run off, they will get into trouble. There is wisdom in the body. Paul would later write, "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another" (Rom. 15:14). What Paul was saying was that there are gifts within the body that can help people through all the problems they may be going through. The minister cannot do the work of the church alone. There are people that the minister cannot reach, but others in the body can come alongside these people.

One thing that really impresses me about our church is the way that people linger after services to minister to one another. They sincerely want to get to know one another, pray for one another, share with one another, counsel one another, care for one another. Being part of a church is important to your spiritual health. I've been in the ministry for many years. I've seen many young people, especially young men, flounder if they are not a part of the church. If you are a new Christian, don't flounder! Don't be a sheep going astray. Let the body help you return to the Shepherd and Bishop of your soul, Jesus Christ. Attend church every Lord's day unless providentially hindered. Make it your highest priority on the Lord's day, even if you have to sacrifice sleep. Come to church to hear the gospel, then stay and enjoy the fellowship of the saints. God has so constituted us as human beings that we need church fellowship as much as we need family. You sorely need the means of grace—the Word, the sacraments, prayer. These are available in the church of Jesus Christ and nowhere else. Do not neglect these. Sometimes people will say to me, "I know of such and such a couple who read the Bible together and pray together and choose not to be part of a church, and they seem to get along fine." Now reading the Bible together and praying together as a couple is a good thing, but the Bible tells us that Christ is building his *church*. This is the main thing that he is doing in this age. You can't obey Scripture if you stand apart from the church. You need the fellowship of the church. Here is a hospital for the sick and

broken. Here is a place of untold blessing as we experience our true humanity. God has constituted us as social beings. As the singer said, “People who need people are the happiest people in the world.” God never intended us to be alone, to live as recluses, to figure out all truth on our own. We are all prone to self-deception. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” So we need the church. Do not deprive yourself of the blessing of being a part of Christ’s body. “There’s a thrill that I feel when I get together with God’s wonderful people.” Experience it! Paul and Barnabas reminded the saints that “we must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.” Yes, we will all surely weather the storms of life. We should never pretend that once we come to Christ, everything will be rosy. But Christ’s sheep are safest within his flock.

As Paul and Barnabas traveled back to the places where they had evangelized, they focused on strengthening converts. Second, they were

2. Organizing churches

We read that “when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” This is really amazing, when you think of it. Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by Christ, through his Spirit, to spread his gospel. In chapter 13:2 we were told that “the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’” That work was specifically to take the gospel to the Gentiles. With these words the foreign missionary movement was launched. The church’s focus was to be no longer inward but outward, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Now the population of the earth was a lot less than it is today, but still, this was a huge task. Where to begin? What to focus on? When we have a big job to do, the task can seem overwhelming. The coward within us wants to say, “There’s no way I can possibly do that; let’s just go watch TV.” But God has promised that he will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able, but with the temptation he will also make a way of escape, that we may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13). What does he want us to do? To take one step, to do the next thing. Paul and Barnabas were just two men, and they had a whole world to reach. Where to start? They started where God in his providence would lead them. Here were gifted men, men with unique knowledge and insights. By God’s grace they had seen converts in four localities. Yet they could not stay in each place permanently, but they had Christ’s promise, “I, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen.” So what did they do? They organized churches. This is significant. They didn’t just pass out Bibles and say, “Now you just read this and figure things out for yourself.” Rather, they “appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” What this means in context is that in each of the four cities and towns where they had made

converts, Paul and Barnabas established churches, commended the people to the Lord, *and then left*.

This must have been traumatic, not just to the missionaries, but to the individual congregations. They must have thought, *How can we get along without Paul and Barnabas?* These were the men who had brought them to the faith; these were the experts, the men everyone looked up to. Yet these early Christians believed in the power of the Spirit of Christ working in the churches. The missionaries themselves might leave, but the Spirit would not leave. As Jesus had said, “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7). Brothers and sisters, our trust must be in the Christ who said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you; lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world. Amen.” Till the end of time the Spirit of Christ will remain with the church, nurturing and protecting it with divine power.

What can we take away from this? *The work of missions is the establishment of churches*. The Spirit of Christ works through the church to accomplish God’s purpose in the world. The work of the church is to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, baptize them, build them up in the faith, and send some out as missionaries to repeat the process. Everywhere the gospel goes, churches are to be established. Paul and Barnabas’s work was the work of planting churches—particularly *presbyterian* churches, as we will see in our third point,

3. Appointing elders

Back to the text: “when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Let’s take a closer look at this text.

First of all, notice that the word “elders” is plural. This is very important. Nowhere does the Bible authorize a church to have only a single elder who exercises sole authority in the church. There was a time a number of years ago when, in the providence of God, this congregation was left with no ruling elders, only the pastor. So what we did, according to our *Book of Church Order*, was to petition the presbytery, the body of the regional church, to assign us a couple of adjunct elders, that is, ordained elders from other churches who would come alongside us and assist us for a time. And this worked out very well, until we were able to ordain two ruling elders. Now, thankfully, we are blessed with four ruling elders, and we pray for more. But the important point is that there must be a *plurality* of elders.

What is an elder? A man who is mature in the faith and able to give leadership to the church. The book of 1 John addresses three categories of believers: “little children,” “young men” and “fathers.” “Little children” are new converts. They know the basics of the gospel. They know that their sins have been forgiven on

behalf of Christ. They know their Father in heaven. “Young men” are strong. The word of God abides in them and they have overcome the wicked one—the devil. “Fathers” understand biblical doctrine; they have “known him who is from the beginning.” Moreover, they are able to beget sons and daughters in the faith. The apostle Paul wrote one of his letters “to Timothy, a true son in the faith.” An elder is a man who is mature in the faith. He is able to understand and communicate sound doctrine. He is able to lead people to Christ.

In the biblical context “elders” are men. Ordinarily they are to be the husband of one wife, though if his wife were to die, a man would not automatically be disqualified to be an elder. It is also possible for a single man who lives a chaste and exemplary life to be an elder. But the Bible nowhere teaches that elders must take a vow of celibacy, that they must remain unmarried.

We read that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church.” The word for “appointed elders” is very interesting. It is the word χειροτονέω, which means to choose or elect by raising hands. χειροτονέω is related to our word *chiropractor*, which refers to a doctor who heals a patient by pressing with his hands to bring misaligned joints into proper alignment. The word χειροτονέω implies that even though Paul was an apostle—a man personally chosen by the Lord to preach his gospel to the Gentiles, a man having apostolic authority—elders were never imposed on the churches from above; but the people themselves, having been properly instructed, chose as elders men in whom they had confidence that they were men of good Christian character and gifts to serve the body. Elders were appointed with the raising of hands. And so it is today. Elders and pastors are never imposed on a church. Rather, they are chosen by the people.

Elders are to be godly men. Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 set forth the qualifications for an elder. He must be “blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well . . . Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside.” The Bible emphasizes that elders must have good character. They must also be “able to teach,” that is, teach sound doctrine. They must know their Bible and be able to give good counsel.

Scripture divides the office of elder into two types: ministers of the word, and ruling elders: “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:17). Notice the word “especially.” Paul speaks of “elders who rule well”—that is, ruling elders. Then there are “those who labor in the word and doctrine.” “Doctrine” (διδασκαλία) means teaching; teaching elders are ministers of the word and sacrament. According to our *Book of Church Order* teaching elders are men who show competency and proficiency in knowledge of the Scriptures, the original

languages of Hebrew and Greek, theology and church history. They are ordained by the presbytery. On the other hand, ruling elders are ordained by the local session.

So in a biblical church there is a plurality of elders—ideally, a minister of the word and ruling elders. One reason the contemporary church is so weak is its failure to understand and implement the biblical form of government, particularly the scriptural office of ruling elder. Christ, the head of the church, instituted the office of ruling elder for the spiritual welfare of his people. Only a biblical view of eldership will enable the church to avoid the two extremes of *dictatorship*, on the one hand, and *individualism*, on the other.¹

So here in our New Testament text we find Paul and Barnabas ordaining elders. Essentially, they are planting *presbyterian* churches. Where did presbyterian church government come from? From the Old Testament! Remember our reading from the book of Exodus. God had just revealed himself to Moses by his name “I AM WHO I AM.” Ultimately, this is the Lord Jesus Christ. “‘I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,’ says the Lord, ‘who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty’” (Rev. 1:8). This God reveals himself to Moses and sends him to Egypt. And then he tells him, “Go and gather the *elders* of Israel (זְקֵנֵי אֵלֶּיךָ).” He is to tell them that the LORD—Yahweh—had appeared to him and promised that he would bring Israel up out of Egypt. Moses and “the *elders* of Israel” were to go to Pharaoh and say to him, “The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; ... now, please, let us go three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.”

Two times in our Old Testament reading today there are references to the elders of Israel. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, yet they were a distinct people with recognized elders—men who were mature in the faith and looked up to by the people. When Israel was established in the Promised Land, it continued to have elders. Many of these elders were a part of the Sanhedrin or Great Council which we see functioning in the New Testament. For over 1500 years the covenant people had had recognized elders. They were exhorted, “Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the company of the *elders*” (Ps. 107:32). Worship took place under the oversight of elders.

So when Paul and Barnabas established churches in Asia Minor—what is known today as Turkey—they ordained elders. These were godly men chosen by the people by the raising up of hands.

Yet today, many churches do not have elders! Some that have them, choose them on the basis that they are successful businessmen, or that they have a lot of

¹ Danny Olinger, “*Ordained Servant at Thirty*,” https://opc.org/os.html?article_id=941, citing Gregory E. Reynolds

influence, not on the basis of godly Christian character and knowledge of the faith. This is wrong, and it results in God's people not being properly protected.

Paul and Barnabas revisited the places that had borne fruit, planting Presbyterian churches. *Strengthening converts, organizing churches* and *appointing elders* is the proper work of the church. Faithful churches do that, because they, like the Chief Shepherd, care about the sheep. O dear flock of God, do not wander from the Shepherd. Amen.