https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iLp9cq9O3Y&feature=youtu.be

In Acts 13 we read about Apostle Paul and the four other missionaries. This exemplary leadership team of five reduces itself voluntarily by forty percent sending two of them out. This is what is called the first missionary journey. This is where we find our first very clear teaching on elders.

There is a lot of teaching on eldership in the Old Testament, but it is hard to make it into a doctrine—it is more of a culture. Every town had elders. Naturally, they were the older people, the ones with more wisdom. They tended to be the men, though there were wise women as well. They sat in the gate. The gate was like the court; they rendered their decisions there and kept an eye on things. They were definitely the leaders in those towns.

What we read Acts 14:23, after the end of the first missionary journey, that they “appointed elders for them in every church; with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” It does not tell us how they appointed elders, whether it was more of a ratification—that is, the locals selected them and Paul and Barnabas said, “Yes, we are with you there”—or something else. There is remarkably little about the appointment of eldership, and there is zero in the New Testament about the appointment of an evangelist or a deacon, though we do have our traditions to rush in and fill the void. We have filled that vacuum nicely.

Soon after these churches were planted, team leadership was established. For a long time, I believe a young church would typically be planted by one person or maybe a team, maybe two people like we did in London, but after a while, one-man leadership is not appropriate. It may be appropriate for a very small church or a very new church. (Of course you could be an old church and very small; if that is the case that one man probably is not the one who should be there.) In the New Testament they made sure that there were elders in the lead position very quickly.

This may sound a little shocking, but I think what we have come up with in our movement is a system that almost guarantees there will be no elderships in any city. We are in hundreds of cities and hardly any of them have elders. Many of those churches are ten or twenty years old. Is it because we set the bar too high or is it because there is competition? Or maybe we are doing something wrong. Again, these are these are my thoughts, but we do see that in the New Testament they appointed eldership quickly. We see this also in the book of Titus, but here in Acts 13, I think we are just dealing with a period of months. It is not years, and it is certainly not decades.

I have no problem with one man leading a church of which he is the father, so to speak (1 Corinthians 4:15), if it is the early days and he is the one who reached out to these people and baptized them. But if it remains a one-man leadership for a long time, I think that is very unhealthy. Protracted autocratic church polity is not healthy, and as many of us know from bitter experience, that is way too much pressure on the leader, his spouse, and his family. It is just not meant to be that way; it is meant to be collaborative.

Eldership in the Old Testament, when it was good, was collaborative. It is the same in the New Testament. The congregation knows who its leaders are, so I imagine after that first missionary journey it was not that hard to figure out who should be leading. It is also probable that elders were house church leaders. When we hear that term we may be thinking of those at the bottom of a pyramid of several levels that broadens out at the bottom. In this bottom level are the house church leaders, but we think of the elders as being at the top. Perhaps that kind of hierarchy, call it a discipling tree or call it what you will, is just not in the New Testament and we are reading it into the passage. I believe it is quite likely, because homes were the normal meeting place for church. If that is where church took place, not in a big setting, the leader of that home was the one who had oversight of that group; thus he is an overseer, or maybe he and his wife are, or maybe in the case of a widow or a single woman like Lydia there were some church leaders who were women. I admit we do not know she was a widow, but there seems to have been a church in her home. But normally it would be a man and normally he would be married and they would have children. We'll get to this soon. In either case, shepherds are personally involved with the flock.

One reason we have moved here to Edinburgh (this is my third time living in the United Kingdom) is that we had been at North River, a big church, with more than a thousand people, for fifteen years and we wanted to be somewhere where we would not just start afresh but where there is nowhere to hide, so we have to be plugged in locally. In a big church you can come and go, especially if you travel, and people do not know. In a big church there are lots of programs, so it is assumed that if you do not show up to a meeting, probably you were in another meeting. People give you all kinds of credit that maybe you do not deserve. But there is nowhere to hide in a church of thirty-five, and we think that is good for us. Plus we are close to family; half of our family is less than three hours away. So I am bringing you greetings from Edinburgh. I am looking out the window of my study and the sun is going to be setting in about 45 minutes. It is about 3:30 in the afternoon here on a foggy Scottish day.

Back to the lesson: congregational autonomy, which I strongly believe in, does not mean that leadership teams—that is what the groups of elders would be—are isolated. Being isolated is dangerous. Not being connected to others is quite risky. We certainly see that in the early church, there was communication by letter, by visit, or sometimes by sending an envoy, an emissary. Paul could not be in multiple places at one time, but he could send Timothy or Titus as an apostolic representative.

We see communication in the next chapter, Acts 15 when there is an issue. People communicate. When the Apostle Paul wants to give a farewell address to the Ephesian church leaders—I am sure this has hit you before—he sends for the elders. He does not send for the evangelist or the deacons or the small group leaders; he sends for the elders.

Acts 20, which I know is a chapter a lot of us love, is an amazing chapter. Paul says goodbye to them, but from reading the pastoral epistles and putting together the chronology of what happens, probably after the book of Acts he was back in Ephesus again. He sends for the elders, and he met them at Melitas. It was a two-day journey going overland and even over water. I think if he had gone to Ephesus it would have been very hard for him to stay there just a couple of days. It probably would have ended up being weeks or months. So he sends for the elders. Why them? For one thing, they know the whole church. Especially if the elders are house church leaders, each elder would know who is in his household and the friends who come, so there is no need to send for anyone else.

We read in 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor.” I know “rule” sounds a bit like a king or a queen, so maybe we should say, “lead well” as it says in some versions. “Double honor” can be translated “double pay.” It goes on to say, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” So we see that some elders focus on preaching and teaching, but the implication here is that elders lead.

I do not think of an elder as a safety inspector. Before my wife and I were married thirty-five years ago, she was a health and safety inspector for the British government. She was young. She would walk into these institutions, these factories or restaurants, and even though she was young I think she put the fear of God in them. I do not think an elder is like that. He just now and again makes sure things are up to muster or he guards the back door while the evangelist deals with the front door.

I served as an evangelist for many years. I know our culture, but in the New Testament we see the elders and that is where the buck stops. But it is not because they are older or they sign some agreement. I believe it is because they are the ones who are the principal leaders of the church, not the minister, the evangelist, which we have in our culture in the ICOC. I am not at all saying God cannot use that, but if we are looking for what the New Testament teaches, the assumption is that leadership of a church by elders is normative. That was normal. Yes, there may have been some exceptions, but the exceptions would prove the rule. Again, in our culture having elders is almost impossible because the true leadership is not in that overseer/shepherd/elder, it is in the ministry staff.

Some people think that I am somehow against staff. I am not against staff; I have been in ministry a long time, about forty years. I worked for the church for twenty years. I have been a Christian forty-three years. I think I know the benefits of staff. I am not sure that some staff are doing what they are best called to do. I would be so bold as to suggest that an evangelist should probably move to another city and plant a church, maybe go to a place where Christ is not known at all. Maybe it would be dangerous, but keep moving and keep planting. But we have become quite settled, haven't we, in our culture?

In many ways we have mirrored the denominational world with the senior pastor model. About ten or twelve years ago in my travels, I ran into more and more church leaders who had business cards that actually said pastor, and I would say, “Don’t use the word “pastor”; that’s not in the Bible.” That is the Latin word for shepherd. Why would you use a Latin word for shepherd unless you were trying to support the denominational model? Well, that is why the NIV used the word “pastor” in Ephesians 4:11. Some people have been very offended when they found out that the word was not even in the Bible. But now I no longer correct these leaders who call themselves pastor or senior pastor—and I am talking about in the ICOC—because, effectively that is what many of them are. They are the senior pastor in the denominational evangelical church polity. To call them an evangelist would be wrong because they are not evangelizing all that much, and they are not planning churches, so what do you call it? It is a hybrid. I am not saying it is wrong; I am not saying God cannot use it, but it is not what we see in the New Testament. The elders directed the church—the buck stops there.

When Paul writes his letter to the Philippians, to whom does he write it? He writes to the elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1); he writes to the elders—I should say overseers—and the ministers. “Minister” is just a Latin word for servant. So, he writes to the overseers and the servants. I do not want to quibble too much about terminology, but sometimes we are quite selective in the terms we choose because we want to maintain our system.

We already looked at 1 Timothy 5:17—some elders led but also did a lot of preaching and teaching. Other elders led and apparently did less preaching and teaching, but all, it is assumed, were leading, and as we'll see, all of them were expected to teach. To some extent Timothy models for them what it means to preach and teach. We see this in chapter 4 involving the public reading of Scripture and then breaking it down and giving the message.

Let's talk about 1 Timothy 3. Many of us would look at the list in 1 Timothy 3 as qualities more than qualifications. Certainly we do not like the checklist idea, although the first time I ever heard this taught, that is exactly what happened. The congregation was putting forward three men and they had all the qualities and check, check, check.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

This is a familiar passage and a high calling. He is a one-woman man; he is faithful to his wife. He is self-controlled, he is hospitable. In the Bible, hospitality is the man's responsibility, not the woman's, even in a patriarchal society. Yes, women do have different responsibilities than men, but the men were the ones charged with hospitality.

He must be able to teach. It does not say he must be able to read an announcement or do a communion talk; no, he must know the Word. He has to stop expecting only the full-time paid people to know the Word, or the teachers. No; if you are an elder you have to be able to teach, you need to be competent with the Bible. He must not get drunk; he must not be a drunkard. He must be gentle. An elder is gentle, but the preacher is tough, and the campus minister is a kick-down-the-door guy; you may have heard that kind of phrase. Really? I thought gentleness was for everyone because Jesus was gentle as a teacher. Yes, there is a yoke and a burden, but one is easy and the other is light. Jesus is humble, and we are supposed to be gentle.

He must not be a lover of money, and so forth. Character is key—character not charisma. Paul assumes overseers would be husbands and fathers. Does that mean if you had no children you would be disqualified? If you were not married could you be an elder? Could Jesus have been an elder? Could Paul have been an elder? There is more than one way to look at this. One view is that it assumes that since most men are married and have children, the elder will be married and have children. I do not believe this rules out a couple that has no children, and I am not so sure it rules out an unmarried man. And to be honest, I am not totally sure it rules out a woman. At the very least, I would say an eldership, a team leadership, that does not take advantage of the wisdom of the sisters is asking for big trouble. We have some churches that have team leadership and the sisters are welcome to join every month or two, but I think more is better. I guess the men could listen to their wives at home and represent them well and everything would be well, but when the brothers get together and the women are not there, sometimes very interesting decisions are made.

Older men were presumably more available for the work of shepherding the flock, since their responsibilities would be simpler. They would have older or grown children, their vocations well established, their schedules flexible, because obviously the words “older” and “elder” are related.

In my work for the underground churches in Asia, I normally record two or three new sermons every month. I have been doing this for a while, and this summer one of them was from Titus 2. It says that the older men train the younger, and the older women train the younger. For years we have known the irony. We got in trouble when we had the younger men training the older men. Train them in what? What is Titus talking about? It is basically training them to live with Christian character in their everyday life. Maybe that is the way to look at it. But we said, no, the younger men will train the older men in how to move the ministry. Not only was it not the subject matter that Paul is talking about here, but it is a reversal of age.

The older I get, the more I see that it is a dual phenomenon. Some of you may relate. I look back at the things we did when we were in our twenties, how exciting it was to go to new countries and start new churches, to be involved at the ground level in so many places, to leave the United States. My frontal cortex was not developed yet; I was too young to rent a car; yet I was making decisions that affected a lot of people. I look back on those times, the excitement, the faith, with a mixture of joy and amazement and longing and, to be frank, some horror as well, because the way God has designed it is that older people are to help the younger people.

Is it possible that in our churches we have given in to youth culture, the glorification of youth and vigor and athletics and power? We have been ashamed of gray and silver hair; we try to color it or cover it up; we have been embarrassed in some way about aging. But biblically, leadership comes from those who have more experience.

This will probably be the strongest point I will make: It seems hypocritical to me to say that this high calling, which is truly a noble task, to live that way, to have that kind of heart, is for the highest position in God's kingdom, the elder. What about for the preacher? What about the person who has the care of souls or maybe feels responsible for 50 or 100 or 500 people? What about the preacher; does he have to follow that? Oh no no no, that is for the elder!

So first, we are assuming that the preacher is the leader of the church, which is a protestant denominational idea. I am not totally against it; I have tried it, and it was not so bad. But we are also assuming that the preacher or evangelist, or call him what you will, is called to a lower standard of holiness than the elder. Now, does that sound backwards? To me it seems really backwards—the hypocrisy of someone who does not mirror these qualities, a church leader maybe who is not gentle, maybe his family is out of control, or whatever it is, he is not a man of integrity. Yet he would remove an elder because maybe one of his kids was not doing well, while this man, if he just imitated that elder, would become a much more spiritual person. I think it is hypocritical to hold overseers to this higher standard of integrity than the men in our church culture who have more influence, power, and control. I would say the more influence, the more power, the more authority you have, the more important these qualities are. The less responsibility you have, the less important they are. You may not agree with that, but I ask you to please think about it.

I know from conversations with several of you that you have had this discussion: it seems very unhealthy to put the spotlight on the children instead of on the elder. It is the elder who is held to that standard, and should the pressure be on the children? That can easily happen. That is the most common question: are all his kids Christians? I remember years ago there was a church that was going to appoint elders. One candidate, all his kids were Christians—all one of them. The other only had one baptized out of six. Both became elders, and as it turned out, many years later the man who had six, they all got baptized, and the man who had the one, the one quit, although he came back later.

We have an elder in one of our churches in Africa with nine children. I asked him at one point before he was an elder, how it was going. He said, “Seven of my kids have been baptized.” I am thinking that is pretty good, seven out of nine; I would take them. The Bible does not say clearly in Titus 1:6 that they all have to be Christians, and it is not even totally clear in translation whether that word *pista* means faithful as in respectful to their parents or believing. Just over half the times that word appears in the New Testament, it means faithful in the sense of respectful and loyal; just under half the time that word means believing, as in being a Christian. We based our whole doctrine on a single verse in Titus.

I wonder whether 1 Timothy 3 is giving us a description of the ideal elder in a way that Proverbs 31 gives a description of the ideal woman. You sisters know she is Superwoman from the hour she keeps, the industry that she is in charge of, her children's behavior, and her husband. This is an incredible woman. I think it is wisdom personified. In the book of Proverbs there are several women as personifications: there is the adulterer, there is wisdom, and there is folly, all personified as women. When you take wisdom and you translate that to flesh, it is like the counterpart to Jesus. Jesus has been a female: Proverbs 31 would describe him, so it is an ideal.

Maybe to some extent 1 Timothy 3 is the ideal. Maybe these are the qualities the eldership should have, not just every elder. That would allow some to be weaker or stronger in different areas instead of everyone having to measure up to an impossible standard.

Let's go on to Ephesians 4. Ephesians 4:11 speaks of the gifts of teaching and leadership that God gave to the church. And he appointed four, possibly five leadership gifts. The first are the apostles, the missionaries, but we use the transliterated word “apostle,” which causes confusion. Is he speaking of the twelve apostles or is he speaking of missionaries in general? We could take that either way, but if it is the Apostles with a capital A, they were the living links to the Lord; they are the ones who preserved the apostolic teaching. At any rate, the purpose of these missionaries was to start churches. Next we have the prophets, and whatever the exact nature of their work was I am not sure I understand, because in the New Testament we have Anna, Agabus, and Phillip’s daughters who were many a number, but they gave us no prophecies. We have nothing recorded, so I am not even clear exactly what the prophecy was. But if I read Ephesians 2:20 correctly, the apostles and prophets were the foundation for the church. The twelve Apostles and Paul, the prophets mentioned in Ephesians 2:20 and 4:11 and also in 3:5, are not the Old Testament prophets but the New Testament prophets.

That was the foundational level, which would still leave us with other leadership gifts today: evangelists, the bringers of good news. They are mobile; they establish churches; they are dynamos of inspiration and evangelism and leadership. These are people who would go into some scary places. There is always a need for evangelists; we need more of them, not fewer, but we need evangelists to engage with secular society who are willing to go where pagans are, which is everywhere in the world, who are willing to go to new places and dangerous places. I am all for that. To some extent even in my ministry as a teacher I do a lot of work with the lost, a lot of engagement with non-Christians even publicly. It is going to be a scary thing to do. I had two more debates this year. We need to engage.

Some of you may be familiar with the book *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. This volume is about 600 pages and contains documents that are later than the New Testament. There are letters like that of Clement of Rome, who wrote to Corinth when the young men were overthrowing the elders. The young whippersnappers thought they knew better, and it is a kind of uproar; it reminds us a lot of 1 Corinthians. The seven letters of Ignatius are in the book, as are Polycarp’s epistle and writings of Justin Martyr. There are ten volumes like this that take us up to just under the 300th birthday of the church.

I have not read all of them, but I have a good friend who has, and he is an expert in them. I can say one thing very confidently: there is no record of an evangelist leading a church in a single one of those ten volumes or the following twenty that take us through the next 400 years. It is just not there. If evangelists led church, this is quite amazing. They just disappeared and showed up in no early Christian documents.

Elders are entirely different. They are there all along. The transformation that happens through the course of the second century, a transformation I have mixed feelings about, is that one of the elders was promoted as the main elder and they just called him the overseer, the *episcopos*, the bishop. It ended up with him being over the other elders. This gradually became conformed to the leadership structure of the Roman Empire, and by the fourth century, political administrative districts were called dioceses. And so you have the bishop over his diocese and if you are from an Anglican or Lutheran or, like me, a Catholic background, you know what that is. This whole hierarchy became conformed to the Roman empire. Instead of the emperor, there was the pope and all the way down through the cardinals, the archbishops, the bishops, all the way down to the priests. That we see developing, but even then, we do not see the senior pastor model, the evangelist model that we are fond of.

I am not against you. Many of you brothers, like me, were appointed evangelist. I respect you. I think Rick Overturf is a great guy. I have always liked Rick, and we need him. I do not need to say names. I am only talking about the model in the Bible. Now, it is true in the ICOC we have more and more evangelist church leaders who are elders, that is, who qualify as we have defined 1 Timothy 3. Even then, I think we have got to ask ourselves, how closely are we following the Scriptures here? It is easy to make a false comparison because in the New Testament, groups were small. We have big church and we have buildings. They did not have buildings. We have a lot of things they did not have. So I do not want to compare oranges to apples or oranges to bulldozers. It is very easy to make mistakes there.

I think there is a good reason, at least in the first century, that the evangelist would not be a woman, although eventually there were women who traveled around and preached and, we do read about them in books like *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, for sure. But usually this work was dangerous, so to go into a place where Christ was not known, an idolatrous place, even if it was just a synagogue, usually men would be sent two by two. They would be facing opposition and maybe imprisonment. This is not a gender thing, a chauvinistic thing; it is just that it is something a man would do, not something safe for a woman.

Maybe that is changing. As long as evangelists—my opinion again—are serving as senior pastors/inspirational speakers/administrators, and they are not traveling and planting churches, it is going to be more and more difficult for us to uphold the necessity of male leadership, that is to say, that church leaders have to be men. If the church is meeting in your home and you are the leader of the home, sure. If you are planting churches in the Islamic world, of course. But when there is no danger and the leader is situated in one place, not mobile like first-century evangelists, it will be hard to explain why a woman cannot do that. I know, some of you would like to close that window; others want to open it.

The last position mentioned in Ephesians 4 is teachers or maybe teaching shepherds, because I am not sure they had teachers as an actual position. The elders were supposed to teach. We have prophets and teachers like Judas and Silas. Everyone taught. I know it is funny because I am a teacher. I know the function is important, but I am not convinced that it was a separate position, whereas you can translate that fourth part of Ephesians 4:11 as teaching shepherds, and to me that makes sense. It is pastoral. They are elders, and they focus on teaching. That would match 1 Timothy 5:17 very nicely.

To sum up: Apostles were few in number and persisted for a single generation. Prophets: I tend to think of them as being first century, but it is a little hard for me to define exactly what the prophecy was. If it was preaching then how would that be different from what the apostles evangelists were doing? I am not totally sure. I have been working on that for more than forty years and will let you know if I ever figure it out; and you let me know if you figure it out, because that is not an easy one. Evangelists: one thing I do know is that they evangelized and they started new churches, but there is no record in all of church history for the model that we espouse. We are espousing a fairly modern protestant evangelical model, what I call the senior pastor model. And then there are the shepherds, the teaching shepherds. Even if it is five positions and not four, shepherd, elder, and overseer are used interchangeably in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, and that is the one that is normative for church leadership. You do not have to have an apostle or a prophet or an evangelist. Maybe you need a teacher, but I think it is probably a teaching shepherd. So it really comes down to elders.