



# Elders and Deacons at The Austin Stone

# Introduction

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**THE AUSTIN STONE** has always been a New Testament church existing for the supremacy of the name and purpose of Jesus Christ. This means we look to the Bible as our authority in all matters of faith and practice, including leadership in the church. We believe the New Testament outlines the pattern for this leadership clearly, and there are many resources available that outline biblical leadership.

In discussing leadership at the local church, however, we have found that it is often more helpful to start with the “why” than with the “who” of church leadership. Like everything in the Christian faith, the answer to church leadership is sourced in the gospel message itself.

The overarching story of the gospel is that Christ came to redeem and restore creation. Amazingly, God has ordained that He accomplish this through His church. It seems, however, that those two things are seldom understood as two integrated truths. They are instead more often completely divorced from one another. If the church is God’s primary means through which He accomplishes His purposes, then it follows that the issue of leadership in the local church is an integrated part of that redemptive story.

## The Gospel Story

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**SO, LET'S START** at the beginning with the gospel. Before creation, God existed in perfection as Trinity. Through an act of freedom, God made creation to share Himself and to be glorified through what He had made. God made a masterpiece called man. God made man in His image and God gave man authority over creation. God made man to rule creation, under His supreme reign.

But a rebellion ensued.

Man rejected God’s authority over him. The harmony between God, man, and creation was broken. Where a relationship of harmony and trust once

existed, relational discord became the new norm. When looking at “the Fall,” there are three primary relationships that have been disrupted:

### **There is now theological discord between God and man.**

Where there was once trust and obedience, there is now enmity and insubordination between God and man.

## **There is now social discord between man and man.**

Where there was once harmony and unity, there is now strife and division between people.

## **There is now physical discord between man and creation.**

Where there was once provision and enjoyment, there is now need and toil between man and nature.

As a result of our rebellion, three needs exist for man—theological, social, and physical.

Fast-forwarding in redemptive history, Christ reestablished His kingship by ushering in the kingdom of God on earth through His perfect life, His atoning death, and His glorious resurrection. Though God has already brought restoration to man in part, He has not yet brought complete restoration, as He will on the day He returns.

When we consider how God is working now, in the “already” time of the kingdom on earth, we see in Scripture that He is now working to restore His kingdom, and to meet the needs of fallen man by Christ through the church.

Jesus is the second Adam, the right representative of God’s reign and rule over creation. He lived a perfect life and paid an infinite price for the sins of men, bringing many sons to glory. Upon His resurrection, God gave Christ power and dominion over every earthly power, and made Him head over the church. Paul described Christ’s authority and power in his letter to the Ephesians:

<sup>15</sup> For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, <sup>16</sup> I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, <sup>17</sup> that

the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, <sup>18</sup> having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, <sup>19</sup> and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might <sup>20</sup> that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, <sup>21</sup> far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. <sup>22</sup> And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

(Ephesians 1:15-23)

The church then, as Christ’s body on earth, is responsible for the administration of God’s grace to the needs of fallen man. Paul elaborated on this principle in his letter to the Colossians:

<sup>24</sup> Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, <sup>25</sup> of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, <sup>26</sup> the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. <sup>27</sup> To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. <sup>28</sup> Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. <sup>29</sup> For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

(Colossians 1:24-29)

The people of God “fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” by suffering like Him to point people to the atoning death of Christ on the cross. This cross is the place where God makes a way for reconciliation. This death becomes for us God’s seal and promise to finish His mission to redeem and restore

creation. Enduring the cross was Jesus’ mission on earth. The point of Paul’s teaching is that Christ has dubbed the church to be His physical presence on earth in His stead. The church, therefore, endures physical suffering to deliver the gospel while Christ is in glory (Acts 7:55-56).

# Church Leadership in the Gospel Story

**THE CHURCH TOOK SHAPE** under the headship of called, faithful, and qualified leaders. Luke’s account of the early church in Acts shows the origins of the church’s leadership model:

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

(Acts 6:1-6)

In an instance when strife was rising up in the church because of a need, Christ’s apostles, the Christ-appointed elder leaders of the church in Jerusalem, stood up and guided the church to select qualified leaders from among them to meet that need. The elders, men who are primarily responsible for the ministry of the Word of God and prayer (addressing the theological need we referenced earlier), appoint another group of men to handle a different kind of ministry.

Though the church could have responded with a temporary task force to meet the needs of the people, they thoughtfully and prayerfully were led to initiate a new role in the church leadership.

**As a result of God's leading, the church was provided with called, qualified, and faithful servants to meet the social and physical needs of the church. At the same time, God upheld the priority of called, qualified, and faithful elders to continue meeting the theological needs of the church.**

We want to point out that though there is a distinction in the roles, roles do not give individuals license to ignore any aspect of Christian life and practice. People in either role (elder and deacon) must, as faithful Christians, remain responsible for tasks in which the other office specializes. Deacons must still obey God in rightly sharing God's Word whenever God opens the door, just as elders must meet physical needs as they walk through life.

Still, the two roles are God's wisdom expressed in organizing the church to meet all three needs of fallen man (theological, social, and physical). What the roles free leaders to do is focus on what they are primarily called to do. Elders can study and pray at peace, because they know the sick are being cared for. Deacons likewise can serve at peace, because they know the elders are studying the Word of God and praying.

While we see God's wisdom in the way He has provided the church with leadership, we can also see folly when it is ignored. In many churches across this globe, the Word of God is being neglected because elders have been required to be at every event, every mission trip, and every service opportunity. Sadly, in these churches they haven't been held accountable to study the Word of God and pray. Other churches err on the opposite side. Every leader is seen through the lens of Bible teacher. In these churches, the Word is taught regularly, but there is no leadership available to meet the social

or physical needs of the people. These churches are, unfortunately, often seen as uncaring even as they preach the gospel of our compassionate God.

When we look closely at churches, many tend to err to one extreme or the other. Both extremes miss God's heart, however, because God's aim is to meet all three needs of fallen man—theological, social, and physical. To keep us from error, God gave us two kinds of leaders, elders and deacons.

An important lesson worth noting is that God's church leadership model is not divorced from His mission. The church leadership is not the maintenance crew for a ship being steered by the wind. Under the power of the Spirit, church leaders are agents of the church's direction, progress, and display of God's great gospel message.

# Two Kinds of Leaders: Elders and Deacons

**HAVING ESTABLISHED** the position of God's leaders in His eternal plan of redemption, we'll spend some time expanding on the specific tasks elders and deacons undertake as shepherds and servants of the church.

*The church's responsibility is to declare and demonstrate the rule and reign of God to the world.*

As a general rule...

- Elders lead in declaring.
- Deacons lead in demonstrating.

Though as Christians the people in either role are not absolved from participating in the work of the other, they are called by God to focus on the work of their role.

## The Role of Elders

The elders of God's flock are presented in Scripture as those who lead God's people by *declaring* the rule and reign of God, primarily by leading his people in the Word. By declaring the character and work of God, elders lead the community to submit to God's reign and rule as revealed in His Word. They lead as under-shepherds, guiding people to obey, not them, but the chief Shepherd. Leading people to submit to God's Word is the primary work to meet the theological need of fallen man. There are two major components to the work of elders in declaring the rule and reign of God: shepherding and ruling.

### Elders Are Pastors

First, God's elders **shepherd**. The primary image of elders in Scripture is that of faithful under-shepherds who pastor the flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-4). The Anglicized term, pastor, is used in some translations and by the overwhelming majority of Christians instead of shepherd, which the Biblical authors used from Genesis to Revelation to describe God's leaders. The term "pastor" traces its root to the French/Latin *pastor*, which literally translates as shepherd. The word, however, loses the shepherd imagery and carries instead the more recent generations' construct of what it means to be a Christian leader.

We are not saying that the image we have around pastor is a bad thing. Recent history has made it a term that connotes one who cares for God's people. That's not something we want to throw out. If anything we want to retain it and add to it as we redeem the language and restore the position to God's intent. When we call our elders "pastors," our intent is to redeem the shepherd image from which the term derives.

Parallel to a shepherd's role to feed his flock, elders teach God's Word to the church. Though there are a multitude of contexts in which elders are called to counsel or instruct God's sheep according to His Word, three primary ones defined in Scripture: equipping the saints by teaching God's Word (Ephesians 4:11-12), protecting the saints by guarding against false teachers and their teachings (Titus 1:9), and, implicitly, teaching and pastoring their own family (1 Timothy 3:4-5). To stress the impor-

tance of this part of the eldership, being “able to teach” is the one distinct difference between what qualifies an elder and what qualifies a deacon for leadership. Though deacons are called to be as godly as elders, they are not required to be able to teach.

Complementary to the job of teaching is the elder’s command to protect God’s flock from heretics. Though the charge is made explicit in Titus 1:9, it is worth noting that most passages in Scripture about elders describe them as refuting false teachers and their teachings (e.g. Acts 15:1-35; 20:28-32). As elders of The Austin Stone, we take this responsibility seriously. This task often comes with pain and difficulty, but we believe that the gospel is worth contending for. We can’t do anything but point to the Head of the house and the rules He’s handed us. It is God’s household and God’s rules, not ours.

Another task of elders is preserving unity in the church through conflict resolution and church discipline. Though Jesus clearly implicates elders in His teaching on the course of discipline in Matthew 18:15-17, our understanding of the role of elders as peacemakers in the church is derived largely from the nature and context of the pastoral epistles. Paul’s entire first letter to the Corinthians is an example of a pastor admonishing a divided church to unity (1 Corinthians 1:2, 10).

A last feature of the elder’s role in caring for the sheep is one mentioned only once explicitly in Scripture. Nonetheless, it is ascribed to their role, and that is praying for the sick (James 5:14-16). Though all Christians are free to pray for the sick, elders are called to it. God in His wisdom gives His elders this task to emphasize that His church is the hope of the world. Where all forms of medicine and earthly approaches to healing can fail, God can work miracles, and He appoints His under-shepherds to lead in His work of healing.

Few churches today ask their elders to know and teach the Bible, protect from heretics, mediate, discipline, and pray for the sick. The Austin Stone elders struggled to perform this calling well for several years. It has been a recent, conscious shift for the elders of The Austin Stone Community Church to have our qualified men doing what they are qualified to do. The spiritual growth we’ve seen in the church as a result has been unbelievable.

### Elders Are Rulers

Second, God’s elders **govern**. Elders govern the church to submit to God’s wisdom and will. God mandated in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 and 5:17 that men who meet the character qualifications He established in Scripture be the ones to rule and govern His church, under His guidance, on the earth. The elders, therefore, are ultimately the men who are responsible to lead God’s church to remain faithful to the work of God’s mission.

The Bible not only describes who elders are, but it also speaks to how they ought to go about their work as leaders. The great parallel given to God’s elders is to lead the church as they lead their own family (1 Timothy 3:4-5). The image is that of a husband and father laying down his life so that his wife and family can be washed with the water of God’s Word and presented spotless and without blemish to Christ, having the image of Christ formed in them (Ephesians 5:25-32; Galatians 4:19). The wife and kids in any family can and will help the head of the house, but God holds the man responsible (Ephesians 5:23; 1 Peter 3:7; Hebrews 13:17). The implication is that elders treat the church not as an economic enterprise, but as a family. Every decision they make and every program they create is under the counsel of God’s Word and intended to lead the family of God on God’s mission.

Elders are more than gifted volunteers. They are called, qualified, and faithful men whose lives and service advance God's kingdom by declaring His power.

## The Role of Deacons

The deacons of God's church are presented in Scripture as those who lead God's people by *demonstrating* the rule and reign of God, primarily by serving the body.

They lead as servants, guiding people to obey and to treasure King Jesus. They help us move out as a visible expression of the new kingdom. Living out the Word of God is the primary work to meet the social and physical needs of fallen man. Going back to Acts 6, the tasks of deacons can't be narrowed as far as the elders. What can be said in sum is that the role of deacons is to do whatever service is required to demonstrate the kingdom, while freeing the elders to do the work of shepherding and ruling. Finally, while deacons lead in demonstrating the rule and reign of God, they also lead others to demonstrate God's kingdom to others.

### Deacons Are Servant Leaders

The heart of the deacon ministry is **service**. While elders are responsible for honoring His name among all nations by proclaiming the Word of God, deacons are the lived-out example of His Word. To paint a picture: while people listen to God's elders speak of salvation in the cross of Christ, people look at deacons to see what it means to be born again. Deacons lead in reflecting the fruit of a life redeemed by Christ.

The Greek term the Scriptures use to name the role of deacon, *diakanos*, translates literally to English as servant. While the term servant more often than

not carries a slighted view, one of low-class and obligatory work, the Scriptures paint a different picture. Christ Himself is prophesied in Isaiah to be a suffering servant (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) and the Holy Spirit is called "the Helper" in John 16:7.

And if it wasn't clear enough that serving is reserved for the noble in the kingdom of God, when Jesus teaches His disciples how to achieve true greatness, He leaves no room for doubt:

<sup>33</sup> And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. <sup>35</sup> And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

(Mark 9:33-35)

### Deacons Are Tested

Scripture is clear that deacons are designated as called and appointed as leaders based on their character. While all Christians are called to live by high standards of conduct and to demonstrate the kingdom of God, deacons are tested. Deacons are designated to the body as trustworthy leaders, as faithful servants. The first church in Jerusalem was more than 3,000 large after day one. God in His kindness gave the church designated leaders whose character could be trusted. What a gift we have in deacons! In a day of isolation and individualism, God has provided instruction for us as a church to appoint only those Christians who have grown in maturity by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Women as Deacons

The Austin Stone is a church striving to restore a biblical form of church government. As such, we are restoring the biblical role of elders, and we are restoring the biblical role of deacons. We are taking our lead from Scripture and are committed to practicing church leadership the way God commanded. In doing so, we obey God in appointing a plurality of men to eldership. Furthermore, we are committed to appointing qualified men and women to the diaconate. Although our ultimate authority on the issue of leadership is the Scripture, we have had the great counsel and example of great churches and leaders. With respect to our view on deacons, we are in agreement with John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis and Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York. We are thankful for their help and work on this issue.

In this movement toward restoring a biblical view of church leadership, we hold a conservative view of Scriptures rather than progressive. The term in 1 Timothy 3:11 is interpreted as “women,” and the ensuing qualifications as applying to male and female deacons. The alternate interpretation reads the term in question as “wives,” which is a possible translation for that Greek term.

The elders at The Austin Stone accept the former interpretation and reject the latter. We base our interpretation on the fact that earlier in the same paragraph, elder wives are given no such attention or requirements. Also, when we consider the context, Timothy was leading some unruly women who were teaching false doctrine and oppressing the church. Paul wrote Timothy to explain the role of male elders and the right role of female leadership in the church. Qualified women could be deacons.

It's important to reiterate that we and others in this restorative movement of church government are conservative in our handling of the Scriptures. God's desire for plural male leadership over His church is what He commands and what we affirm. In the case that a deacon role would entail headship or authority over other deacons who are men, we will honor God's command and submit to His wisdom. For more information on this topic, we did not think we could do a better job in presenting the biblical case than has already done by John Piper and Bethlehem Baptist. Please refer to that article<sup>1</sup> for a more expanded discussion and biblical exegesis.

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1. John Piper, “Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church,” Desiring God, last revised April, 27, 2000, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/rethinking-the-governance-structure-at-bethlehem-baptist-church>.

# Summary

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**AS THE CHURCH OF GOD,** The Austin Stone is striving to be everything that God has designed us to be. We, as His body, are a part of the history of redemption that God has designed for His glory since the beginning of time. We are humbled to be a visible expression of Christ, declaring and demonstrating His kingdom until He returns. Our prayer is that we represent Him well through obedience to His revelation in every aspect of our practice as a church, especially in our humble stewardship of leadership.