

Eldership Announcement

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

- [0 : 0 0] John, Noah, and Noah we put forward today to be elders, to join Dove and I on the plurality of elders that cares for the saints at Providence Community Church.
- And I mentioned that I was going to do a podcast that sort of walked through some of the theology that is at work in the background behind this decision. And really also, you know, I want to give you just some information about what's going on with the church and our mindset as we accommodate the growth that the Lord's bringing and so on and so forth.
- So I thought I would start by telling you about a flashback I just had the other day. You know, my life has been quite full and full of full of things that were hard or, you know, that I tried to maybe immediately forget.
- And so now as I get older, there's it's I think the Lord brings things up to me and says, remember this and remember how that seemed really hard and remember how I was faithful and so on.
- So I've been having a lot of these I almost call them like healing flashbacks where God reminds me of some difficult thing that happened years ago.
- [1 : 1 9] And I had a flashback to something that happened when I was in my early 20s, I guess mid 20s, maybe. I don't remember a lot of the details. Some publishing company had decided to commission a curriculum, you know, like a Bible study curriculum of some sort.
- And I was asked to be on the writing team and I was by far the youngest member of this writing team. And I don't remember how I got asked at the time.
- I was dabbling with writing curriculum and Bible studies and things like that and submitting them. So somehow I got picked to be on this team. And the company put us up in a cabin that was, I don't know, like two hours south of St.
- Louis and gave us, I don't remember, it was like three days or something to write this curriculum or at least to come up with the outlines for how it would all go. We would put it together throughout the year.
- Well, I wound up having just a miserable time. I walked in feeling really insecure. I was definitely a lot younger and less experienced than most of the men there.
- [2 : 2 9] And the older men who were there, I expected to just be, you know, super godly and super inspiring and so forth. But man, when they weren't working on the curriculum, they spent almost all of their time complaining about their churches.
- And I was just sort of in this, you know, this cabin for three days, just full of angry men, you know, bitter at their churches and so forth.
- And then I really did hold my peace, believe it or not. I just, again, was a little intimidated. But man, there was just so much anger and bitterness.
- Anyway, on the way home, I was exhausted from it all. And I was kind of at the end of my rope and they were continuing their complaints on the way home back to St. Louis.
- And I just finally, I just spoke up and I think I said like, hey, you know, I just think this is sinful. I also think it's kind of gay for grown men to spend this much time complaining about something that you're in charge of.

[3 : 39] If you know me, you can imagine this. And I just said something to the effect of like, if you want your situation to be better, then like maybe you should stop complaining about it and take some ownership of it and, you know, lay down your life and get to work.

I kind of, you know, I kind of boomered the boomers, I think. Kind of bootstrapped the bootstrappers. Anyway, they did not like that. The car was deadly quiet after that.

And I didn't get my back and I never got a check or anything. I don't think the curriculum ever got finished. But I share that because early on in my pastoring, man, I definitely had a lot of experiences.

Some close, some kind of from afar of, wow, like local churches aren't as healthy as I thought they were.

I was definitely naive. I definitely thought that things were better than they were at the local church level. I guess I probably still am naive to some extent.

[4 : 43] And I think I'm sharing that now because I just think it's easy to forget how dark it gets in other contexts and how quickly churches can be filled with bitterness, either from the congregation to the pulpit or from the pulpit to the congregation or both.

And just, you know, how essential it is for leaders to have the joy that Hebrews talks about in their leading. And also a kind of a reckless abandonment. It's like, I'm not going to play it safe.

I'm going to trust God. And if I trust God, then he'll take care of me. And so I think I was thinking about that just because I was just feeling grateful for the way things have been going at Providence.

Providence and in particular, the way that, you know, it's been a lot of hard work for Angela and I.

But one of the things that's been most beautiful, I think, is we've just never felt pressure to be anything other than ourselves. Like a sanctified version of ourselves.

[5 : 51] Like we definitely sin and don't want to and need to be called out, you know, for our sin when we sin. But there is a sense in which I think a lot of pastors aren't free to be who God created them to be.

And that's really of no advantage to the church. Long term, you want a church full of people who are comfortable in their own skin, who are happy with the lines as they've fallen according to the providence of God.

And if they want to see some change or willing to do the work to lead that change and so forth. And so I just feel very thankful even as I record this that God's done that.

God's done that at our church. And, you know, the goal of that is not for me to feel comfortable. I mean, the goal of that is, is to have a church full of people who are their unique selves.

Individuality is way more important than we give it credit for. You know, we we complain a lot about individualism, which I think is a problem. People just kind of living for themselves.

[7 : 01] But there's a way where we really need each person to be themselves. They're a unique expression of the image of God. And when they all work together, it sort of fits like, you know, like tiles in a mosaic.

That represents something bigger. We don't want all the tiles to look exactly the same. You know, we're not going to make a mosaic that way. We're just going to make a monochromatic wall. So there's an important aspect of this, of having people that are individuals.

And I think that starts with the church, with the leaders, learning how to be themselves in their ministries. Well, of course, you know, being the version of themselves that is the most like Christ.

So with that, I will talk a little bit about like, what are we doing? Why are we thinking we need to do this? You know, and so forth. And I'll start by saying, you know, what's the point of an elder?

Well, the point of an elder is to care for the household of God. And, you know, what does that look like specifically? Well, strangely enough, the last third of Exodus gives us some good insights into what it means to be an elder, what it means to lead a local church.

[8 : 22] You know, I read this morning from Exodus 25. The Lord said to Moses, speak to the people of Israel that they take it for me a contribution for every man whose heart moves him.

You shall receive the contribution for me. And this is the contribution that you shall receive from them. Gold, silver, bronze, blue and purple, scarlet yarns. And, you know, the list goes on. So you've got something where the Lord is moving in people's hearts to give of themselves, to give of their possessions, their gifts.

And it's all going to kind of wind up in a pile, you know. Well, now what do you do with all the stuff, you know, that people have given? Well, in Exodus 36, that's when you see, so, you know, 11 chapters later, we had to go through the fallout of the golden calf and the fallout and so on.

And we had to get the tablets redone and so forth. But by the time we get to Exodus 36, the people had been giving faithfully. And what we see now is, well, what are you going to do with all this stuff?

And in Exodus 36, 1, it says, It says,

[11 : 01] It says, That was verse 8.

I'm not skipping. I'm reading the whole chapter to you. Verse 9.

So in chapter 2, Paul calls the church the temple.

You know, we're bricks. We're living stones. That's what Peter says in 1 Peter 2. That's what Paul says in Ephesians 2. The church is a living offering.

It's a living sacrifice, full of saints who are living sacrifices. So it's really the pile of resources that we see in Exodus. In Exodus, the pile of resources are things.

[13 : 41] In Ephesians, the pile of resources are people. People that God has brought into a local church. And what does an elder do? And what does an elder do? Well, the elder does the work of Bezalel and Aholiab.

The people are the gift. And the elders are like craftsmen who equip the saints for the work of the ministry and actually see that local church built up until it becomes the full measure of what God called it to be.

And it's filled with the glory of the Lord. So what is an elder? Well, an elder is like a craftsman who sees the saints as the sacrifice, as the gift to the Lord, and assembles those gifts, those saints, in such a way that they become a living tabernacle for the glory of the Lord to fill.

And so with that vision, what an elder does is an elder really is a craftsman with some leadership abilities who knows and loves the saints.

And they know their unique callings. And they know them as individuals. They understand that each person is a little mosaic tile that has a spot. And, you know, maybe that tile is dirty with sin, needs to get cleaned up, and so on and so forth.

[15 : 10] Maybe it needs some edges chipped off. But they love each tile as an individual. And they get that tile shaped up and set in the right spot.

And then all of these tiles come together and display the excellencies of God. So when it says equipping the saints for the work of the ministry, it's really the elder's job to help all of the saints find their way into serving the Lord well.

Now, one of my pet peeves is this passage gets preached a lot when we're looking for nursery workers or something. And I just want to be clear, like, most of the ministry that the saints do is outside of the church.

Most of it is in your home or in your role at work or as a citizen or as a neighbor and so on and so forth. So elders aren't supposed to just be, like, plug-in spots on the nursery roster or, you know, the AV roster or whatever.

It's not the work of ministry at the church. I mean, that's a part of it. But it's really, I need to know as a pastor, I need to know you, or you need at least somebody to know you, to know all the ways that God's calling you to serve, to know your gifts and your weaknesses, and essentially work with you as an individual, you know, and help you to fit into this larger thing that God's doing.

[16 : 38] So that's really what an elder does. They're kind of like gardeners, I think, also. You know, you've got to know all the plants and you've got to have a good sense of what goes together, where it goes and how they work together and so on and so forth.

So that's our vision of what an elder is, and that's maybe, as you can see, why we would want to increase our number of elders. As we grow, we can either produce uniform disciples on an assembly line, or we can keep adding bespoke craftsmen.

Those are the only two ways that this gets done. We either create a system which has its advantages. It doesn't need as many pastors, but it also really is a bit like an assembly line.

It really does create a bit of a uniformity. If we want to avoid that, the only way that we can avoid that is by training up elders as craftsmen, and that's the route that we're taking.

Now, at this juncture, I want to talk about kind of some theological things and some denominational things, and then I don't think this is going to be super long because I think I can get through this part of it in about 10 minutes, and then maybe another podcast down the road, or in some other context, we can talk more about the qualifications.

[18 : 00] But let me give you kind of some theological principles that matter related to appointing elders. So the first thing is that we think that there are two types of elders in the Bible, and we would label them ruling elders and teaching elders.

So ruling elders and teaching elders. And this is not novel to us. This is pretty robustly a part of church history, and there are plenty of denominations that do it this way. Now, to be sure, all elders need to be able to teach.

That's in 1 Timothy 3. But in 1 Timothy 5.17, Paul writes the following. Listen to this. This is where we get our sense that there are these two kinds of elders, ruling elders and teaching elders.

1 Timothy 5.17. Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

That's the verse that we land on to see this, you know, this multi-role kind of eldership. Let elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

[19 : 14] So all elders rule according to this verse, but some of them express that rule primarily through preaching and teaching. So that's where we get the idea of two types of elders.

You have ruling elders, and they do pastoral care, church decisions, you know, so forth. And then you have teaching elders, and they also do pastoral care and church decisions, but they have an emphasis on preaching and teaching.

And this view holds that the New Testament, this is not me, I pulled this off of a website. I just thought it was a good summary statement. This view holds that the New Testament office of elder is one office with two distinct groups or classes of men.

These two classes are equal in rank and authority, but they are named by their distinctive function or task. Ruling elders are those who govern and rule the church.

Church teaching elders are those who have the special task of preaching in addition to ruling and governing the church. These are typically the men who receive the double honor because they labor in word and doctrine, 1 Timothy 5.17.

[20 : 24] So that's a quote, this is me. So from our view, and this, like I said, has been practiced in other contexts across church history, we would want all elders, we would see that all elders have to be qualified according to the qualifications put forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

But we would also want to make sure that those who are going to dedicate themselves to preaching and teaching have undergone especially rigid examination for their theological acumen, their capacity to handle the word in a fluent way, and so forth.

Now, in our denomination that we participate in, ordination is a relatively difficult thing to attain. It took, Dove, about two years of pretty serious study to get there.

I was ordained in Sovereign Grace in 2015, but, you know, in 2015 I had already been a theology nerd for about 17 years at that point.

And so ordination in Sovereign Grace is tough. It's a tough hurdle to get over.

[21 : 37] And if we required all elders to be ordained under their system, we would just not have many elders because relatively few men have the natural talents and time to clear this hurdle.

This is really kind of where the vocational aspect of ministry comes into play. You know, the amount of time you need to dedicate to developing theological acumen and, you know, constantly feeding yourself.

I mean, you know, for a while there I got super into strongman stuff and I was watching all these strongman videos. And, you know, their main job is to eat. Like, they just have to eat constantly.

And everything else is like secondary. The working out and all that, they do work out a lot, but the main job is, man, they just have to eat 10,000 calories at least every day. And, you know, these preaching and teaching elders, probably the one thing that you need to keep in mind when you have a guy who's, you know, doing a sustained pulpit ministry like I do or like, you know, a lot of pastors do, you just can't imagine how much biblical calories you have to consume in order to stay fresh, you know, in order to keep learning how to say important things and new ways for people to, you know, hear them and receive them and so forth.

So teaching, all laboring in eldership is difficult, but preaching and teaching, it really should have a higher bar for, to clear because it is actually fundamental to the church, you know, in a really key way.

[23 : 20] We are people of the book. That's how our people are really fed is through the word. And so I think it's appropriate to ask those people who are going to spend substantial amounts of time preaching and teaching to be ordained.

If any other people wanted to be ordained, that's fine. That's not a problem. But we would probably always insist that those who are going to be teaching elders, you know, go through a pretty rigorous ordination process that really has got a special eye on the theological proficiency of the candidate.

Now, you do have this other elder, the ruling elder, and they're not, they're doing a lot of the pastoral work. And of course, they too need to stay fresh and read the word and so forth. But the demands associated with the teaching ministry aren't there.

And so we feel comfortable, not just that it's our decision, but that the Bible is pretty clear about this too, that that ordination bar is a artificial hurdle imposed, I think, with wisdom for the most part, but not the sort of thing that has to apply to every possible situation, every possible elder.

So the way we're drawing the line is, is if the person is going to be dedicated, either initially or ultimately in preaching and teaching, they need to be ordained.

[24 : 48] And there's a process that Sovereign Grace had spelled out for that, that it's, you know, really, really clear. It's really hard, but it's really clear and measurable. And then the other process is a ruling elder.

And that would just be left up to our church and, and the leaders at Providence, along with the congregational advisement, discerning whether individuals are called and qualified to serve in this ruling elder capacity.

So what we would hope to wind up with in a few months is to have me and Dove as teaching elders and John, Noah, and Noah as ruling elders, all serving together as equals on a team that is trying to steward the various means of grace God brings into the church via the saints.

And, you know, a lot of congregational talk about plurality and eldership is about accountability, like that, that plurality exists primarily to keep the pastors accountable.

That, that is definitely a part of what we've been doing, but that's really not the weight of intention in the scriptures. The weight of intention in the scriptures is to have men who can teach, care for, provide for the people, rule over the church well, contend against enemies, and so on and so forth.

[26 : 07] It's really not so much in the Bible for the care of the pastors. It's really for the care of the, of the people. So that's where we are. We are going to have this two tiered, well, not really tiers, two roles within eldership, teaching elders and ruling elders.

Teaching elders need to, you know, clear this higher bar of formal ordination. Ruling elders do not need to clear that higher bar, but they do need to be qualified, and the congregation needs to be, you know, pretty overwhelmingly for, you know, pretty overwhelmingly for these guys coming in as, as ruling elders.

So if you're interested in becoming an elder, there are two tracks under this system. The one is to pursue formal ordination, and that's a system that's pretty well established within sovereign grace.

And the other one would be a ruling elder, which would be just a matter of, you know, being qualified, of having the confidence of the congregation. And then, you know, the process by necessity, because we don't have some kind of outside process to, to use, it's rigid.

The process by necessity to appoint a ruling elder is a, is far more organic and, and really just more up to, you know, the need of the church and a bunch of other things.

[27 : 29] So I guess the last thing to talk about is that there is a little bit of controversy with this, not in our church, but our denomination wants all elders to be ordained.

And we just disagree. We don't think their ordination standards are appropriate for all elders. And we have wrestled with this for a long time, at least five years.

And we finally just decided that we are going to exercise our autonomy a bit here. Ultimately, local churches can do what they want. And we've just decided in this area, we're going to graciously disagree and, and color outside the lines a little bit.

Now, this isn't a big enough disagreement to fight over and certainly not enough of a disagreement to cause us to leave the denomination, but it is probably big enough for us to have concluded after several years of conversation that we're just not going to do it their way.

We, we want to have these two kinds of elders and that we're just going to go ahead and, and, and do it our way. Which we believe that, you know, in the spirit of the denomination, like we are, we are lined up with the main idea, which is that the local churches have autonomy to make decisions.

[28 : 47] And this is the decision that we're making now, you know, we're going to do it our own way. Um, but at the same time, we're not going to rub our rebellion in anyone's faces. And, and by the way, when I say do it our own way, I don't mean like we just invented something.

As I've mentioned, this was the view held. This has been the view held by many churches over the years. It was certainly present within the reformation. I referenced Calvin's view of which was similar to this in some features.

So we're not going to rub this in anyone's face. We're just going to do it. And, uh, we're going to be chill about it on the website. We plan on presenting the ruling elders as the quote unquote leadership team.

And the dump, the nomination won't recognize John, Noah, Noah as elders. I mean, that that's, you know, that's non-negotiable. That's up to them, whether they would recognize them or not, because those guys aren't going to go through the ordination process.

They won't be recognized. I'll let you guess, uh, how much those guys are upset about not being recognized by the denomination. These guys are in it to serve. They're definitely not concerned about, you know, this or that title.

[29 : 50] But insofar as the church goes and how we function, these guys are going to be elders period. End of story. Uh, functionally, we've already been working together like this for quite some time.

We've already been making decisions together, like the building renovation and so on and so forth. We've, we've begin to try our hand at voting here and there on certain things, but my policy has always been that when you're working with a team, it is not typically a good idea to proceed without a, a unanimous when you're working with a team of elders, it's not typically a good idea to proceed on big ideas with, uh, without some sort of unanimous consent.

I guess like there are some examples where it's okay to have some disagreement, like for instance, with the parking lot, you know, that was 60 grand and you know, we did have the cash to, to pay for it, but that was about it in terms of our reserve.

And you know, we, we took a vote and I think I was the one that dissented. I didn't, I wanted to wait another year and there were risks to waiting another year. It could have, if we had a bad winter, it would have cost us a lot more money.

So I was, I was willing to roll the dice. I wanted to wait. Um, but I was outvoted. Uh, the guys all, you know, said, no, let's do it this year. And in that kind of thing, when it's just a parking lot or it's, you know, I, I, I'm not worried about that kind of, kind of disagreement.

[31 : 18] Uh, frankly, it, it felt refreshing for me to just be able to say, I just disagree, but I don't want my disagreement to override everybody else's agreement.

Let's just, let's just go along with it. But for the most part, you know, I will still be, I've got by far the most experience on the team. Um, and, uh, I, I will still be, you know, what they call, you know, a first among equals I'll, I'll, I'll lead things.

I'll lead, I'll lead kind of how we talk about things and, and we'll be typically the person that will dove or I will typically be the people who bring things up that need to be dealt with is we're, you know, we're spending more time focusing on these things, I guess.

Although maybe not, I don't know. Anyway, uh, my, I, I can, I can lead in a way that is, Hey, this is, you know, this is what I think. Um, this is, you know, 30 years of whatever of experience.

This is what I think, but also God works through these teams and God works through these men. And there's no need to typically, there's really no need to have disagreement on these teams.

[32 : 30] We can, we can very often slow things down and talk about them from different angles. This is what we've done really for five years. We keep working on something until we find a way that works for all of us.

And a lot of times it's really just a lack of, you know, we, we're trying to understand something. We're trying to plan for something. We're trying to solve a problem. We talk about it.

We talk about it. We talk about nothing seems quite right. And so we, we, in that meeting, we come back for another meeting later and, you know, we just keep doing this. We just keep working the process. And then when the Lord decides that there's clarity to be had, he's going to give us clarity.

He gives us a solution that we all feel good about and so on and so forth. So that's, that's pretty much how these sorts of things run. You really want to, you really want to be able to go slow with a lot of this.

As you might guess by just our choice with some of the structure in this, we were trying to do bespoke ministry, no individuals, help individuals, you know, all that kind of stuff.

[33 : 37] We're not, we're not too worried about speed. We're, we're pretty comfortable being low and slow. So we don't want to waste momentum that God gives.

But at the same time, we are pretty confident that we know the culture God wants to build at Providence. And it's a culture of kindness and honor and joy and humility.

And we know that building that is not a quick thing. So that's, that's, I guess, probably enough for, for today.

You guys know these men already, you know, that they're already serving with extreme zeal. You know, these wives already. These wives are, you know, I, I think it's been such a joy over the years.

I grew up with a brother, one brother, and we were pretty close. But it's been such a joy just living in the church for 30 plus years to have sisters, you know, to have real sisters, girls that I really do listen to and rely on and root for and so forth.

[34 : 48] And, you know, Gratia and Lauren and Kate are, are girls like that. And Christine and Angela, I, it's been wonderful to have these, you know, little sisters to be a part of this team in some respects.

So that's, that's a 35 minute kind of picture of what's going on. You really need to look over the qualifications for yourself as you're thinking through whether these guys are qualified.

You need to read Titus one and first Timothy three. And maybe the only piece of instruction I would give you about reading is in Titus. You know, it talks about his children are some, some versions say believers.

The Greek word there is just faithful and, and most commentators understand that to simply mean, you know, obedient. So one of the things that we would typically look for is like, is, is a man helping his kids to be joyfully obedient?

You know, um, is he, is he walking that line between leading well and leading clearly and strongly while also, you know, giving kids grace and mercy and, and so forth.

[36 : 00] And that's all, you know, that's, that's an art. And I think it's a good, wise gift from the Lord to point us both in first Timothy three and in Titus one to a man's home life as a really good indicator of what, you know, is he, is he qualified to lead?

So yeah, I'd recommend you read those two qualification passages with these three guys in view. And, uh, and if you have any questions, comments, or concerns, you can direct those to me or to dove.

But yeah, I think we'll probably, um, assuming we receive positive feedback from the congregation, I think we'll probably move to install these guys in an official capacity sometime in, in January.

If you have questions, please just let me know. It's hard to anticipate where all questions might be. Um, and if you're kind of new, do me a favor before you, you know, you can come talk to me anytime.

That's not a problem, but, um, you need to rely on some of these people who have been here for a while. And some of the people who have been here for a while are young. So, so you probably, no matter how old you are, you probably know some, some longer term members of Providence.

[37 : 06] So if you're wondering about these three guys, ask around. Um, my guess is, is that one or all three of these guys will have served almost every single person in the church in a meaningful way in the, in the, you know, the last several years, at least, at least one of his has, I hope.

Okay. Well, uh, that's, that's all I've got for today. Thanks for listening. Thanks for taking the time to, to weigh in on this and, uh, above all pray because we really feel like the Lord's blessed us with a good group of saints.

And we want to steward those saints. Well, for the, for the glory of Jesus, we want to build up this local church to be full of the glory of God. All right.

I'll stop talking. I'm going to go home and have family dinner with the family. All right. God bless you. Bye-bye. Bye-bye.