

STRAIGHT TALK TO PASTORS

Frank Viola

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword</i>	5
Part I: The Message	7
Part II: Questions and Answers	45

FOREWORD

House church is definitely “in” today. Get your Internet browser to make a list of “house church” web sites and you will be astonished at the length of the list. Add to this the number of books on the topic, the magazines devoted to it, the articles about house churches in the papers, the television broadcast reports about them, and you can see that this subject is hot.

The trouble is that many house churches are doing in homes what they used to do in their basilica churches. I once visited a house church in which each person was handed a hymnal. We all sang hymns while the leader’s wife played the organ. There was a “testimony” time. We prayed for “prayer requests” (the leader was the last one to pray). And then we listened to a sermon from the leader.

It is easy to see that one of the problems about this particular house church is that it did not understand the virtues of an open meeting. But there is a far deeper and more common problem. That is, this house church just assumed the essential rightness of the standard Christian model of leadership.

Unfortunately, they are not alone in this. In some house churches (and some so-called “New Testament” churches), it gets so bad that the leadership becomes spiritually abusive. It is far easier to get Christians out of a basilica church than it is to get the modern model of leadership out of many churches that are seeking to follow New Testament practices.

Frank Viola's explosive address to a group of authoritarian pastors is a powerful summary of the case for the New Testament's non-hierarchical model of leadership. Read it. Be shocked at how far we have wandered from the practices of Jesus and the apostles of the first century. Then get ahold of Frank's other books, read them, and prayerfully consider what God may want *you* to do.

Frank Valdez,
Tampa, Florida

PART I

THE MESSAGE

What follows is the message that Frank Viola delivered to a group of 30 pastor-elders on July 24th, 2001 in Santiago, Chile. The vast majority of the text is the verbatim message. Therefore, it reads just as it was spoken.

THE LORD JESUS CHRIST AND AUTHORITY

Let's start with the Lord Jesus Christ. You have to remember that Jesus Christ came into the earth at a time when the Romans were in power. Now the Romans had a certain kind of leadership that marked their society. They got this leadership model from the Babylonians and the Egyptians. But the Romans brought it to perfection. It was the hierarchical leadership structure. In my country, our military is patterned after this structure. The Romans were great warriors, so it worked well for them.

Do you understand hierarchy? You have someone at the top, then you have someone under them, then you have someone at the very bottom. The one at the top has more authority than the one below him. The person lower has less authority than the one above, and on it goes. It is a descending order of authority. It's top-down authority. It is a command-style relationship.

The Romans perfected this structure. It was part of their culture. With that in mind, listen to the words of Jesus Christ. Matthew 20:25: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them."

The Greek word for "authority" is *exousia*. Brothers, you can read the New Testament from beginning to end and you will never find this word *exousia* (authority) in a context where one believer in Christ has *exousia* (authority) over another believer! You will never find that in the New Testament. It is not there.

Let's go on. Jesus said, "The rulers of the Gentiles [the Romans] lord it over those who are under them, exercising authority over them." The Greek word for "exercise authority" is *katexousiazo*. *Kata* means above or over. *Exousiazo* means to exercise authority over another. So *kataexousiazo* means top-down authority. It refers to hierarchical leadership. And Jesus is condemning it! Jesus also uses the phrase "lord it over them" to describe this form of leadership. The Greek word for "lord it over" is *katakuriuo*. Keep this in mind.

According to Jesus, the Gentiles exercise authority from the top-down. They are lording it over the people. They are dominating the people. They are controlling the people. This always happens with hierarchical structures of descending authority. It creates a culture of control and oppression.

But our Lord says, "It shall not be so among you!" Jesus Christ, when He came into this earth, was the most liberated Person to walk the planet. His main job was to set people free. He is the Great Liberator. In His day, He set women free. The women followed Him wherever He was. And when He died on the cross, it was the women who were there, staying with Him. When He rose again from the dead, it was the women who came to Him first. Jesus Christ had a very exalted view of His followers. He had a very exalted view of women in a day when they were oppressed and suppressed. He was a liberator. This is very important, brothers. There is something in your Lord that is liberating, that comes to set people free.

Jesus says, "Whoever wishes to be great among you of my disciples, he shall be your servant." I'm going to make a very important statement at this

point that we will come back to. The mark of a servant of God is that he comes to set people free. Not to lord over them. Not to control them. But to set them free. One of the major things that I do in planting a church is to set people free. And that is the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Now let us go to Matthew 28.

Jesus Christ is getting ready to ascend. These are some of His last words. You are familiar with them. Matthew 28:18: “*All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. All authority is mine.*”

Now, brothers, there is no authority except the authority of Jesus Christ! Only He has authority. There is no authority except His authority. This is important.

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM

Jesus Christ ascends. And His twelve apostles are sent to Jerusalem. They raise up a church in Jerusalem. It is a very large church. On the first day there are three thousand in that church. Now I want us to go to the book of Acts. I want to give you the flavor of what the church in Jerusalem was like. They met in homes all throughout the city. Their meetings were open. The brothers and sisters freely shared with each other.

They gathered at Solomon’s Porch to hear the apostles share Christ with them. The apostles were preaching Christ to the lost, but they were also training God’s people on how to know their Lord and how to meet. The brothers and sisters were freely meeting in homes all throughout Jerusalem. They met for a number of years. And it was just the apostles and the people. Brothers, there were no designated leaders except for those twelve apostles

who were sent by Jesus Christ. It was the apostles who were planting the church and the brothers and sisters. There were no designated leaders.

Then there was the dispersion. The brothers and the sisters in Jerusalem scattered all throughout Palestine, except the apostles. Some of them went as far as Antioch in Syria. There was another church raised up in Antioch. The church of Antioch grew very quickly. In time there were prophets and teachers there. These are gifts. These are functions. You will never read anywhere in the New Testament that there were elders in the church in Antioch. But there were prophets and teachers.

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, the church is growing again after the dispersion. About fourteen years have now passed. The church in Jerusalem is about fourteen years old. And in Acts 11 we are told that the Jerusalem church is suffering poverty, and the Antioch church wants to help. So Antioch sends money to Jerusalem to help relieve their poverty. In Acts 11:30, Luke says that Saul and Barnabas, acting as representatives for the Antioch church, send the money from Antioch to the *elders* in Jerusalem. Now there are elders in Jerusalem. But this took fourteen years!

Now listen to me carefully. Every time you hear about the Jerusalem church before this, Luke always refers to “the apostles and the people.” Luke now mentions elders. What are they doing there? They’re just accepting money to give to the church. That’s all they are doing.

ELDERS IN GALATIA

Then something interesting happens. Turn to Acts 14. Back in Antioch, the Holy Spirit sends out

Saul and Barnabas to preach the gospel to the heathen. They are now apostles—sent ones; I like the term “church planters” or “workers” better. Call them what you wish. But they are people who plant churches.

Saul and Barnabas head to South Galatia. They preach the gospel in four cities. There are four churches raised up in those cities. Saul and Barnabas only spend about five months with each of those churches, preaching the gospel and equipping the saints. They then leave those churches on their own without any leadership. And they leave them between six months and a whole year without any leadership. Where is the leadership during that time? The church is in the hands of the brothers and sisters. They are the ones that lead. Do you understand this?

Saul (now called Paul) and Barnabas come back to those four towns. And when they come back, we are told in verse 23 of Chapter 14 that they did something interesting.

Can anyone in the room give me the names of these four churches without looking at your New Testament? Okay, here they are: Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Now on their way back, Luke says that Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders in every church.

The original word in the Greek which is usually translated “ordained” actually means “acknowledged” or “recognized.” Paul and Barnabas *acknowledged* elders in every church. This is not an official ordination like ministers are ordained today. It is simply a public recognition of what was already happening.

Also, the phrase “every church” does not mean every church in the world. It means every church in

South Galatia in A.D. 49. I am giving you context. Some have taught that every church must have elders. And they base this idea on this verse. But that is not what this verse is saying at all. Luke is speaking about every church in South Galatia in A.D. 49.

Let me just stop to make a point. The way that we have been taught to approach the New Testament is by taking one verse out of one of Paul's letters, another verse from one of Peter's letter, another verse from another letter that Paul wrote at a different time to a different group of people, another verse out of Acts, and then pasting them all together. We lift each verse out of its historical context. This is how we learn Scripture. But it is totally wrong.

By using this approach, you can prove any doctrine, and you can support any practice. What I am giving you today is the story in its historical context. When you read the New Testament in its historical setting, things look totally different.

Okay, Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders in the four Galatian churches. The word "elder" is translated from the Greek word *presbuteros*. It simply means "old man." It refers to someone who is more seasoned than the others. So Paul says to the brothers and sisters in the Galatian churches the following:

"Brothers and sisters, it's been almost a year since I have been here. I have watched you all function. The meetings are in your hands. You've made decisions on your own. You will still do this, but I'm leaving for a long time. I'm going back to Antioch in Syria. I may not ever come back here. Therefore, if you have a problem—if you have a crisis—I want you to look to these particular

brothers because they are older and more mature. I have watched them in the short time I've been back. And they are reported by you all to have excelled in service. You already know to look to them in times of crises. I am just acknowledging publicly what you already know to be true. They have been caring for the brothers and sisters already. So if there is a problem, listen to what they have to say."

Paul did not say, "Now these men are elders and they are going to control your meetings." He did not say, "They, like the Roman lords, have authority over all of you." He did not say, "Whatever they say is the voice of God. You must obey them." No! He said, "These are the older brothers in the church who have shown that they have wisdom. And they are faithful to serve. Give weight to what they say when you get in a tough place." I will prove this to you shortly.

THE CHURCHES IN GALATIA

Paul and Barnabas go back to Antioch, Syria. While they are there, these four churches in Galatia have visitors that come from Jerusalem. These visitors are Jewish Christians who still have an institutional, legalistic mind.

They believe that to be saved you must not only believe on Christ, but you must also keep the Law of Moses, which includes circumcision for men. So these Jerusalem brothers, these Judaizers, visit the four Galatian churches. And they tell the saints there all kinds of things. They say, "We are from Jerusalem, where the twelve apostles of Jesus live. Paul didn't come from Jerusalem. That means he's not a real apostle. Not only that, but we saw him rebuke Peter, the greatest apostle of Jesus. We

watched it when we visited the church in Antioch. Paul is a man-pleaser. He has not told you the whole gospel. He has withheld from you the truth about keeping the Law and circumcision, just to please your flesh.”

Some of the Galatians begin to believe these Judaizers. Paul gets word of it, and he writes a letter. Brothers, what is the name of that letter? *Galatians*. That’s right. Let’s turn to Galatians.

Now I have a question: Are there elders in the Galatian churches? *Yes*. Yes, there are elders there. Paul acknowledged them about a year ago. Paul has heard that these visitors have come with another gospel. So he writes Galatians and he says in verse 1, “Paul, an apostle, sent from God, not sent from man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead.” And then he says in verse 2, “To the elders of the churches in Galatia.” No! that’s not what he says, is it? (*No*)

Paul writes to whom? He writes to the churches, to the brothers and sisters. He does not write to the elders! Think about that, brothers. Think about that. These Galatian churches are going through a major crisis. The very gospel of Jesus Christ is at stake. And Paul never once mentions the elders!

Now if the elders in the first century are the men who lead the church, make decisions for the church, are responsible for the church’s health, and represent the church, then why didn’t Paul mention them!? The answer is obvious. Those elders did not have that kind of power. The church was in the hands of the people, and Paul wrote to the brothers and the sisters. He addressed the problem to the brothers and the sisters. Because it was *their* problem. So they, the church, were to take care of it.

Brothers, when I write a letter to one of the churches that I work with, I, like Paul, write it to the whole church. And the church reads it together. The church is responsible for its message. It is responsible for its problems. It is responsible for its ministry.

This pattern continues. Galatia is not an isolated situation. I want to make a comment now. And I want you to think about it. In all of Paul's 9 letters to the churches, he mentions "the brethren" about 130 times. He mentions elders five times. He mentions pastors one time. The phrase "brethren" refers to the brothers and the sisters. This is significant. It points to the fact that Paul sees the leadership and ministry of the church as belonging to the whole Body, not to the elders.

Do you know why Paul wrote his letters to the churches and not to the elders? Do you know why he mentions "the brethren" far more than he does elders and pastors? Do you know why he never addresses a church problem to a pastor-elder? Because all authority is given to Jesus Christ! And the church is the corporate Christ! So all authority is in the church! It is not given to certain men. It is given to the church.

All right, let's continue. After Paul writes his letter to the Galatians, there is a great council in Jerusalem. There is a debate over the Law of Moses. When the Jerusalem council meets, all the saints in Jerusalem are present. It was the whole church meeting, *with* the apostles and the elders. And the Scripture tells us that the church made a decision along *with* the apostles and the elders. The elders didn't make the decision and say, "Okay, church, this is what you have to do." The apostles didn't even make the decision.

No, all the brothers and the sisters—“the whole church”—with the apostles and elders, made the decision together. The apostles and elders were certainly vocal. They gave guidance to the issue. But it was the whole church that made the decision, of which the apostles and elders were a part. This is very clear from Acts 15:22.

Further, Acts 15:23-25 tells us that the apostles, the elders, and the brethren (the church), wrote their decision in a letter. In Acts 15:28, it is clear that the decision was made by the Holy Spirit and the church. So it's the brothers and sisters, the apostles, and the elders who authenticated the letter. It wasn't just the apostles and the elders. Brothers, are you following me? The church made the decision along with the apostles and the elders. This is very important.

THE CHURCH IN THESSALONICA

Paul heads off to his second church planting journey. He now takes Silas with him, and they go to Greece. When they pass through Galatia to visit the churches, they take with them Timothy.

Paul and Silas plant four churches in Greece. Can anyone in the room name those four churches? They are: Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, and Corinth. Four churches. Paul and Silas, with Timothy, spent about three months with each of them except for Corinth. The Corinthians were not very smart. So Paul spent eighteen months there. And still it didn't do much good because they had more problems than any other church!

Let's take the churches in order. Paul plants a church in Philippi. He then goes to Thessalonica and plants a church there. He only spends about

three months in Thessalonica. He leaves behind Timothy in Thessalonica. Then he comes to Berea, and then Corinth. Timothy meets Paul in Corinth and says, "Paul, the church in Thessalonica is having many problems."

Listen to me, brothers. The church in Thessalonica is only six months old. These are new Christians. Have you ever met a Christian who is six months old? Is a Christian who is six months old mature? (*No*) He's a baby Christian, right? (*Yes, amen*) Virtually all of these young Christians in Thessalonica were heathens before they met the Lord. Only a few were Jews.

Timothy says to Paul, "Paul, the Thessalonian Christians are being persecuted. Some of them are being tempted to go back to their old life of immorality and idolatry. They need to be encouraged. One of them has a relative who has recently died, so they want to know what happens to a person after death."

Paul then sends Timothy back to Thessalonica with a letter. I want you to turn to 1 Thessalonians. Now, brothers, the church in Thessalonica was free to make its own decisions just like all the other churches that came from Paul's hand. Here is Paul's letter. I want to read the opening verse. "Paul, Silas and Timothy to the elders in the church in Thessalonica." Is that what it says? No! He writes to the church! "To the brothers and the sisters." He writes to them. It is to the church that he gives his instructions. It is to the church that he addresses the problems. He expects the brothers and the sisters, the church, to take care of its own problems!

"But brother Frank, what about Chapter 5:12-13?" Let us look at Chapter 5:11. Paul says to the church, "Encourage one another. Build up one

another. Just as you are doing.” They, the brothers and the sisters, were ministering one to another. They were taking care of each other. And then Paul says, “But we request of you that you appreciate [or recognize] those who labor for you and direct you.”

The Greek word translated “direct,” or in some translations “are over you,” is *proistemi*. It means to guard and provide care for. Paul says, “Esteem them [those who guard and care for you] very highly because of their work.” Then in verse 14, Paul writes to the church again saying, “We exhort you brethren,” and he says, “warn the unruly, comfort the feeble, support the weak, and be patient with one another.” This is the church’s task!

Now, brothers, listen to me. This church is six months old. Six months old! There are no elders in this church. It is impossible to have them. Paul planted the church in a space of about three months. And he never returned to acknowledge elders. He has only spent three months time with them. He could not have acknowledged elders after three months time! And when he wrote this letter, the church is only six months old.

Who then is Paul referring to in Chapter 5:12-13? Who are these men who are to be esteemed because they care for the flock? He is referring to Silas, Timothy, and himself—all three men are workers, called to “the work” of planting and nurturing churches extra-locally. They are the ones caring for the church at this time.

The verse says esteem them because of “their work.” Paul is essentially saying, “Brothers, we are your workers. And we are caring for you right now. Recognize and appreciate us. Appreciate Timothy when I send him back to you. For he cares for you. Appreciate Silas and myself for we labor among you

when we are there.” But he is saying it in such a way that he doesn’t draw direct attention to himself or these men.

There cannot be elders in this church. Impossible! The church is too young, and Paul could not have acknowledged them after three months. But even if you believe there were elders in Thessalonica, fine. His only word is: “Appreciate them. Esteem them.” But remember: This whole letter is written to the church, and he waits until the very end of the letter to say, “Esteem what these men do. Appreciate what they do.” That’s it. He didn’t say “Obey everything they say.” This is a very different mindset than what we have been taught to have.

Timothy comes back to Corinth where Paul is and he says, “Brother Paul, I read the letter to the Thessalonians, but the saints are confused. You answered their question about what happens to us when we die. And you mentioned the Lord’s return. But now they think that Jesus is coming back any second. So half the church has quit their jobs, and they are mooching off the other saints. This is a real problem.”

So Paul writes another letter. It is called 2 Thessalonians. This is how he starts it. 2 Thessalonians 1:1: “Paul, Silas and Timothy to the elders.” (*No*) “To the church.” This church was having a huge problem. Imagine your congregation right now. Imagine that half the saints have quit their jobs, and they are now living off of the other brothers and sisters. If Paul were your worker, he would not write to you elders in this room! He would write to the congregation! In fact, he wouldn’t even mention you elders!

In this entire letter, Paul never mentions local leaders. Why? Because he knew that the church was led by the church. Leadership was in the hands of the church under Christ. But we aren't finished.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

After Paul spends eighteen months in Corinth and raises up a church in that city, he leaves. He returns to Antioch of Syria. After he is in Antioch, he comes to Ephesus. He spends three years in Ephesus. While he is there, he gets word from a woman named Chloe and the people that work with her.

Chloe's people tell Paul about all of the problems they witnessed in the Corinthian church. Not long after that, Paul gets a letter from the Corinthians themselves, handed to him by three brothers in the church. The letter contains a list of questions for Paul. The church in Corinth is about five years old. Not five months. Five years!

Let's list the problems they are having. What's happening in Corinth? Divisions. They're breaking up into four different camps: The Apollos camp, the Peter camp, the Paul camp, and the Jesus camp. Immorality. There is incest. Abusing the Lord's Supper. They're getting drunk at the Lord's Supper. Others are over-eating at the Supper, and are not waiting for their poor brethren.

They are taking each other to court. They are not loving one another. They are arguing. I'll tell you another one. They are doubting the resurrection. Some of them are going back to their own pagan lifestyles and they are visiting prostitutes. This is a first-class mess!

I'm sure Paul threw up his hands and said, "I wish I never met these people! Five years have passed, and this stuff is going on?" So Paul picks up his pen and he writes a long letter. It fills 16 chapters in our version.

I would like to read the opening words. Keep in mind everything that is happening in this church. 1 Corinthians 1:1: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes who is with us, to the elders of the church. To the elders who are not doing their job. To the elders who are not controlling God's people very well."

Is that what he says? No!! He writes, "To the church!" . . . "To the brothers and sisters. This is *your* problem. I expect *you* all to take care of it. The church is in your hands. God has given you, the brothers and the sisters, the responsibility for church affairs in Corinth."

But this next point is even more arresting. Paul never once mentions elders! Not once! Not once does he mention a pastor! Not once an overseer! It's not there, brothers! Over 30 times in this letter Paul says, "brethren." "Brethren, I implore you." "Brethren, I beseech you." "Brethren, you are supposed to take this man who is committing incest and hand him over to Satan." "You, brethren, are to do this" . . . not the elders!

But it doesn't end there. Paul now leaves Ephesus and visits Macedonia (Northern Greece). He probably visits the church in Philippi which is in Macedonia. Paul gets word that men from Jerusalem have come to the Corinthian church, and they are trying to take it over. They are speaking evil of Paul. They are teaching the people that they must follow the Law of Moses. They are claiming that they are the real apostles because they have

letters from Jerusalem. Paul has no such letter. Paul didn't come from Jerusalem (where all "true" apostles come from). And he is preaching a false gospel . . . so they are saying.

These Judaizers are also saying, "We have visions. We have experiences with God. We come from Jerusalem. We have letters from Jerusalem, showing that we are authentic. We are true apostles. You'd better follow us. Do not follow Paul." The alarming thing is that some of the Corinthians were being deceived by these men.

Brothers, if there was ever a time to blow the whistle for the elders, it would be now. But let's look at 2 Corinthians. Let us see if Paul has gotten his act together. Let's see if he finally realizes that he needs to get the elders involved.

2 Corinthians 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother who is with me, to the elders." No! Again, he writes, "To the church!" Brothers, he spoke to the church all throughout this letter. It was written to the church. The church is made up of God's people. The church's problems belong to God's people.

THE CHURCH IN ROME

Paul now leaves Macedonia and pays a visit to Corinth. He visits this very troubled church for three months in the winter of A.D. 57. From Corinth, he writes a letter to the church in Rome.

The book of Romans is regarded as the greatest theological writing of Paul. Everything that is important to the Christian faith is in this letter. It's his masterpiece.

Now, brothers, listen to me carefully. The church in Rome is about three years old. This is the sixth

letter that Paul will write. I want you to look at the book of Romans. I want to tell you why he wrote this letter.

Paul is getting old now, and there are new converts being made in the church at Rome. Paul has never been to Rome. He sent people he knew to Rome. The church appears to be transplanted. But he never went to Rome. Paul wrote this letter to give a comprehensive statement of the Christian faith for the new converts.

There are Jews and Gentiles in this church. They are having problems with one another. Paul heard about it. The Jews believe that you are supposed to eat only clean foods. The Gentiles believe you could eat any kind of food. The Jewish Christians believe that you have to keep certain days holy. The Gentile Christians believe every day is the same.

There is internal conflict. They are fighting, brothers. The Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians are not getting along. So Paul writes in Romans 1:7, "To all who are beloved of God in Rome, to those who are called saints." Paul never once mentions pastors, elders or overseers in this letter! It is written *to* the church and *for* the church. And this is the most important document explaining the Christian faith!

But that's not all. In the very last chapter, Chapter 16, Paul greets the people in the church. He greets twenty-six individuals and five households. And he mentions various things about them. In that entire chapter, Paul never once mentions elders, overseers or pastors!

True to his style, the letter is written to the whole church. And when he deals with their problems in Chapters 14-15, Paul addresses the church. He tells

them to admonish *one another*. In other words, “This is your problem, church. You deal with it.”

THE CHURCHES IN ASIA MINOR

Not long after Paul writes Romans, he visits Jerusalem. He’s almost killed there. He’s put in prison in Caesarea. A few years later he is taken to Rome as a prisoner. In Rome, Paul is on house arrest. He will write his most profound letters chained to a Roman guard. The first one is Colossians.

Turn over to Colossians. Can anyone in the room tell me who started the church in Colosse? It was not Paul. It was Epaphras. Epaphras was a man that Paul led to the Lord. After spending time learning from Paul, Epaphras went back to his hometown in Colosse, and he raised up a church there. This church is about five years old now. They are having major problems. Jewish Christians have given the Colossians a false gospel. Epaphras visits Paul in Rome. Here we have a young apostle visiting an old apostle.

Epaphras says to Paul, “Visitors have come to the church in Colosse with a false gospel.” Paul has never been to this church. So Paul starts to yell and scream at Epaphras saying, “You appointed the wrong elders! This is not supposed to happen. The elders are supposed to keep this stuff from happening. Let me handle it. I’ll write to those elders.” And in Colossians 1:1 he says, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God to the elders.”

No! It is to the saints! To the faithful brethren! The letter is addressed to the brothers and the sisters! And Paul speaks to the church the whole

way through. He ministers to the church because this problem is the church's problem. There is not one mention of elders. Not one mention of overseers. Not one mention of pastors. Brothers, consider this!

About the same time Paul has it on his heart to unfold the gospel of God's eternal purpose to all the saints in Asia Minor. Ephesus is in Asia Minor, as well as Colosse, Laodicea and many other cities. Paul unfolds this gospel by writing a letter entitled "Ephesians." This letter is the crown of Paul's ministry.

Ephesians 1:1 says, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the elders who are at Ephesus." Is that what it says? Absolutely not! This letter is to the brothers and the sisters. Finally in Chapter 4 . . . finally . . . Paul breaks down and writes the word "shepherds." All of Paul's previous letters never mention "shepherds" (pastors).

Shockingly, all he says about the shepherds in Chapter 4 is that the shepherds and teachers exist to help equip the saints. Equip the saints to do what? To minister one to another. To take care of their own problems. To be the church. And those shepherds do not lord it over God's people! They are *among* the flock, not over the flock. They are just the older brothers. And Paul never writes a letter to them when the church is in crisis. Never!

Then in Ephesians 5:21, Paul says to the church "and subject yourselves one to another." Why? Because the authority of God rests in the Body. The authority is given to Jesus Christ, and the church is the corporate Christ. The authority rests in the church. We are to submit ourselves *one to another*.

PAUL TO THE EPHESIAN ELDERS

But brothers, there is one small point that I left out. I want to go back to something in the story. Let's return to when Paul raised up the church in Ephesus. He did it in three years. It was an intense three years. He ministered Christ every day for two of those years in the hall of Tyrannus from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. He was also training workers whom he would send out throughout all of Asia Minor to plant churches. He trained them in Ephesus.

It was those men who brought the gospel throughout Asia Minor. You know the names of some of the churches they planted. They are mentioned in Revelation Chapter 2 and 3. They were planted during Paul's Ephesian trip between A.D. 54 and 57.

All right, now watch. When Paul left Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem, he and the men that were with him met with the elders in Ephesus. What Paul said to these elders is something that every brother in this room needs to hear with your physical ears and your spiritual ears.

I will read to you Acts 20:17, "And from the city of Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church." So there are elders in the church at Ephesus. When Paul writes Ephesians about five three later, these elders are still present in the church. But Paul never addresses them. Not once. Interesting, eh?

Now we are in Miletus. And Paul speaks to these elders. It is about A.D. 58. In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the elders, "Be on your guard for yourself and for all the flock, *among* which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." Notice what he says: "You, elders,

are *among* the flock, and the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Not *over* the flock; *among* the flock. Among the flock! Among the flock to do what? “To shepherd the church of God.” Not to control the flock, but to care for it. To serve it. The elders are overseers, not overlords!

The word “overseer” means one who looks out for the good of the saints, not for his own personal interests. Yet because overseers care for the saints, they are called shepherds also. And a shepherd (pastor) is simply a metaphor, it is not a title nor an office.

In the first-century churches, all the brothers and sisters take care of one another. *All* of them take care of one another! But the shepherds are the older, wiser ones that do it best. They are the *examples* for everyone else. Let me put it this way. Every brother and sister is to do what a true shepherd/elder does. The elders are but examples to all.

Now hold on to your chair. Get ready. It’s going to be heavy, brothers. Look at Acts 20:33. I want you to read very slowly verses 33 to 35. Follow this: “I, Paul, have lusted after no one’s silver or gold or apparel. Yes, you elders know that my hands have provided for my necessities, and for those who were with me. I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that *you*, elders, must support the weak. And remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He said, *It is more blessed to give than to receive.*”

Now, brothers, let’s get the scene. Paul, an apostle sent by God, spends three years raising up a church in Ephesus. Before he leaves, he acknowledges the older brothers, the elders. He says to them, “Take care of God’s people if there is a

problem.” He did not say, “Lord over them. Control them. Do all the teaching and preaching.” Nor did he say, “You are their leaders. They must obey you.” He didn’t say that.

Four years after the church in Ephesus is planted, Paul meets with the Ephesian elders at Miletus. He says them, “Brothers, the Holy Spirit has given you a gift to care for the Lord’s people. They are the flock *of God*; not your flock. It’s the flock *of God*, purchased with His own blood. You are *among* them, not *over* them. Brothers, when I was with you I worked with my hands. I paid for my own needs, and I also paid for the needs of the men I trained. By doing this, I gave you an example. Elders, shepherds of Ephesus, remember my example. That I did not take anything from God’s people! I gave to them! I did not take from them! Follow my example.” And that is what an elder is, brothers. He is a person that *gives*! He doesn’t receive! Brothers, think about this. Just think about it.

THE CHURCH IN PHILIPPI

Paul is now in Rome, and he’s getting ready to write his last letter to a church (as far as we know). He is an old man. He only has a few years left to live. He gets word that the church he planted in Philippi is having problems. This church is about twelve years old. There are elders there now that have emerged over the years.

Let me tell you the problems they are having. There are some sisters in the church who are fighting. There’s a family feud going on. They aren’t getting along. They’re ready to kill one another. Have you ever seen this? I certainly have.

The Judaizers have come again. They're saying, "You must be circumcised. You must follow the Law of Moses." Not only that, but some are saying, "We're under grace. It's okay if we sin. It's all right. Let's fill our bellies. Let's live for our flesh."

This church is in trouble, brothers. So Paul will write his last letter to this assembly. Let's look at how he addresses it. Philippians 1:1 says, "Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus *to all the saints* in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi. Oh, and by the way, this letter is written to the overseers also."

Paul simply says, "This letter is to the church first, and it is also to you too, elders." And then he writes the rest of the letter to the elders explaining to them that this problem is their problem. Is this what he did, brothers? No! A thousand times, no! The letter is written to the church! It's *to* the church and *for* the church! Paul never mentions or addresses the overseers again. He merely gives them a fleeting "hello" after he greets the church in the opening sentence. Then he never mentions the elders again. All of the instruction is given to the church.

PAUL TO TIMOTHY

We are in the year A.D. 63. Paul has been released from prison. The Ephesian church is being infiltrated with false teachers. And it doesn't seem that the church is handling it very well. Nor does it appear that the elders, the older men in the church, are dealing with the false teachings that some of the younger saints are buying into.

The church in Ephesus is about nine years old now. Paul has already acknowledged elders there.

We've already met them in Acts 20, when Paul visited them in Miletus. But about four years after Paul left Miletus, he wrote to his co-worker, Timothy—a young apostle. The letter is called 1 Timothy. And Paul says something interesting to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:1: “If there is any man in the church who aspires to oversight, he desires a good work.”

In the Greek, there is no word that means “office” in this passage. In fact, nowhere in the New Testament is an elder ever called an office. Translations that use the word “office” do not reflect the original reading. Oversight is a function, not an office.

Paul writes, “If there is a brother that is given to oversight, he desires something good.” And now, Paul does something quite interesting. He gives Timothy some of the characteristics of an overseer (an elder).

Now this is what you should be thinking at this point: One, there are already elders in Ephesus. Two, Timothy has been traveling with Paul for about twelve years now. Timothy should know what an elder is. Why would Paul have to tell Timothy what the characteristics of an elder are? He should already know. He has watched Paul acknowledge elders in more than one church. These are important considerations.

I'm going to make two conclusions. First, an elder is not an office. Neither is it a *static* function. There is no such thing as the concept “once an elder always an elder.”

Secondly, Paul wrote this letter to Timothy. In it, he gave him the characteristics of an elder. Timothy should have known them already. But he only should have known if eldership was a big deal. If it

was something very well known. Brothers, acknowledging elders was not a big deal in the first-century. Timothy had to be told about this. Perhaps it wasn't for his own sake. Perhaps Paul wrote these characteristics for the church's sake. Either way, it shows that God's people were not conversant about elders. It was not something defined and structured.

Remember, Ephesus is a church that is about nine years old at this point. Timothy had been working with and observing Paul for thirteen years, and yet Paul had to say, "Here are the characteristics of an elder."

Paul knew that the Ephesian church was suffering from false teachings. Apparently the elders who were there were no longer elder-ing properly. Or maybe they were falling short morally. 1 Timothy 5:19-22 may indicate this.

Yet here's the point. Timothy had to be told what an elder was—either for his sake or for the church's sake. Therefore, elderhood, eldership, and the characteristics of an elder, were not a big deal. This fact is perfectly consistent with the whole tenor of Paul's letters, as we have seen.

Near the end of the letter, in 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul mentions something interesting. Now brothers, do you remember when Paul was with the elders of Ephesus at Miletus and he said, "I worked with my own hands. I took nothing from the church. You follow my example. Jesus Christ said it is better to give than to receive. So you elders give and do not receive"? Do you remember that? Well, Paul is not contradicting himself in this letter.

Paul is telling Timothy, "Let the older men, the elders who guard well, be given double honor." The word for "guard" (poorly translated "rule" in some

translations) is the Greek word *proistemi*. And it means to guard or care for. It doesn't mean to rule. It doesn't mean to control. It means to guard and protect. Paul writes, "The elders who guard well and minister a lot are to be given double honor."

Listen to me brothers. Paul told the churches, "Honor one another" (Romans 12:10). All the brothers and sisters are to honor one another. He also said in his letter called Ephesians, "Submit one to another." Christians are to honor one another. They are also to submit to one another.

But the brothers who serve the most, those who give of their lives the most, they are worthy of *double* honor. Paul is telling Timothy, "Make sure the saints especially appreciate these brothers who labor extra for the church's well-being. Especially those who minister a lot in the meetings. Not who do *all* the ministry in the meetings. No! But those who teach more than the others. These people deserve greater respect."

Paul goes on to establish his point by saying: "Do you remember the Scripture that says that a working ox is worthy of food? The ox that works for you has a right to be fed. And also, an employee who works is worthy to be paid."

Follow me, brothers. An ox that works deserves food. An employee, a factory worker, deserves to be compensated with money for his hard labor. In the same way, the elders who serve well, who give their lives to the well-being of the sheep, are worthy—not of food or money—but of greater respect. This is the meaning of double honor.

Paul did not say the elders are worthy of a salary! He did not say they are worthy of a free meal ticket! He said they are worthy of greater honor. Remember, it was to the elders in Ephesus, these

same men, that Paul said about five years earlier, “I’ve worked with my hands. I’ve taken nothing from the church. I have only given to the church. Follow my example!”

PAUL TO TITUS

We are now in the year A.D. 64. God’s people are being persecuted because Nero, the Roman Emperor, is slaughtering the Christians in Rome. He’s torturing and killing them. Presumably, most of the saints that are mentioned in Romans 16 were killed. Some were burned alive by Nero.

Sometime during this persecution, Paul writes to Titus, another brother he trained and worked with. Paul, and perhaps Titus also, planted a number of churches on the island of Crete. Years later, things were falling apart.

So Paul writes to Titus saying, “Go to Crete. Things are falling apart in the churches there. They are also being persecuted. There is false and destructive teaching that they are accepting as well. Go there. It is now time to acknowledge the older, faithful men to help with this crisis.” And then he says, “Publicly acknowledge these men, the ones who are already serving and have the respect of the brothers and sisters. Acknowledge them. Recognize them in every church in Crete.”

Brothers, Paul did not say to acknowledge elders in every church in the world. Titus Chapter 1 has been used to justify such a practice. No! He said to acknowledge elders in every church on the island of Crete. This is the context. Then Paul does the same thing that he did with Timothy. He gives Titus the characteristics of a true overseer.

Why the characteristics? Because these men must not be overlords. They must not be controllers. They must be men who are trusted by God's people. So that they will not control the church. Their public recognition did not empower them to control the church nor to do all the ministry. But in times of crisis, the saints should look to them. And Titus is there to point this out.

Again, the characteristics of a pastor-elder were not very well known. Titus traveled with Paul for a long time, and Paul had to tell him what they were! Eldership, oversight, and shepherding were not given the kind of attention they are given today.

Finally, Paul writes his last letter before he dies. It is 2 Timothy. There is no mention of elders or pastors in that letter. Paul simply says to Timothy, "You are a worker. Be faithful with the Lord's work. And train other faithful men to carry on the work faithfully."

Timothy was a church planter. He was an itinerant worker. He traveled like Paul did. He planted churches, left them, and then continued to help them periodically. This is what he did. Paul encourages Timothy in 2 Timothy to continue to be faithful with that work.

PETER TO THE CHURCHES IN ASIA MINOR

Paul is probably dead (or he's imprisoned). The churches in Galatia and Asia Minor that Paul planted are suffering. They are being persecuted. Peter, the apostle, is in Rome. Now these churches need to be cared for by an outside worker. Peter knows that they are suffering so he writes them a letter to encourage them in their suffering. Galatia,

Bithynia, Asia Minor, etc. are Paul's territory. This is the Gentile world. These churches are made up, not mostly of Jews, but of Gentiles. But Paul cannot write them.

With the help of Silas, who was with Peter in Rome, Peter writes a letter to the Christians in Asia Minor and Galatia. It's called 1 Peter. Let's look at it. Peter opens with, "I am Peter. I am an apostle of Jesus Christ. I am writing to you who have been scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia" because of persecution.

Notice: Peter doesn't write to the elders. Like Paul, Peter writes to the churches. And everything he says is to the churches, until he gets to the last chapter. Do you understand the significance of that? The entire letter is to the churches. Only at the very end of the letter does he say a few words to the elders.

Brothers, hear this with the ears of your spirit. Peter knows that the churches are having a hard time. They are suffering. There is a tendency in men, in our human nature, to control God's people when things are going wrong among them. In our effort to protect them, there is a tendency to control them. Peter knew this. And this explains what he has to say to the elders.

1 Peter 5:1 says, "Therefore, I, Peter, speak to the elders who are among you." Notice his words: "*Among* you" . . . not *over* you. The elders are among the church, not over the church!

He goes on, "I am an elder—an old, faithful man. You also are elders—old, faithful men." Verse 2 says, "Shepherd [that means take care of] the flock of God." Let me tell you what the Greek says, "Shepherd the flock that is *among* you." Not under you.

Do you understand? The church is among the elders, not under them!

He continues: “Exercise the oversight.” He doesn’t say “exercise the overlording.” He says “exercise the oversight.” He is telling them, “Look out for the saints. Care for them; they’re hurting. You are older brothers, you know better. I am exhorting you to look after your younger brothers and sisters.” That’s what Peter is saying. He goes on: “Do not serve the church because you feel forced to. Do not do it for dishonest gain. Do not take from God’s people.”

Then we have verse 3: “Not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but by being examples to the flock.” Peter says to these elders, “Do not lord over the flock, but be examples to them.” He then says to the younger brothers and sisters, “You younger brethren, submit your heart, listen to, and give weight to what the elders say to you. Not because they have authority over you. Not because they have the right to control you. But because they are older in spiritual life.”

But as he closes in verse 5, Peter tells them all: “Be subject to *one another* in humility.” These are echoes of Paul’s words in Ephesians 5:21, “Submitting yourselves one to another . . .”

Now, brothers, listen to me. This is important. Peter is afraid that during this time of crisis the elders will start to lord over, control, take over, and exercise authority (*exousia*) over the church. So he says to them, “Do not lord over the flock.” These words “lord over” are translated from the same Greek word that Jesus Christ used in the opening passage that I read when he said, “The Gentiles lord it over (*katakuriuo*) those under them. The Gentiles have a hierarchy. But it is not so among

you.” Peter repeats the Lord’s words: “Do not lord over God’s flock!” . . . “Do not be overlords over God’s people!”

Brothers, none of us thinks that we lord over God’s people. But let me tell you something: If your people are afraid of you, you *are* lording over them! Your motive may be good. But if your people feel controlled by you, you *are* lording over them! Brothers, if your people feel that they have to get permission from you to make decisions in their private lives, then you are lording over them! Because you are putting fear in their hearts. You are making them feel controlled. You are telling them what they can and cannot do in their personal lives . . . like who to vote for, like whether or not they can attend a meeting held by another Christian.¹ Therefore, you brothers are lording it over God’s people!! And if that is not what it means to lord over God’s people, then you tell me what it means to lord over them?!!

God’s servants—we in this room—are called to set the people of God free. This is our ministry. You can visit any of the churches that I work with, and you will discover that they are not afraid of me. I do not tell them where they can visit. I do not tell them how to vote or use their money. I do not tell them what they can and cannot do. I set them free to be under Jesus Christ who is their only Lord. And brothers, they respect me. And if I ask them to do

¹ Note: According to the first-hand testimony of long-standing members of their congregations, the pastor-elders of Santiago had routinely told their congregations how to vote, how to use their money, what Christians they could and could not fellowship with, etc. Not a few of the saints in Santiago had expressed how terrified they were of these men.

something, I do not give them commands. I never command them to do anything. I, like Paul, beseech them. I ask them. And most of the time, they listen to what I say. But I do not control them. They are not afraid of me. Consider this, brothers.

I'm going to finish this quickly to make it complete. Peter writes another letter we call 2 Peter. It deals with heresies in the churches in the Gentile world. (Scholars think that he wrote this letter to the same churches he wrote to in 1 Peter.) Yet despite the fact that heresies were infiltrating the churches, Peter never mentions elders. He predicts the coming of false teachers and prophets. But he never mentions pastors as an antidote. Again, he writes only to the church.

JOHN AND JUDE

Now we come to the letters of the apostle John. In John's day, dangerous doctrines were coming into the church. Some of them were doctrines that taught that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh. John writes three letters. The first letter is to all the saints. Some have come with the doctrine that denied that Jesus was a human. And John presents Jesus Christ in simplicity: He is light, He is love, and He is life. He is God. John never mentions elders in his letter because the church was led by the saints.

In his second letter, John writes to "the elect lady," a precious woman. In other words, John is writing to a church. John sees the church as a girl, as a woman, as a Bride, just like Paul. In the third letter, we have a problem. John writes to the saints in Ephesus. They are being troubled. John sends workers to visit the church. But there was one man

in the church who was dominating the saints. He would not receive the workers that John sent.

John wrote, "There is a brother in the church who loves to have the preeminence. He believes God has called him to control God's people. He doesn't think he's controlling them. He thinks he is caring for them. But he is lording it over them. He will not receive me, and he will not receive the men I have sent. This man forbids the church to receive these workers also."²

Brothers, we have not so learned Jesus Christ!

But John never calls on the elders to deal with this problem. He instead concedes that the church has the right to be led astray by a controlling man if they choose to. While John will speak out against this and expose the problem for what it is, he cannot force them to follow his guidance.

Jude wrote his letter at a time when the believers were falling prey to damnable heresies. Jude's main burden was for the Christians to contend for the purity of their original faith in Jesus Christ. Interestingly, in the face of these heresies, Jude never mentions elders or pastors.

HEBREWS AND JAMES

The book of Hebrews was probably written by Apollos or Barnabas. We cannot be sure. Most of the Christians he is writing to are Jews. And many of them are being persecuted. As a reaction to the persecution from non-Christian Jews, these Jewish

² Note: It was reported that the elders in the room had forbade the Christians in their congregations from attending any of the meetings that Frank Viola was holding in Santiago.

Christians are regressing back to their Jewish rituals. Some of them have one foot in the church and one foot in the synagogue. Others are thinking of leaving the Christian faith because of the pressure.

This is a long letter. I think it is thirteen chapters. And Barnabas (or whoever wrote it) never mentions elders. He talks to the church all the way through until he gets to the very last chapter. In Chapter 13:7, he writes, “Brothers and sisters, remember those who labored among you and guided you. Who taught you the faith. Imitate them.” He’s clearly talking about the apostles here—those who planted and watered the church.

But as you read on, there is one verse that is of great interest. It also appears in Chapter 13. In Chapter 13:17, he says, “Brothers and sisters, obey those that guide and care for you so that their work will not be difficult, for they must give an account.”

Brothers, listen to me. The word “obey” in this passage is an interesting word. When you get home, you may check this out. For it is true. That word “obey” in the Greek language is not the normal word that is used for obey everywhere else in the New Testament. It’s not that word in this passage. The regular word for obey is *hupakuo*. It’s used in

³ For an indepth explanation of Hebrews 13:7 and 13:17, see *Who is Your Covering?*, Chapter 2. Here is a quote: “The word ‘rule’ in Hebrews 13:7,17,24 is translated from the Greek word *hegeomai*. It simply means to guide or go before. In his translation of Hebrews, NT scholar F.F. Bruce translates *hegeomai* into ‘guides’ (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT, Eerdmans). These texts carry the thought of ‘those that guide you’ rather than ‘those who rule over you.’”

such contexts as: “Obey the king.” “Obey the judge.” “Obey God.”

That word is not used here. Instead, it is the Greek word *peitho*. It means “allow yourself to be persuaded by.” So Barnabas is saying, “Let yourselves be won by, persuaded by, the elders.” It has this flavor. That when the older brothers speak in the meeting, or when the brothers come together to decide on an issue, and the more spiritually seasoned brothers—the ones who serve the most—say something, listen to what they have to say. Esteem what they have to say. And allow yourself be persuaded. Tilt toward agreeing with them.

Why? Because they serve the most. Because they are older and wiser. Not because they have a position. Not because they have some sort of official authority. But because they serve the most and are more mature in spiritual life.

The writer of Hebrews is not saying, “Obey them unconditionally.” No! The Greek means “let yourself be persuaded by” them. In all thirteen chapters, this is the only place where local leadership is mentioned. Then, at the very end of the letter, the writer says, “By the way, greet the elders.” That is the only other word about elders amid thirteen chapters of instruction to a church that is in danger of falling away from the faith of the gospel.

One book I have not mentioned is the book of James. It was probably written around A.D. 49, shortly after Paul wrote Galatians. James is from Jerusalem. He was an apostle. He wrote a letter to all the Jewish Christians throughout Judea. The ones who were scattered throughout Palestine after Saul of Tarsus had persecuted the church.

The churches in Judea were having the following problems: They were turning toward the world and becoming worldly. In fact, they were loving the world. They had a view of faith that was divorced from works. It was probably a misunderstanding of Paul's message of faith. But that's not all. The rich in the churches were mistreating the poor in the churches. The rich were taking the better seats, giving the poorer the lower seats. They were also arguing a lot amongst themselves. There was strife and contention in the churches.

So James writes, "To the elders." No! Just like Paul and just like Peter and just like John, James writes: "To the churches." All throughout the letter, James writes to the churches who are scattered everywhere in Judea. He writes to the twelve tribes, the Jews, who were part of the Christian churches. Everything he says is to the brothers and the sisters!

And then in the last chapters he says, "Oh and by the way, when there are sick people who can't make the meetings, let the older brothers, the elders, visit and pray for them." That's all James says about elders. He doesn't ask them to stop the worldliness nor does he blame the elders for it. The only thing he says is for the sick in the church to ask the elders for prayer. That's all!

Finally, we come to the Island of Patmos and the book of Revelation. The book of Revelation does not say anything about elders except that there are twenty-four elders in the heavenlies, and no one knows who they are.

CLOSING WORDS

I have a point brothers, and it is this: We have inherited a particular view of authority. We have inherited a mindset about leadership that does not come from Jesus Christ nor from the New Testament. It comes from the Roman world! And we have baptized it, we have made it Christian, and we have promoted it. But it is not of God! When you leave here today you are responsible. Because now you know. For you have heard.

May we be liberators of God's people and not overlords. And here is the important thing to remember, brothers: Many of you in this room may not see yourself as an overlord. But if most of your people do, then you are.

With these words, Frank sat down in his chair and said, "Thank you, brothers." The entire room was silent for a few moments as the men sat frozen in their seats. One of the elders then stood up and dismissed everyone for a lunch break. The lunch break was followed by a 3-hour question-and-answer session about Frank's message.

PART II

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

The following is an abridged version of the question-answer session that followed the message. Most of Frank's answers have been retained. Another gentlemen responded to some of the questions also. However, in order to release him from being held responsible for any of the controversial statements in this book, his answers have not been included.

Frank's opening:

Well, brothers, thank you for the meal. It was wonderful. I was talking to Reuben (*one of the elders*) right after our last meeting. I told him that I was very relieved that no one attacked me after the message. But he was very quick to inform me that the meeting is not yet over. (*Laughter*) As we are sitting here I am noticing something: You have arranged the chairs in such a way that we are a big bull's eye! (*Laughter*)

I want to say a few words about brother Rudi who has been trying his best to translate. He was sort of dragged here. It reminds me of a story.

There was a king many years ago who had a great kingdom with much wealth. He had a beautiful daughter who had come to age for marriage. The king sent out an announcement that the man who would marry his daughter would have to be the bravest man alive.

He wrote, "Send your bravest men to me. I have a great pool of water. Inside that pool are dangerous sea creatures; sharks, barracudas, man-eating whales, sting rays, and other dangerous creatures. Whoever wishes to take the hand of my daughter will have to swim across this pool of water. And whoever will swim to the end alive will receive my beautiful daughter in marriage."

So there were a number of men who responded to the king's invitation. They all lined up in front of the pool. But no one would jump in. An hour went by. No one jumped in. Two hours went by. No one jumped in. The king started to fall asleep. All of a sudden there was a great splash. Somebody was in the water. And he began to swim across the pool. He was kicking the sea creatures. Jabbing them,

punching them, and struggling for his life. Finally, he got to the end . . . alive.

The king jumped out of his seat and said, "I've never seen such bravery in all my life! You shall have the hand of my daughter, Sir."

But the man said, "I do not want the hand of your daughter."

The king was baffled. He said, "I don't understand."

The man said, "I don't want your daughter."

The king said, "I will give you my kingdom."

The man said, "I don't want your kingdom."

The king said, "I will give you great riches. Please, let me give you something. I have never seen such bravery."

The man said, "I don't want your money."

The king said, "Well, what is it that you want?"

The man stared at the king intently and said, "I want the man who pushed me in!!" (*Laughter*)

Rudi is like the man who was pushed into the water. (*Laughter*)

Question: What place does tithing have inside of the church?

Frank's answer:

Are there bulletproof vests in this room?
(*Laughter*)

If we approach the New Testament by lifting verses from various letters and putting them together, we can build a case that tithing is a New Testament practice. And therefore we can tell God's people that they must tithe. But if you look at the story of the first-century church, you will discover that the Christians did not pay tithes. It is not there.

The early Christians recognized that the tithe was part of the Old Covenant. The tithe was Israel's income tax to support the temple and to help the Levites who were not given an inheritance. But it was also for the purpose of supporting the widows, the fatherless, the poor, and the strangers. This rarely gets mentioned when ministers preach on tithing today.

Nevertheless, Jesus Christ has put to death that whole system. Today, all of us, all of God's people, are functioning priests. We, the church—God's people—are the temple.

Now here is something that I don't think any of you know. Historically, you cannot find Christians tithing until the eighth century. The eighth century! This is historical fact. The Christians in the first century did not tithe. The Christians in the second century did not tithe. The Christians in the third century did not tithe. It wasn't until 700 years passed that tithing became a Christian institution.

But that's not all. Brothers, it wasn't until the fourth century—under Constantine the Roman Emperor who converted to Christianity and made a Christian state out of the Empire—it wasn't until Constantine that the church had a paid clergy. Church leaders did not receive a salary from God's people until the days of Constantine.

Do you understand? Tithes were not practiced among the Christians until seven hundred years had passed after Christ. It was not part of the first-century church's practice. It was part of the Law. And we have been freed from the Law.

I know that Melchizedek was given tithes by Abraham. And I understand that this happened before the Law. But, brothers, may I make this observation? Abraham gave tithes to Melchizedek

only *one time*. So if you wish to hang tithing around the neck of God's people by using Abraham as an example, then you can only use it to support a one-time tithe.

Comment: The theme that brother Frank gave is broken up in several parts. The first one is a composition of authority and liberty. The second part is the elders in the church. The third part is the finances that the elders are using or are receiving their sustenance from. Therefore, that is where the questions should be based. But some people might break from the theme, and we would like to hear his responses anyway regarding the direction of the church.

Frank's response:

Brothers, if you take everything I said—the heart of it—the most difficult challenge in it has to do with two issues: Power and security. *Your* security.

We, as men, if we are honest, enjoy having God's people look up to us. We like this. But it has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. And it hinders the very thing that Jesus Christ came to do. Yet in our hearts, the dark part, we enjoy it. But it is the greatest obstacle to God's eternal purpose, even above Satan's direct work.

Your presence as ecclesiastical leaders that are put above God's people is a greater obstacle to God's eternal purpose than Satan's direct work. Because by your presence in the position that you are in, God's people are suppressed, oppressed, limited, and hindered. This is the truth.

As far as power and security go, you inherited this mindset. You inherited this practice in which

you make your living off of tithes. To change it, it takes a courageous, brave individual who comes to a point of desperation and says, "I don't care what it costs, I am not going to be part of something that hurts God's people." As long as you accept money from the Lord's people, you are part of a separate class. They will always look up to you in an unhealthy way.

Question: I was listening very attentively to what brother Frank shared this morning. And I have a problem. I'm going to give an example. In 1920, around that year in China, Watchman Nee began to start a movement in restoring the church. Brother Nee, in a time after that, wrote a book regarding his experience that he had that was translated as "The Normal Christian Church Life." He starts this theme of the wineskin. The wineskin is the structure of the church. God has given us the wine, but he has also revealed the wineskin. He hasn't left his initial theme of the wineskin.

And there is a point that I find very important regarding the wineskin. Brother Nee brought his book so that Austin-Sparks could revise the book. And he gave his opinion regarding the matter. Brother Sparks revised the book and generally was in agreement with the content of the book. But he made an observation that could come in the same manner. In the work of God, the life comes before the structure. The seed is before the tree. The seeds have their own trees with the fruit and the roots and every river goes in its own direction. In the same way, the life is before the form, and the life makes its own form. The absolute is the life. The form depends on the life. And he wrote at the end of his manuscript of brother Nee's book regarding the

church: “Of the churches and the work of God, to understand Christ in all of His parts and modes, is to know the church and the relationship of the church with Jesus Christ the Head. The church is a Body and a distinct organism.”

I feel that in your exposition there is a definition that is too closed. I believe that some of the things you say of the church are truth. That is to say, the elders are not over the flock. They are among the flock. Now, that is a very important point that I believe. It is a principle.

Secondly, you said that the only authority that exists in the church is Jesus Christ and that the believers don’t possess “exousia” or authority to tell people what to do and be obeyed. I also believe that, too. Now, what concerns me is that after listening to you guys, I feel that to make that model or pattern absolute you close the door for whatever other movement or work of God that looks to return to those original truths. The emphasis and the model aren’t exactly the same.

Frank’s answer:

Thank you for your expounding. (*Laughter*) I am impressed with your knowledge of brother Nee and brother Sparks. But I want to add some perspective. Nee wrote his book in 1939. Brother Sparks and brother Nee were both in agreement on the issue that life precedes form. Sparks had a problem with Nee’s idea of one church in a city, feeling it too technical and earthly.

When we raise up a church, we rarely if ever talk about form. We do not talk about the wineskin. We give the people the wine. We preach Christ. We give

them Christ. We show them how to know Christ. Out of that emerges naturally the *ekklesia*.

Now, we make an observation that when we read the New Testament as I have done this morning, the form that is our experience (not our doctrine) is the same form that we see in the New Testament.

In this meeting today, I am not speaking to new converts. I am not raising up a church. I am talking to men who already have a form. And I am challenging you tenderly, but with the hardest words I know how to express, that your form does not match the form that we find in the first century.

To put it another way, brothers, what I am saying is that among some of the brothers here (I don't presume to know you all), your form does not match the form of the Lord's life that we find in the New Testament. It rather reflects the forms that were created by human tradition.

You must understand that I do know about the churches that you oversee. And I do know that your churches are somewhat independent. Perhaps the things that I have heard from many people about their experience with your churches are all wrong. Perhaps your people are not afraid of you. Perhaps you are not controlling God's people. Maybe you're not receiving money from them. Maybe they don't look at you as having power over them. Perhaps all of them are making this up. If so, then I thank God the church is leading its own affairs rather than you men. But, brothers, you are not accountable to me. I have simply come here with a message. You are accountable to your Lord.

I will repeat something that I said in the beginning. It was my last words to you in my message. If your people are afraid of you, if they feel

controlled by you, if they feel suppressed, you may not think that you are an overlord, but you are.

My main message, brothers, is that God's people must be set free. That Jesus Christ was the most liberated person who walked this earth, and He is still this way. As God's servants, we are to be those who set people free. Especially God's people.

I am going to repeat: I am here because I was invited to come. I am not here to take any of your people. But, brothers, as sure as I sit here, the word that you heard was for many of you in this room.

Question: How do you deal with problems? How would you be able to discipline a situation like Paul did to those that were in the church disorganizing it, because sometimes they got off the track?

Frank's answer:

Very simple. As we learned earlier, Paul always spoke to the church. When the church departed from the Headship of Christ, as Corinth did, Paul told the church to handle the problem. He gave the church instructions. But most important, whenever he wanted the saints to act, he asked them. He beseeched them. He implored them. He requested of them. Very, very rarely did Paul ever make a command to a church. And when he did, he had the word of the Lord in his mouth. It was Christ's command, not his own.

This is discussed in my book, *Who is Your Covering?*. I list all of the passages where Paul asked the believers to follow his instructions. Brother, I do the same thing. If there is a problem in one of the churches I care for, for example, I do not command. I present the Lord. And I may ask

the church to handle it in a certain way if they don't know how to handle it already. Oftentimes we do not even address the problem directly. We present Christ, and He handles it through the saints.

Question: I would like to ask a question that probably you have already answered. But I would like to hear you again. What element of function does a local presbyter (elder) have? How do they provide for themselves economically? I think that you have responded to this question. And I do have an idea, but I would like to hear from you again on it.

Frank's answer:

In the first century, the presbyters (elders) were the spiritually seasoned men. Presbyter means "old man." They were local men. They had grown up within the church. They were not imported from somewhere else. They grew up in the church. They were always brothers among other brothers.

So "elder" is not an office and not a position. It is an older man. Because of their age, the elders were more seasoned and experienced than the others. Out of that came a heart to serve and care for the younger brothers and sisters. Paul uses a metaphor to describe this aspect of what they did. It is a metaphor. It is not an office. It is not a title. It is a metaphor to describe the fact that these older men cared for their younger brothers and sisters. The metaphor is "shepherd" which is often translated "pastor." Paul uses it only once in the New Testament.

Because these same brothers cared for the saints and watched out for their well-being they were also

called “overseers,” from the Greek *episkopos*. They watched, or “saw,” over the others. They had a heart to protect and to guard. This was natural. It was organic. They did this naturally because of their spiritual maturity.

All the brothers and sisters served. All the brothers and sisters cared for one another in the church. But these older brothers, as they grew up in time, excelled in service. They were the church’s examples of service.

Because of their wisdom, some of the elders (who could speak well) would sometimes teach in the meetings. But they would not monopolize the meetings. And they didn’t do all the ministry.

That was the short answer. For the long answer read my book, *Who is Your Covering?* They were the older, faithful brothers. That’s all. And by the way, they worked for a living in the first century.

Question: Regarding the text of 1 Timothy 5:17, I believe that the elder is an office because it comes out of the church. In some moment in the New Testament, the apostles formalized with the church the recognizing of an older brother and after that he takes the position as an older brother. First he is and then he is recognized. In Acts 14:23, he says, “The apostles constituted elders.” By subjugating the verb in Titus 1:5 we learn that Titus should establish elders. The subject of establishing is Titus, not the church.

Therefore, what I am saying is that the formalization of that elder in that moment in time was recognized publicly, and therefore the elder is in the position that is recognized by the church. At that moment, he begins to be in the office as an elder.

When the apostles constitute elders, the Greek verb indicates that it was by laying on the hands. In the churches nobody needs special recognition to function in the church. In 1 Corinthians 12, what Paul says is in the Body you have a ministry. God placed you in the Body. You can minister in the Body. You don't need special recognition to do it. If you are a prophet, if you are a pastor or a teacher, if you speak in tongues or whatever, you have that position in the Body. You minister to the Body. But, for the elders, something additional was required.

I don't say that it is clearly stated in the New Testament the same way that what you shared this morning is not clearly stated. It is an inference based on situations of a model that is like a puzzle for those who don't have all the pieces. You have to infer what was in that place where the piece is not there.

Now, the apostles established elders by laying on of hands. It wasn't necessary for any other member in the Body of Christ. Why is this?

Frank's answer:

Now this is beginning to get complicated. But you know what, brothers? If you want to make elder an office go ahead. But you cannot escape the fact that Paul does not write to the elders when a church is in crisis nor does he appeal to the elders. This is very important. So if you want to make it an office, fine. But it's an office that doesn't have a lot of authority. Not the way we think it does today.

But I don't believe it was an office. Let me explain.

First, the word “office” never appears in the original language when elders are mentioned. And official language is never employed.

Second, there are two times in the New Testament that we are told that the apostles acknowledged elders. In South Galatia and then in Crete. Also there is an implication that they were to be appointed or acknowledged in Ephesus through Timothy.

The Greek word for “appoint” in Acts is *kirotoneo*. The Greek word in Titus is *kathistemi*. Now if you look at how those words are used in first-century literature outside the New Testament, you will find something interesting. They do not mean “putting into a vacant position that has authority.” Instead, they simply mean “recognizing a function that was already existing.”

Question: Then why was it necessary?

Frank’s answer:

Public recognition of elders was not necessary everywhere nor in every church. It is only reported to have happened on three occasions. First in South Galatia around A.D. 49. Then in Crete and in Ephesus in the mid-60s. We are speaking where Scripture does not speak if we say it was necessary all the time. Laying hands upon men called elders appears nowhere else in Scripture outside these three occasions. (Also, it is not true that only elders had hands laid on them. Itinerant workers did also. Acts and the Timothy epistles make this clear.)

Now why were elders publicly acknowledged in Galatia, Crete, and Ephesus? We can’t be sure. I believe they were acknowledged in Galatia because

Paul did not know whether or not he would return there. Those were the first churches he planted. And we know from Galatians that he got sick on that trip.

Secondly, in Ephesus things were breaking down. This is clear from the context of 1 Timothy. False doctrines that led men away from Jesus Christ were circulating, and the saints were being drawn away by them. The elders in Ephesus that were already there didn't seem to be doing what they should have been doing. This is implied when Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "Be careful who you lay hands on and if you have to rebuke an elder, let it be by two or three witnesses." This could imply that the past elders were rebuked for something. About the same time things in Crete were breaking down also. This is clear from the letter to Titus.

The laying on of hands may have merely been a token of blessing upon these men wherein the apostles asked God to give them wisdom. We don't know. But we do know that it was not the installation of some authoritative office.

We have found in our experience that there are times when a church has grown to a certain point, or it is going through a particular crisis, that it is helpful to say to the saints (very informally), "Saints, if you undergo this kind of problem, take note of these certain brothers who are more mature, who have a real heart for the church, and who are wise. Look to them."

In other churches we don't do this. It isn't necessary. In Antioch there is no mention of elders. In Corinth there is no mention of elders. My point, brothers, is that we have taken 20th-century official authority that came from the Romans, and we have

superimposed it back into the first century. And we have turned elders-pastors into offices with power.

In history there is a man by the name of Cyprian of Carthage. He lived in the third century. He was a former pagan philosopher. He came into the church and taught that when a minister is ordained he enters into an office that has authority. And when he enters into that office he is over the church in authority. Through ordination, the minister becomes somewhat of a mediator between God and man. Cyprian of Carthage died around A.D. 250. He influenced the church with that teaching. Another man, Gregory of Nyssa who lived around A.D. 350, taught that ordination gives the minister both special authority and special holiness. It makes him a different class of Christian.

When the Reformers took the Catholic priests and made them Protestant pastors, they based their understanding of the pastor's authority on the teachings of Cyprian, Gregory, and a man by the name of Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius said that the pastor represents God, and the people must listen to the pastor for he is God's delegated authority over the people.

These three men took the Roman idea of official authority and brought it into the Christian church. You can check it out for yourself.

So I don't believe eldership is an office. If you do, fine. But if it was an office, it didn't have much power to it. The power and authority was in the church. I tried to make this clear this morning.

Oversight is mostly a passive role. I will give you a good definition of an elder. I hope you remember it. The elders are the brothers who pray with their eyes open. That's all.

Question: I want to know what the role of the father is in the family. I want to do a comparison between authority in the family and authority in the church. The authority in a family is the father. Is he among the family or is he over the family? Relate that to the spiritual authority of the church.

Frank's answer:

We believe in the family. But you cannot take our modern understanding of the nuclear family and apply it to the church of Jesus Christ, which is a Divine organism.

I think we err when we take the nuclear family and we apply it to the church strictly across the board. I have heard men say that in the nuclear family the father has the authority. The children must obey the father. Therefore, in the church the elders are the fathers. The rest of the saints are the children. So they must obey the elders.

Now you have a real problem with this because as we learned this morning, every letter that Paul wrote to the churches does not fit that mold. When Paul talks to the church he says, "brothers and sisters" or "brethren," which means the same thing. And Jesus Christ made this profound statement in Matthew 23: "Do not be called Rabbi for one is your teacher and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone father for one is your Father in heaven."

The church has a father. He is God. Everyone else is a brother and a sister. In connection with this, I think there is a big difference between delegated authorities as it relates to kings, judges, and secular government and authority in the church of Jesus Christ, which is a Divine organism that is not native to this earth. There is a total difference

between official and organic authority. It is not one principle that can be applied on both levels.

God disperses His authority in different ways when it comes to these different spheres. And it is the sphere of the church that we are discussing today.

Question: Regarding the word “honor” in 1 Timothy 5:17, I understood that you said it didn’t have anything to do with money or sustenance. But the context says this clearly.

Frank’s answer:

In this passage, the word means honor or respect. The context bears this out. Let me explain.

First, the specific Greek words that the New Testament uses for “financial payment” or “wages” is *misthos* and *opsonion*. These are not used in the Timothy 5 passage. The Greek word for “honor” in 1 Timothy 5:17 is *time*, and it means “respect” or “value.” (The word did not mean “honorarium” in the first century. It is never used that way in the New Testament nor in first-century literature.)

The elders who labor well are to be respected, or valued by the church. This same word is used in 1 Timothy 6:1 where Paul says for slaves to respect (*time*) their masters. In fact, the word *time* is used four times in 1 Timothy, and it means “respect” in every case.⁴

⁴ A different form of the word is used to refer to widows in 1 Timothy 5:3, but the same idea is conveyed. Widows deserve honor.

Second, all believers are called to honor (*time*) one another (Rom. 12:10). It would be absurd to think that Paul in Romans is telling the Christians to pay one another. The elders who serve well are to receive more honor—or greater respect.

Third, the fact that respect is what Paul had in mind is born out by the next verse (1 Tim. 5:19). Paul says that the elders are not to be accused (dishonored) unless there are two or three witnesses to confirm the accusation.

What I see Paul saying there is that just as an employee deserves money and just as a working ox deserves food, an elder in the church who serves the church well deserves double honor. Not single honor as all the brothers do, but double honor. That is, greater respect.

So I see him drawing an analogy. He is not talking about financial payment or a salary. If we take it that way then Paul contradicts what he said to these same elders of the church of Ephesus five years earlier (Acts 20). He told them not to take money from God's people.

Let me close with this one point. If you decide to push this verse to mean that God's people are to give money to elders, keep in mind this one fact. This is a passage where an older worker (Paul) is telling a younger worker (Timothy) that the elders may receive double honor. If you, as elders, tell the church they *must* give you money based on this passage, you are outside Biblical bounds. For if the passage means what you think—and I've given you reasons why it should not be taken to mean that—then you have no right putting this on God's people. That's the job of an extra-local worker who knows you and the other saints well.

Question: The development of the church in the first century is a dynamic process, not a static one. What happened in Jerusalem is not exactly what happened in Antioch. And not exactly what happened in Galatia. And not exactly what happened in Ephesus, etc. When Paul writes to Timothy we can suppose that there has been a developing of the church because the church is an organism that develops. If we only look at Jerusalem as a model, we lose a lot of the church. If we look then at the churches of the first century they weren't divided. There weren't any denominations. There was only one church. The church grows bigger more than what the church grows in your context.

In a small church, like yours, the elders could work. But in a dynamic development, the church grows a lot. Because of the organic growth of the church, some of the elders dedicate a hundred percent to the term of eldership. In Timothy it says the elders that govern well, especially those who work hard, the word translated means, "to work until you are tired," from teaching and sharing. They give their lives to preach and teach amongst the brethren because of the great number of disciples. They have to be a hundred percent dedicated to the church. And the organic growth of the church requires that job. That is not a paid pastor. That is just a necessity of the Body to pay for that person so that the Body can keep functioning. I don't see a contradiction between that necessity and the spirit of the New Testament.

Frank's answer:

Brothers, I do not believe that the first-century church evolved into something better. When you look at its development in the first four centuries, it devolved and digressed rather than evolved. I do not believe that a paid clergy, whatever you want to call it, men who are paid a salary—paid elders—was a positive or an organic development. I do not believe that was better than what was happening in the first century. No more than the evolution of the Catholic priesthood. These things happened quite early on in the life of the churches—within 300 years.

Let me say something else. If the church is functioning as it should—if extra-local workers are ministering to it periodically—if every member is functioning, bearing responsibility, ministering, and taking care of problems, I do not see why on earth any brother would have to stop working because he has to prepare for ministry! This, to me, indicates that the brotherhood has broken down. It indicates that the brothers have stopped taking care of the church. When that happens, a full-time “minister” becomes necessary.

Now I will tell you this: I have no problem with brothers and sisters in the church out of gratitude as part of the double honor, blessing some of the brothers that really shepherd the saints in whatever way they wish. Having them over for dinner. Blessing them with a financial gift from time to time. Buying them clothes.

But, brothers, that is not a professional clergy! And this is what the church turned into. We can find anything in the New Testament if we look hard

enough. But a salaried eldership is nowhere to be found in the New Testament.

Again, I give you the words of Paul to the elders in Ephesus: "Follow my example. It is more blessed to give than to receive." This is where I take my stand. This is where the brothers I meet and work with take our stand. And I will tell you something: It will change the way God's people look at you if you do not take their money.

Let me add something more practically. I have been a Christian a long time. And I have never seen in all of my life a man who received a salary from God's people who was not set apart from them as someone better, someone higher, and someone of a different class. Nor have I ever seen a local person who received a consistent salary from God's people not hinder the church's functioning. I'm not talking about traveling apostles; that's a different story. I'm talking about a man who is local. I have never seen such a person who is paid not hinder the functioning of God's people who they were serving.

Your motives in receiving funds from God's people may be pure. It may fit into what this brother is saying. But if there is so much of a need in your church for ministry that some have to quit their jobs, then the brotherhood is not functioning properly. And you will need outside help to change that.

Also, the saints *will* look at you differently. You are separating yourself from them by this practice. It does not fit the story because of this. I know this is a hard word, but it is true.

Question: I wanted to say that the apostle Paul was a temporal example. Paul did not always work with his hands. It was occasionally. In Corinthians,

he quoted Old Testament passages to found his belief to be sustained. But he was very honorable and renounced that right to be an example to the saints to be servants. Do not muzzle the ox. This was given to others who had a right to take money.

Frank's answer:

Brother, I appreciate you bringing that up. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul is making very clear that an apostle, a sent one, someone who travels to plant churches, an extra-local worker, has a right to receive money from God's people. As you said, Paul waived that right.

But that passage can only be applied to such people today. It is not talking about local men. It is not talking about elders. It is talking about extra-local workers.

Now I will say this to you. We travel and plant and/or encourage churches. We do not take money from God's people to support our own needs. We work with our hands. We pay our own way. We don't have to do this. We can receive support from God's people. Because of our calling we have that right, but we have chosen not to use it for the same reasons that Paul waived this right himself.

Now, as you said, when Paul was on the road, at times he received money from other churches that he planted. The only church that gave to him was Philippi. They gave him four gifts. That's all. He would not receive money from a church while he was working with the church. Paul says this in 1 Corinthians 9. He says, "When I was among you I did not take anything from you." But when he was traveling, he would receive help for his travels. Yet

only Philippi helped. 1 Corinthians 9 is to church planters, not to local men.

Question: Frank, is the leadership of the elders the principal problem that exists at this moment hindering God from having the church that He wants? Is this the principle problem? You said earlier that it is a greater problem than Satan's direct work. Is there another problem that God has, and that we should know about? We want to know what the most important things are that we should take away to co-work with God.

Frank's answer:

I appreciate your question. There are *many* problems that we have today. Many problems. I speak for all of us here. But I believe that the number one hindrance to seeing the glorious Bride of Christ function freely in all of her beauty is the modern pastoral role that we inherited from the Reformation and whose roots go back to the Catholic priesthood.

I believe that this is the number one hindrance to freeing God's people. To freely function as the Body of Christ means expressing Jesus Christ together. The pastoral role stifles that. This is my observation. I believe that today in this room, this is what the Lord is saying to us. This is the problem for us to deal with now.

Question: Brother Frank, the word you shared this morning, also with your books, does a very good recreation of the first century. It is very interesting. It puts out a new light on how the

church and the work functioned in the days of Paul. This is very interesting. But there is a risk.

This morning you recreated the story. The risk is to place the historical context at the same level of the Scriptures. And in one moment we do not know what is Biblical and historic and what is not Biblical. What is history? What is Scripture and what is novel or soap opera?

Therefore, I believe that the Bible stands on its own. Recreating the historical context is unnecessary. Instead of giving weight to the argument, you take away weight.

Frank's answer:

I will answer very briefly. It should take no more than two hours. (*Laughter*)

First of all, any time anyone comes to the New Testament, they are in need of interpreting what they are reading. You cannot read the New Testament without interpretation.

What most of us are taught to do is to interpret by lifting verses out of context, and then to put them together to build our doctrines. This is why we have thousands of different denominations in Protestant Christianity. When the New Testament was originally written, it did not have chapters and verses. Chapters were added in 1227. Verses were added in the 1500s.

So we have to interpret when we read. We cannot escape this. It's important that we weave together the book of Acts chronologically with the letters of Paul and the other epistles.

Brothers, if we don't do this then we can make the Bible say anything we want. It is too easy to do.

We have to know the historical context, the story if you will, to understand what we are reading.

The New Testament believers and the apostles did this. If you listen to them preach in the New Testament, Stephen and Paul for instance, they tell the story of the Old Testament in their messages. And whenever they quote Scripture from the Old Testament, they do it with a context.

I am writing a book that tells the story of the first-century church.⁵ It is not written in novel style, so there is nothing in it that is fictional. It is a synopsis of the first-century story. It is all based on the New Testament, the Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. It is also based on historical facts. Things that scholars know. No one disputes many of these facts. Example: South Galatia had four towns in it called Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. Many of the people there were poor and illiterate. We know this. This helps us to understand the New Testament.

What you heard this morning was based on the facts of the New Testament. And we looked at the Scriptures. All I did was put it in its proper context. Brother, you have a choice. You *are* going to interpret the New Testament. You cannot read it without interpretation. Are you going to interpret it out of order—out of context—by lifting verses from different letters and pasting them together? That is *not* the Word of God! The Word of God has a context!

May I make a statement, brothers? Something just happened in this room. A number of you

⁵ The book is called *The Untold Story of the New Testament Church*, and it is now available.

brothers got this idea in your head. You thought, “Ah, I will simply go through the New Testament. I will build my own model that will justify my present practice and what I am comfortable with.”

Brothers, do not do this. You have not so learned Christ.

Question: After hearing this, it looks like our structure is wrong. Our hearts know that we love the Lord. We are a church because we believe in the name of Jesus and we confess Jesus. It is complicated to ask questions because part of the base is that we should leave. You start from the base that we should leave some things and put it on the other side. What things unite us in Christ, Frank, to be together?

Let me explain. There are many brothers of this context who have read your books and have thought that they should leave us. And we have invited you so that we can be in unity. Can you give us some guidance on this?

Frank’s answer:

I’m going to repeat something that I said earlier. This is important. And it does answer your question. Brothers, our views of leadership are poles apart. If most of you in this room are honest, you will agree to that. Now that doesn’t affect my relationship as a brother in the Lord with you if you don’t allow it to. But I do not support and I cannot agree with this form of leadership. I want to repeat that even though we disagree, I am not going to take any of your people.

But I will tell you something. This is not a spooky prophecy, but it is what I see. If things do not

change, many of your people will leave. This will happen.

I want to repeat that your main task as the Lord's servants is to set God's people free. To serve them. Not to control them and never to put fear in their hearts.

To read the fascinating story of what happened in Santiago before and after this message was delivered, download the entire report at: www.ptmin.org/chile.htm

For further reading on the New Testament teaching regarding pastors/elders, see Frank Viola's books, *Rethinking the Wineskin* and *Who is Your Covering?*