

A Biblical and Practical Model to Find and Train Your Church's Next Lead Pastor

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1. Some Introductory Thoughts

- a. "Every pastor is an interim pastor." One day, you will resign, retire, expire, or leave for another ministry. Ideally, *you will have prepared your church for this transition and will have trained a pastor to take your place*, the main idea for my time with you today.
- b. Statistics from a 2019 study by the Barna Group indicate that roughly three quarters of protestant pastors are fifty-five years old or older and that pastors over the age of sixty-five outnumber pastors under the age of forty.¹ These statistics reflect the shortage that independent Baptist churches face as well.² If you don't train a replacement or lead your church to find this man and transition your ministry to his leadership, you might find no successor at all.
- c. The standard practice advocated by many is (1) to have a pastor say goodbye two months in advance, (2) to organize a search committee over the next three months while the congregation grieves the prior pastor's absence, and (3) to then find the church's next pastor over the next 6 to 24 months. If Paul told Titus to "put what remained into order" (Titus 1:5), this process defaults to putting the church *out* of order. I believe that the Bible gives a better way.
- d. I have tried to distill 82 pages of a Th.M. thesis into 45 minutes.³ The following scratches the surface. The footnotes can guide your study further.
- e. Some assumptions on my end include (1) congregationalism, (2) Baptist church polity, (3) churches can have one or more pastors, and (4) pastor (shepherds) = elder = overseer. I also assume that (5) the original apostles were the only apostles, but it is helpful to remember that their role was pastoral (cf. Acts 6:4; 1 Pet 5:1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1).

2. Five Principles of Interpretation

a. Scripture is sufficient to guide us in pastoral appointments.

- i. The *London Baptist Confession* (1689) succinctly defines *the sufficiency of Scripture*: "The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience."⁴

¹Barna Group, *Leadership Transitions: How Churches Navigate Pastoral Change—and Stay Healthy* (Ventura, CA: Barna Group, 2019), 7, 25.

²Bruce McAllister, "The Coming Shortage of Pastors and Missionaries," *FrontLine* (January/February 2021): 6–7.

³David Huffstutler, Th. M. thesis, "A Theological and Practical Model for the Appointment of a New lead Pastor in an Established Church" (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2021). If you would like a PDF copy of my thesis, email me at davehuffstutler@gmail.com.

⁴*London Baptist Confession* 1.1, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, ed. William J. McGlothlin (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911), 227.

- ii. Scripture states of itself that “all Scripture” is “profitable” for “the man of God” to “be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:15–17), pastoral succession included.

b. Scripture regulates how we handle pastoral appointments.

- i. For some, this “principle asserts that we are given a model for church government to which we are neither to add nor subtract.”⁵
- ii. While the absence of *instruction* about pastoral appointment keeps us from being too dogmatic about the matter, perhaps we could at least ask, if the Scripture *teaches* us by way of *apostolic pattern*, why do it any other way?

c. **The NT takes priority in teaching us about pastoral appointment**, which is to say that the NT directly informs “the church’s nature, mission, and order,”⁶ pastoral appointment included.

d. **Some passages in the NT take priority over others.** Bauder gives us three helpful principles:⁷

- i. First, “teaching (didactic or doctrinal) passages should interpret historical passages.”⁸ 1Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:6–9 teach requirements but not appointment.
- ii. Second, “clear passages should interpret obscure passages,” which means that “a passage that can mean only one thing should be used to interpret a passage that could possibly mean several things.”⁹ Acts 6:1–6 gives many details for appointment helping us to understand what may be missing in briefer, less clear passages (Acts 14:21–23; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22; Titus 1:5).
- iii. Third, “deliberate passages should interpret incidental passages.”¹⁰ No didactic passage deliberately commands or teaches the church how to appoint a pastor as, say, 1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 deliberately list out the requirements for pastors. The question is just how incidental or deliberate historical passages might be.

e. Historical texts can *teach* us about pastoral appointment.

- i. Jamieson argues that if “in general, apostolic practices functioned as a binding precedent for all churches (cf. 1 Cor 11:16), then the apostolic practice of

⁵Samuel E. Waldron, “Plural-Elder Congregationalism,” in *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville, TN: B & H, 2004), 203. In this same book, see also James R. White, “The Plural-Elder-Led Church,” 257.

⁶Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Disinfectives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 20.

⁷*Ibid.*, 13–16.

⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

“matters of church leadership and structure” should likewise function as a binding precedent as well.¹¹

1. In quelling division in the church, Paul stated, “That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as *I teach them everywhere in every church*” (1 Cor 4:17).
 2. In giving instruction about marriage, “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. *This is my rule in all the churches.*” (1 Cor 7:17).
 3. “If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have *no such practice, nor do the churches of God*” (1 Cor 11:16).
 4. Paul’s instruction about who speaks in the church was written to the Corinthians, but his instruction for them was the same “*as in all the churches of the saints*” (1 Cor 14:33; cf. 14:33–35).
 5. Regarding persecution, the Thessalonians “became *imitators of the churches of God* in Christ Jesus that are in Judea” (1 Thess 2:14).
- ii. New Testament letters indicate this consistency as well by prefacing their teaching with addresses to multiple churches, to Christians across a large geographic region, or to Christians in general (Rom 1:7; Gal 1:2; 1 Pet 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1; cf. Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).
 - iii. So, if we see that the New Testament *consistently describes* how pastoral appointments are taking place as led by the apostles, I believe that we can see these descriptions as *instruction* for us today.

3. Six important texts help shape our theology of pastoral appointment.

- a. **A Teaching Text: 2 Tim 2:2:** Train pastors to take your place.
 - i. If ever a text taught how to appoint your church’s next pastor without using the words *pastor* or *appointment*, this would be it.
 - ii. Just as Paul had entrusted (1 Tim 1:18, παρατίθημι) Timothy with the charge to guard the good deposit (1 Tim 6:20, παραθήκη, the noun form of παρατίθημι), so also Paul commanded Timothy to entrust (παρατίθημι) “what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses... to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.”
 - iii. This text qualifies the recipients of Timothy’s teaching in three ways.

¹¹Bobby Jamieson, “Why New Testament Polity Is Prescriptive,” *9Marks Journal* (July–August 2013): 14.

1. First, they must be “faithful,” perhaps shorthand for the requirements found in 1 Tim 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.
 2. Second, they must be “men” (ἄνθρωπος), a requirement of those who teach the church (cf. 1 Tim 2:11–12).
 3. Third, they must “be able to teach others also” in order to perpetuate this process of teaching, also a requirement for pastors (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9).
 4. At the least, these qualifications are true of pastors.¹² At the most, Paul had pastors in mind when describing the recipients of Timothy’s teaching.¹³
- iv. As pastors teach faithful men who can teach others as well, a church will potentially have men ready to replace a pastor, whether the pastor is the only pastor in the church, one pastor among others, or one who leads the others. This process requires a pastor to train potential pastors, give them opportunities to teach, and share his pastoral leadership.¹⁴

b. A Clear Text: Acts 6:1–6: Here’s how the church appointed deacons.

- i. Acts 6:1–6 clearly describes how to appoint officers, a precedent assumed in Acts 14:23.
 1. The apostles led and “summoned the full number of the disciples” (Acts 6:2).
 2. The church was to “pick out from among” themselves “seven men” who would oversee feeding the Hellenist widows (Acts 6:2–3).
 3. The church approved of the process as “what they said pleased the whole gathering,” and the church “chose” the seven and “these they set before the apostles” (Acts 6:5–6).
 4. The apostles led the process to its conclusion as they “prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:6) in fulfillment of their role to “appoint” (καθίστημι) these men “to this duty” (Acts 6:3).
 5. In summary, the apostles (functioning very much as pastors; cf. Acts 6:4) led a church-approved process to appoint deacons.

¹²Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 635.

¹³White, “The Plural-Elder-Led Church,” 271.

¹⁴Phil A. Newton surveys contemporary models for how this training might take place (*The Mentoring Church: How Pastors and Congregations Cultivate Leaders* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2017], 143–77). See also Glen Currie and Joey McNally, “Leading through Pastoral Succession: How our Story Can Help You” (paper presented at the E3 Pastors Conference, Allen Park, MI, 19 October 2018), 1–3; Marshal Fant III, “Transition a Church to a New Pastor,” *FrontLine* (January/February 2021): 19.

- ii. Luke briefly describes the congregation’s approval of pastors in Acts 14:23, but leaves the reader to assume the rest the appointment process already described in Acts 6:1–6.¹⁵
 - iii. For 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:22, and Titus 1:5, Paul focused only on the role of the council of elders, Timothy, and Titus. Paul omits the role of the congregation, but with Acts 6:1–6 as a guide, one may assume that the congregation was similarly involved in these pastoral appointments.
- c. **A Text That Starts a Pattern: Acts 14:23:** The church appointed pastors in the same way.
- i. Paul and Barnabas clearly led the process of appointing elders in Acts 14:23. The implied subject of the verb “appointed” (χειροτονέω) is translated “they,” referring back to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:19–20.
 - ii. Though χειροτονέω can refer to a unilateral appointment of one by another,¹⁶ this instance likely retains its literal meaning, to “stretch out the hand” in voting.¹⁷ Paul and Barnabas can thus be said to have “appointed” these elders by having led the churches to elect them by congregational vote.
 - iii. Though briefly described, this process in Acts 14:23 parallels how the Jerusalem church appointed the seven in Acts 6:1–6.
- d. **The Pattern Continues with Pastors: 1 Timothy 4:14:** Pastors (and probably Paul) appointed Timothy to his ministry.
- i. “The gift” was everything involved for Timothy’s ministry—his leadership role and its necessary Spirit-given abilities. “The prophecy” was likely much like Acts 13:2–3, a prophet’s Spirit-given affirmation of Timothy’s calling.¹⁸ As to setting, the men who appointed Timothy could have been from Lystra (Acts 16:1–3),¹⁹ Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim 1:3),²⁰ or both (cf. Acts 9:17; 13:3).²¹

¹⁵Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 921.

¹⁶Richard Beckham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964). Beckham notes that the related word προχειροτονέω speaks of God’s having “chosen” the apostles in Acts 10:41.

¹⁷BDAG, s.v. “χειροτονέω,” 1083; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 921; Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory of Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894), 349; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 3:233–34.

¹⁸John F. MacArthur, Jr., *1 Timothy*, MNTC (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 179–80.

¹⁹Ibid.; Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1–2 Timothy and 1–3 John* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2006), 261.

²⁰Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 71.

²¹I. Howard Marshall and Philip H. Towner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, ICC (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 568.

- ii. “The council of elders” (πρεσβυτέριον) is a collective term referring to the elders of a church (or churches) who laid their hands on him.²² This council likely included Paul (cf. 2 Tim 1:6).²³
- iii. If a group of pastors could lay hands on Timothy for his ministry, it follows that, assuming congregational approval, a pastor or group of pastors in a local church or from sister churches could lay hands on men to appoint them as pastors as well.

e. **The Pattern Continues without Apostles: 1 Timothy 5:22 and Titus 1:5**

i. 1 Tim 5:22

- 1. 1 Tim 5:17–21 instructs Timothy regarding the reward and rebuke of pastors. Pastors continue to be in view in 1 Tim 5:22–25.
- 2. Timothy’s role, likely with the other elders in Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim 4:14), was to appoint other elders by the laying on of hands.

ii. Titus 1:5

- 1. Titus was to “appoint elders” in the churches in Crete.
- 2. The verb “appoint” (καθίστημι) is used in Acts 6:3, which could indicate that Titus led the churches to appoint pastors as the apostles appointed deacons in Acts 6:1–6.²⁴

- iii. The absence of the congregation in these texts does not absent the congregation from this process. Paul simply focuses on the roles of Timothy and Titus.

f. **Conclusion:** The apostolic pattern of pastoral appointment was pastor-led, congregationally-approved appointments of pastors. This process continued in their absence. This pattern is instructive for us today. So...

- i. Teach a faithful man to take your place.
- ii. Secure the church’s approval for him to be the pastor and for the process as to how he will take your place.
- iii. Appoint him to take your place.

²²George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 209; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” *SBJT* 7 (2003): 10; John P. Meier, “*Presbyteros* in the Pastoral Epistles,” *CBQ* 35 (July 1973): 339–42; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 262; Aída Besançon Spencer, *1 Timothy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 117; Quinn and Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy*, 402; Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, 259.

²³Benjamin Griffith, *A Short Treatise Concerning a True and Orderly Gospel Church*, in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life (A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents)*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 107; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 262..

²⁴Bauder, *Baptist Disinctives and New Testament Church Order*, 95.

iv. Make a smooth transition.

4. Using our theology as a filter, we can find some safety in an abundance of counselors on the matter of pastoral appointment (cf. Prov 11:14).²⁵

a. Outgoing Pastor

- i. *Commit yourself to training pastors.* This takes focus and time. Your ministry can have continuity by training a pastor and making a transition in the pastorate to him.
- ii. *Be faithful.* Brevity and ineptitude may damage your leadership to find the church's next pastor.
- iii. *Plan.* Two factors often keep pastors from handing over the reins:
 1. *Money:* Save your finances for a future without income. Have your church save a year's salary if you need to overlap with the incoming pastor.
 2. *Ministry:* Determine where and how you will serve in the future. If you stay in another role, this needs to be agreeable to the church and incoming pastor. Perhaps a sabbatical is best to let the incoming pastor lead for a time without your presence. When you return, plan to meet regularly to iron out the wrinkles.
- iv. *Communicate, communicate, communicate,* every step of the way.
- v. *Support the new pastor.* Your criticism could kill his ministry.
- vi. *Be humble.* "The main ingredient in a transition is the humility of the outgoing senior leader."²⁶

b. Incoming Pastor

- i. *He can do this.* If trained in-house for this transition, the incoming pastor is simply taking on a more public role. He knows the church, whatever might be its beliefs, distinctives, and size.
- ii. "*Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth*" (Prov 27:1). Without the preexisting confidence of the outgoing pastor and church, a failed vote could divide the church, necessitating a disappointing departure for an assistant pastor.

²⁵This entire section condenses a chapter from my thesis, "Recommended Practices for an Established Church Appointing a New Lead Pastor."

²⁶Bob Russell and Bryan Bucher, *Transition Plan: Seven Secrets Every Leader Needs to Know* (Louisville, KY: Ministers Label, 2010), 10. See also Jim Ozier and Jim Griffith, *The Changeover Zone: Successful Pastoral Transitions* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2016), 25; Terry Roberts, *Passing the Baton: Planning for Pastoral Transition* (Self-published, CreateSpace, 2015), 18–19.

- iii. *Realize the relational shift.* The church will have to adjust to his newfound role. If there are fellow pastors, they will have to adjust from him as an equal to being first among equals, which is sometimes hard to do.
- iv. *It takes time to say goodbye.* The incoming pastor needs to sympathize with the congregation when a shepherd shepherds no more. Their memories of “the good old days” are not necessarily criticism of how things have become to be under the new pastor.

c. The Church

- i. *Change is never easy, but it doesn't have to be hard.* A church that trains pastors, plans well, and communicates clearly about the future can be led well through a pastoral transition.
- ii. *Give honor where honor is due.* Give a good goodbye the outgoing pastor. Celebrate the new ministry of the incoming pastor. (And pastors, as humble as you may be, let them do this.)

d. Interim Pastors

- i. *Interim pastors can help a church take its next step.* This role might look more like Acts 14:23 than that of a regular pastor—someone who has a priority to help the church to find its next pastor.
- ii. *Interim pastors can help a church in crisis.* An interim pastor especially helps in the event of a pastor's death, disqualification, or abrupt departure.

e. Pastoral Search Committee

- i. This committee can be helpful if it somehow has *pastoral leadership*.
- ii. Ideally, that leadership *comes from the church* in search for a pastor.
- iii. Yet more ideally, the committee can *search among the church's own men*, already trained, to be the church's next pastor.

f. Planning for a New Lead Pastor

- i. *Plan for anything.* Have both immediate and long-term transition plans and codify these plans in their bylaws. Whether death or retirement occurs, your church will know what to do. As you age, suggesting a backup plan in the event of poor health can helpfully provoke discussions for long-term planning.
- ii. *Plan ahead.* A pastoral transition can take 6–12 months. Finding a guy can add another 6–24 months. If overlapping ministries, the process is even longer. Try to determine your last year as a pastor ten years in advance and then carry out these steps accordingly.

g. Transitioning to a New Lead Pastor

- i. A *delayed transition* means that a pastor steps down, the church looks for the next pastor, and finally they find him. “This is a huge challenge to most churches; as momentum and direction is lost, some members leave the church, and giving often goes down as well.”²⁷
- ii. If possible, have an *overlapping transition*.²⁸ Roberts summarizes this process: “A good transition plan can unite pastor and people. The pastor can select and mentor a qualified candidate, bringing the congregation in the process through teaching, communication, and ultimately, by their vote of approval.”²⁹ As the incoming pastor has the opportunity to shepherd, preach, and know the church, so also the church will hear, follow, and know him as a shepherd. It will be natural for him to assume this new role.
- iii. If nothing else (e.g., my own experience in becoming the pastor here at FBC Rockford), a *sequential transition* can allow an incoming pastor to begin his ministry immediately after the outgoing pastor has left. The outgoing pastor could help the church find a new pastor, prepare him for his ministry, and assist him as necessary after stepping down.

h. Continuing with the New Lead Pastor

- i. Give honor where honor is due. Honor the outgoing pastor. Give him a sabbatical if he is staying on in another capacity.
 - ii. Celebrate the new pastor with an appropriate installation service.
5. **Conclusion:** Pray that the Lord would send a laborer to continue the Great Commission harvest. Maybe he’s already in your church. Train him. Plan for the future. Communicate with the church. Step down and support the new guy. As you do so, you will have entrusted a faithful man to faithfully lead your church.

²⁷Henry A. Virkler, *Choosing a New Pastor: The Complete Handbook* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 73. See also Robert Green, “Passing the Baton: A Theological and Practical Look at Pastoral Turnover,” *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 10 (Spring 2006): 79–80.

²⁸Carolyn Weese and J. Russell Crabtree, *The Elephant in the Boardroom: Speaking the Unspoken about Pastoral Transitions* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 141.

²⁹Roberts, *Passing the Baton*, 21.

Appendix: A Summary Plan for an Outgoing Lead Pastor
to Lead His Church to Appoint a New Lead Pastor

All ages are approximate. *Clarified instructions for single-pastor churches are in italics.*

Beginning of Ministry	Train qualified men to be pastors.
60 years old	Notice a decrease in one's energy levels or other signs of aging. Personally evaluate who might be the next lead pastor. Speak to church leaders and officers about an emergency plan in the event of one's untimely death. Update church bylaws as necessary.
60–68 years old	Give potential replacements increased opportunities for leadership and preaching. Identify which man might best become the church's next lead pastor. Privately ask mature leaders in the church what they think of this man as a potential replacement. As they confirm who this may be, ask this man if he would be willing to take this role and secure his positive response. <i>Lead the church to budget for two salaries for when an incoming pastor overlaps with the outgoing pastor.</i>
68 years old	Initiate private discussions with church leadership and officers to announce one's desire to step down and recommend one's replacement. Follow steps in church bylaws to appoint the next lead pastor. Settle one's finances and future ministry for when one finally steps down. Privately announce one's retirement to key individuals within the church. <i>If necessary, lead the search process for the next lead pastor.</i>
69 years old	Publicly announce one's desire to step down and recommend one's potential replacement to the congregation. Lead the congregation to vote for this man as the next lead pastor. Serve with the incoming pastor, gradually decreasing one's own responsibilities while giving them to the incoming lead pastor.
70 years old	Formally step down as lead pastor and install the new lead pastor. Support the new pastor through regular meetings and advice. Allow the church to celebrate your tenure and rejoice in the new pastor in appropriate services and events. If staying at the church, take a sabbatical for