

4. Real Churches Call Empowering Elders

Our elders need new insight on their role and responsibilities.

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:1-4)

Churches call them elder boards, church boards, deacons and deaconesses, the trustees, or the board of directors. Whatever the plurality of senior leaders in a church is called, Acts 6 gives valuable insights. Most of the biblical passages concentrate on the character of the people who serve in senior leadership in the local church (see 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1). Acts 6 is the only story in Scripture I know that describes the actual functioning of a "church board." For a more thorough treatment, see my book, *E³: Effective, Empowering Elders*.

Some churches say they are "elder rule." Other churches claim "congregational governance." Still other churches identify themselves as "staff led." How do you describe church government in a single sentence? Single sentences can be too simplistic, but they can also be useful.

Try this: *Pastor (and staff) led, board governed, with congregational authority; all accountable to Jesus Christ*. Every dream needs a team and every team a leader. The pastor needs to lead ministry leaders who lead the ministries of the church. Pastors also need a plurality of senior leaders for good governance, and that's what this chapter is all about.

At the same time, the priesthood of every believer is respected when there are congregational meetings where the members have final authority on the big decisions: pastors, elders, budgets, and buildings. *Pastor led, board governed, with congregational authority* is a functional structure that empowers leaders to equip all God's people.

What is board governance? Remembering that the book of Acts and this passage in Acts 6 is descriptive and not prescriptive. I believe that we can find some timeless truths here that will help church boards today be more effective.

Effective boards pray

"We will turn this responsibility over to them and *will give our attention to prayer* and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3-4, emphasis added)

The apostles guided the church toward the priority of prayer and the Word of God. The senior leaders of the local church must lead in prayer. How do you guide the ministry of prayer in your church? Larry Osborne, senior pastor of North Coast Church in San Diego, California, describes how he established "The Shepherd's Meeting."

When I entered the pastorate, I wasn't so naive as to expect board meetings to be the high point of my ministry. But I didn't expect them to be the low point, either. Yet by the end of my first year, I couldn't think of anything less appealing. I was dismayed by our lack of trust and unity, ignorance of church growth principles, and inordinate time spent on trivial details.

Frustrated by our inability to find time to deal with these vital areas, I hit upon an idea. Why not schedule an extra monthly meeting to deal with them exclusively. I wasn't sure if the board would go for it, but they agreed to try the meetings for the rest of the year. So I put together a series of "shepherding meetings" to zero in on three areas: (1) team building, (2) training, (3) prayer....

We meet on Saturday mornings — we stay away from all forms of decisionmaking. No votes are allowed, no minutes taken... We begin with breakfast, usually in a home — once we set aside a time and place just for training, people brought their books and articles marked, and their assignments completed.... When we gather to pray, we follow some basic guidelines.

First, we limit the time spent sharing requests. It's too easy to spend thirty minutes talking about what to pray for and ten minutes praying. So most requests are brought up as we pray. If something needs an explanation, it's included in the prayer. If a person needs clarification, he interrupts and asks for it.

Second, we pray conversationally, with each person praying for no more than one item at a time. Third, we pray for individuals by name, and we pray specifically.... and candidly. (Osborne 1989, 89-96)

Many churches encourage all believers to participate in a weekly prayer meeting. Many of us grew up with Wednesday night prayer meetings that strengthened the ministry of prayer. In our church in Moscow, we practiced an hour of prayer before the worship service.

A church I know of in Tennessee set apart an hour every Friday morning for the elders and the previous elders to come and pray for the needs of the church. I know churches that set apart an hour of prayer during the worship service so God's people can go to the throne and make intercession. If the elders do not oversee the ministry of prayer in the local church, who will?

Effective boards protect

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them *complained* (Acts 6:1a emphasis added).

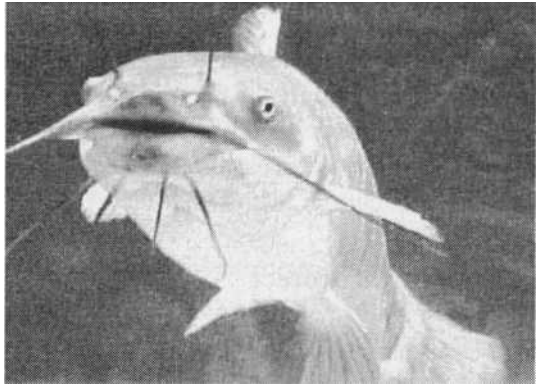
"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:28-31a)

Effective elders discern the difference between catfish, and dragons, lions, and wolves. Different kinds of people fill our churches. Paul warns of wolves. In my first pastorate, I ran into them. For some time, I saw a wolf under every bush. Now, I see different kinds of creatures in the church. Chuck Swindoll writes of catfish in the church.

In the Northeastern United States, codfish are not only delectable; they are a big commercial business. There is a market for Eastern codfish all over, especially in sections farthest removed from the Northeastern coastline. But the public demand posed a problem to the shippers. At first they froze the cod then shipped them elsewhere, but the freeze took away much of the flavor. So they experimented with shipping them alive, in tanks of seawater, but that proved even worse. Not only was it more expensive, the cod still lost its flavor and, in

addition, became soft and mushy. The texture was seriously affected.

Finally some creative soul solved the problem in a most innovative way. The codfish were placed in the tank of water along with their natural enemy, the catfish. From the time the cod left the East Coast until they arrived in its westernmost destination, those ornery catfish chased



the cod all over the tank. And you guessed it; when the cod arrived at the market, they were as fresh as when they were first caught, and there was no loss of flavor nor was the texture affected. If anything, it was better than before. God is committed to the task of working in us, developing us, rearranging us, firming us up, and deepening us so that the characteristic traits of His Son begin to take shape. (Swindoll, in the weekly newsletter of the First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton, California)

Dragons are another kind of people in our churches. Marshall Shelley's helpful book *Well-Intentioned Dragons* describes them. "Within the church, dragons are often sincere, well-meaning saints, but they leave ulcers, strained relationships, and hard feelings in their wake" (Shelley 1994, 11). Dragons may be hot about what they believe. They may singe hair with their hot breath. Dragons may act a bit strange compared to normal sheep, but they are well-intentioned. Wolves are not.

Wolves are the worst. Paul warned the church of Ephesus that wolves are so dangerous because: "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). We trust them, but they turn on us.

Wolves distort the truth. Truth is often elusive as it delicately dances through life. Truth like the Trinity, the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, the inerrancy of Scripture, and justification by faith are hard to grasp and easy to distort. The truth of what is really going on in a leader's life can be hidden, dark, and distorted. The discernment of how to handle a difficult problem in the church can be distorted.

Wolves distort the truth and divide the flock. Catfish nip at our

heels, dragons singe people, but wolves are out for blood. They take truth and twist it to gain a following. “This is a self-willed person who thinks he is right, and who goes from person to person in the church forcing people to make a choice” (Wiersbe 2003, 268). Titus 3:10 tells us what to do. “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him.” Wolves call for church discipline, removal from membership, or dismissal from staff.

Sometimes we are dealing not with a wolf but a lion. In one of my ministry positions, I was challenged in a staff meeting by another staff member. During the meeting, I confronted him in a respectful but clear way. I determined that if he crossed a line of respect again or if he became divisive again, I would warn him a second time. After that, I would ask our board to remove him from our team following the counsel of Titus 3:10. Thanks be to God, I discovered over time that he was not a wolf; he was a lion. Lions are confident and they are not afraid to speak their minds. They will attack if they believe it is necessary and they do not easily back away from an issue. But I have discovered that if we take the time to tame a lion, lions can be solid teammates in the jungle we call ministry.

Effective boards process

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve *gathered all the disciples together...* (Acts 6:1-2, emphasis added)

In Acts 1, there were 120 people. By Acts 6, there were thousands of believers and the apostles decided the care of widows demanded a congregational meeting. This is descriptive and not prescriptive. One principle I see in this decision to gather everyone together is *the apostles guided a process that honored the priesthood of the believer*.

There are three common detours that take a church in the wrong direction when it comes to an Acts 6 type of crossroads. These three detours will undercut trust rather than build the confidence of a congregation.

Detour #1: Overlook the critical concern

Everyone is watching at the crossroads of complaints: “Will our leaders give wise oversight or overlook it?” Unhealthy boards turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to needs, especially if they are the needs of foreigners (Greeks), and the poor and powerless (widows). Care of widows was their low-grade infection. The apostles did not ignore it. If they had overlooked it, it would be like a leaking roof; it would just get worse.

Detour #2: Try to fix the critical concern personally

The Twelve could have fixed the problem by dividing up the city. “Peter, you take the center of Jerusalem. Andrew, you live out west.” People will often let the leaders fix problems. It is easy and simple. But it does not develop people, and it wears out a few leaders. It develops dependence rather than mature sons and daughters of God.

At one point in the life of our church, the board decided to assign new families to each of the board members for basic care. This sounded good, but it never worked. The board members were already overloaded. This can plateau a church at the level of care the existing leaders can provide, and it can be difficult to recruit new board members. Finally, we moved to Adult Bible Fellowships and small groups as the primary vehicles for equipping God’s people to care for one another.

Detour #3: Turn to the same old trusted friends

The twelve apostles did not try a quick fix to the problem by turning the situation over to a few trusted friends. Larry Osborne, in his book *Sticky Teams*, has a great chapter on the young eagles in a church. “When all the good and influential seats on the bus are filled by old-timers ... it crushes the spirit of the young eagles” (Osborne 2010, 121). The twelve apostles did not overlook the problem, or try a quick fix, or turn to friends.

Effective boards empower

It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare* [equip] Gods people for works of service. (Ephesians 4:11- 12a, emphasis added)

"We will *turn this responsibility over* to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3b-4, emphasis added)

Empower is the modern word. Equip is the biblical word. The Greek word, *katartizo*, is a word rich with meanings that are instructive for us.

- ***To mend nets*** (Matthew 4:21 and Mark 1:19). "It does not necessarily imply, however, that that to which it is applied has been damaged, though it may do so, as in these passages; it signifies, rather, right ordering and arrangement" (Vine 1966, 174).
- ***To bring together opposing factions*** so that the government can go on. "The basic idea of the word is that of putting a thing into the condition that it ought to be" (Barclay 1976, 149-150).
- ***To frame***. The idea is, again, right ordering and arrangement. "By faith we understand that the universe was formed [framed] at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (Hebrews 11:3).

One of the skills that elders must develop is to frame people into church ministries according to their spiritual gifts. Another skill that effective elders develop is an understanding of the impact of church size. The best book I know on the issue of church size is Gary McIntosh's *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Will Not Take You There*. Here are my notes from his "Taking Your Church to the Next Level" seminar given to the Great Lakes District of the EFCA on November 8, 2010.

A plateau is a floor and a roof. Churches grow and then pause to rest and retool. In forty years of research he discovered ten plateaus and keys to transition.

Breaking through the 35-65 plateau (people in the sanctuary)

- Full time pastor—step of faith—takes 150 people to pay a full package
- Adequate facility—new rule is 70%—you need 100 seats for 70 people
- Worship and children's ministry

Breaking through the 85-125 plateau

- Full time pastor and an administrative assistant (1/3 of the pastor's salary)
 - Pastor for every 148 people
 - Support staff—one for every full time pastor (salary is 1/3 of a pastor)
- Adequate facility—200 seats for 140 people—70% rule (Nelson Searcy)
- Minimum ministries: worship, children, women, men, and maybe youth
- 3 adult ministries to make friends (small groups, softball)
- 7 small groups: sports, Bible studies, prayer groups, task groups, etc.

Breaking through the 200 plateau

- Second pastor and a second secretary
 - Children's pastor first, not youth (parents of teens not coming)
- Add new groups (14 total) or adult ministries (6) so you can connect 60%
 - 200 people—need to connect 120-130 adults
 - 3 adult groups for 100 adults (average of 20)
 - 6-7 small groups for 100 adults (average of 10 people)
- Add a second worship service (move from single cell—major resistance)
- Expand facilities: 300 seats to get beyond 200 regular attenders and parking @ 1.8-2.2 people per car; plus 25 cars for workers

Breaking through the 400 plateau

- Begin shifting leadership, planning, administration roles to pastoral staff
- Board is now policy/oversight, delegated daily decisions to the

staff

- Add third pastoral staff person and another secretary (to get to 450)
- Build on your star ministries (20% of ministries bring 80% of new people) or if senior pastor is more external or internal—hire the complement (evangelism-worship-new connections) (administration- equipping-discipleship)

Breaking through the 800 plateau

- Staff focuses on mentoring and leadership development
- Staff must be able to build teams or you cannot grow beyond 800
- Staff give emergency care only, as care shifts to lay people (group, etc.)
- Use facilities multiple times or use various sites
- Develop a team of staff specialists (tech, administrative pastors, etc.)

The organizing principle of the church of under 200 is relational. Everyone knows everyone in the small church. The church is like a family. The patriarch and matriarch of the church approve anyone who comes in. McIntosh calls the church of 200-400, “The Managerial Church.” Ministries are added and leaders must be managed. He calls the church of 400-800, “The Organizational Church.” The senior pastor develops skills in organizational development as well as managing the ministries and keeping strong relationships. Senior pastors are always shepherds; now they are also ranchers.

Effective boards propose

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” *This proposal* pleased the whole group. (Acts 6:3-5a, emphasis added)

I have served with leaders who cared about people and directed a process well. Everyone understood the vision and core values of the organization. Significant issues were identified with passionate discussions. However, strategic plans were never presented, and we left

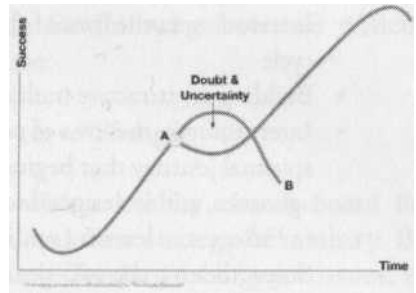
with no sense of progress, just well-intentioned meetings.

Effective elders agree on proposals that can be called “s-curve changes.” “S-curve” changes are not just someone’s good idea or someone else’s successful program, they are revealed to us by the Lord as a work for us to complete (Colossians 4:17). “S-curve” changes are Spirit-led changes that bring a scary downturn first. For example, Moses received the call of God to lead his people into the Promised Land, and he took steps of obedience. The immediate result was that the people were forced to gather their own straw to make bricks, where before it was provided for them. It gets harder before it gets better. Erwin McManus asks the right question: “Are you willing to do the right things even if the result is decline?”

(McManus 2002, 192)

One of the best descriptions of this is provided by Charles Handy in his classic book “The Age of Paradox” (also known under its British title as “The Empty Raincoat”). He views the essential paradox of this renewal and innovation in this way:

“The secret to constant growth is to start a new sigmoid curve before the first one peters out. The right place to start the second curve is at point A where there is the time, as well as the resources and the energy, to get the new curve through its initial explorations and floundering before the first curve begins to dip downward.” (Handy quoted in Randel 2012)



Multiplying smaller groups can be an “s-curve change

The small church must die to the desire for intimacy with everyone, so that more people can be included. The single cell must die so that the church might have many growing and multiplying cells. “The essential character of the small church is this capacity to care about people personally. The small church cannot grow in membership size without giving up its most precious appeal, its intimacy” (Dudley 1978, 49).

A new emphasis on small groups can be the “s-curve” change for the mid-size church. One church of 200 was stuck. God led them to change from Sunday school to small groups and the church grew to five hundred people because home groups fit the community. Another

church gets “smaller” by adding Adult Bible Fellowships and grows.

A unified outward focus can be an “s-curve” change

Lyle Schaller, in *The Interventionist*, looked at thousands of churches that could and should have been growing in numbers, but instead were shrinking in size:

The number one reason is the absence of a widely supported strategy for reaching newcomers in the community. It matters little whether the strategy is designed around:

- Inviting people to come to a meaningful worship service on Sunday morning
- Reaching potential members through superior teaching ministry
- Intervening in the lives of the unchurched at strategic points of life cycle
- Building an attractive multicultural congregation
- Intervening in the lives of people at strategic points on a personal spiritual journey that begins with the skeptics, doubters, and agnostics, and is designed to help people move from non-believers to believers to learners to disciples ...
- Strengthening the two-generation family
- Challenging believers to become involved in doing ministry locally (the seven classic corporal works of Christian mercy— feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, care for the orphan, tend the sick, visit the prisoner, and bury the dead)
- Creating a growing number of off-campus ministries
- Creating a network of small groups

The critical issue is not the central theme of that strategy. The crucial question is whether the congregation, including the configuration of the paid staff, is organized to be supportive of a clearly defined and widely supported central strategy. (Schaller 1997, 14)

A change of location can be an “s-curve” change

The First Evangelical Free Church of Austin, Texas, was established in the 1890s. For over one hundred years they honored the Scriptures and the message of Christ. In the early 1960s the church and its five hundred members moved into a new building on a growing edge of

town. The location served the church well for thirty years.

In 1990, the church took the bold step of focusing on University of Texas students just down the street. After ten years of effective ministry, the church grew to a vibrant, multigenerational church of 1,800 people, including 700 college students from nearby UT. With such explosive growth, the need to change locations was clear. Disappointment in the move caused some people to leave, but God continued to bless the church: worship attendance increased from 1,800 to 2,700 people in a few years.

A change in pastoral staff can be an “s-curve” change

Here is a good description of when it is time for a change of pastoral leaders. Changes in leadership are refreshing, not the end of the world. Maybe it’s simply time to retire. More often, the pace slows, the vision blurs, people make mistakes, weariness sets in, and life for followers becomes difficult. Ineffectiveness moves in like a virus. It’s time.

How do we spot the “s-curve” change?

I once did an “s-curve” change exercise with a healthy church board that understood their mission, their core values, and their strategy of ministry. But they needed to see the next mountain to climb. To clarify the major issues, we concentrated our efforts together on a **SWOT** analysis of the church.

Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats

We listed ten to fifteen observations in each of four quadrants in the **SWOT** grid. Each person voted for the three most strategic issues from the long lists. This exercise gave us a clear convergence.

Major Issue #1: Foster intentional leadership development

(High conversion growth and need for shepherds)

Major Issue #2: Plant a Spanish-speaking church

(80% of the homes in the community speak Spanish)

Major Issue #3: Deepen the ministry of prayer and the Word of God

Effective elders bring proposals to God's people for their approval. Sometimes the approval of the elders is sufficient. Sometimes a congregational decision is best.

Effective boards govern with policies

The church board in a small church makes the ministry decisions. As a church grows, the effective board makes new policies instead of endless ministry decisions. Larry Osborne, in his book *Sticky Teams* describes how the elders in the small church focus on *doing*. "All Hands are on deck." The board makes the ministry decisions and elders are running most of the ministries. As a church grows, staff are added and the role of the board changes from *doing to approving*. Policies are critical. Staff operate within the approved policies of the church.

As the church grows to mega church size, the role of the board changes from *doing to approving to reviewing* (Osborne 2010, 102-103). Ministry staff need the freedom to make decisions and then give a report to the board - just like Peter, who acted by faith in the house of Cornelius and then gave a full report to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem in the beginning of Acts 11.

John Carver defines a board policy as "any board utterance" (Carver 1997, 25). As a church grows, good governance articulates a clear policy so that the pastor, the staff, and all ministry teams can operate within clear boundaries.

The board should not use its power operationally. The board is to establish policy; it does not manage. This is the central issue of concern in most churches. There is always confusion between the lines of demarcation separating the power that belongs to the board and the power that belongs to the pastor and other program directors. (Shawchuck and Heuser 1993, 197)

In Acts 6, The Twelve have the oversight. The Seven have the operations. The Twelve have governance. The Seven have a specific task. The Twelve guard the purposes. The Seven guide the programs.

The board's role is governance; the staff's role is management. Until these two areas of work are clearly differentiated there will be paralyzing confusion and conflict. (Hendrix 2000, 126)

Effective boards guard values and leaders

Elders guard the core values. When core values are treasured and protected, there are good results! The Holy Spirit inspired Luke to record the following numbers:

- *The value of the gospel brings good results.* “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41, emphasis added). “But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000” (Acts 4:4).
- *The value of the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, prayer and the breaking of bread brings good results.* “And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).
- *The value of integrity and church discipline brings good results.* “Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number” (Acts 5:14).
- *The value of an effective elder board brings good results.* “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

Elders guard themselves. Do not rush to add leaders and remember that anyone, even elders, can fall. God’s heart is to multiply the flock. Satan’s design is to divide the flock and destroy us all. “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock ...” (Acts 20:28a). We guard ourselves against snares such as:

- *Materialism:* “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing” (Acts 20:33).
- *Slothfulness:* “In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak ...” (Acts 20:35).
- *Authoritarianism:* “... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3).
- *Immorality:* “You are witnesses ... of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you” (1 Thessalonians 2:10).

Elders guard the biblical teaching of Prophet, Priest, and King. No

godly man or woman in Scripture was given all three roles. Abraham was a prophet of God, but not a priest of God. Melchizedek was a priest and a king, but not a prophet. King David was a prophet and a king, but he was never a priest. Only Jesus Christ is worthy to be our King of Kings, Prophet of Prophets, and our High Priest in the order of Melchizedek.

In May 2007, at The Gospel Coalition conference at Trinity, pastor Mark Driscoll described three kinds of new “commanders.” His presentation started the conversation and here is how I now summarize the idea.

Priests—Priests care about people. Ministry is all about loving relationships for priests. They love a close relationship with our Lord and his people. Priests walk with people through the difficulties of life. They are there when people are dying or marriages are crumbling. Priests love people and they love to teach the Bible. Members overlook shortcomings in the pulpit and leadership skills because this good shepherd has steadfastly stood beside them in the heartaches and the joys of life.

Prophets—Priests love people, and prophets love to preach. While priests love to be with people, prophets look to the world of books, ideas, and writing. While priests go to the hospital; prophets look for the library. The word “prophecy” means to “show forth Gods truth” and prophets love to shine the truth of God in the pulpit or on an airplane. People flock to their preaching just as they did to John the Baptist and live with the fact they are more private than their previous pastor, and that they are often administratively challenged.

Kings—While priests love people and prophets love to preach, kings love to lead. Ministry is about developing the organization. Kings cast a clear vision. They seek good results and build a loyal team. Kings understand delegation and sometimes they are not seen as servant leaders. Often, kings populate elder boards, serving as overseers. People honor their commitment to effectiveness and efficiency and they live with the fact that only a few trusted people feel close to a king.

One of my friends attended this lecture and reacted, “Every leader is to be like Christ. Every leader is to seek to follow the Lord as prophet, priest, and king.” His point was that we cannot justify a lack of love for

people just because we happen to be a prophet.

It is still helpful to see a pastor as primarily wired to be one of these, perhaps two, and he needs to really work at the third to be like Christ. Wise church boards understand the special wiring of their pastor and they work to build a complementary team of leaders around him.

Are you more of a prophet, priest, or king?

How can you protect your senior pastor in light of this insight?

How can you work better together with a view to the unique wiring of every elder?