# THE PLURALITY DASHBOARD

Indicators for Inspecting the Health of a Plurality

DAVE HARVEY



### INSPECTING THE ENGINE OF PLURALITY

Some men plant churches and slide into a plurality of elders through a slow and measured process. Not effortless mind you, but time is on their side and the manuals of Strauch or Dever become companions to help guide the way. Others, like me, inherit a plurality almost overnight through a church crisis where the most compelling qualification is that you are the only pastor left standing. Discovering that this new role comes complete with a set of elders is, well, kind of exhilarating, akin perhaps to finding out you're pregnant and delivering the baby all in the same evening. But even messier.

As awakenings go, mine landed with a thud. The mental 'thwap' arrived as I saw a distinction, one that shaped my entire orientation toward eldership from that moment forward. Simply put, a plurality of elders was not synonymous with a team of elders. Our shared values, mutual respect, history of relationships, network affiliation, and even constitutional responsibility did not magically create a band of brothers. A plurality can be nothing more than the names that appear in incorporating documents or under the "elders" tab on the church website. But a team is a leadership community that breeds a certain kind of culture. This is not to say that a disconnected plurality has no culture. Wherever two or more elders are gathered, culture emerges. The only question is whether that culture fosters a healthy team and a stronger church.

The importance of converting a plurality into a team cannot be overstated. Like it or not, the culture of an eldership determines the health of a church. John MacArthur says, "Whatever the leaders are, the people become." This is not to diminish the role of the Holy Spirit, biblical preaching, the priority of mission, or many other means of grace that shape the people of God. But without the agency of healthy pluralities, each of these can be quenched or curtailed.

As the elders go, so goes the church.

# THE FOUR-CYLINDER ENGINE

So how do we know if a plurality is healthy; if a plurality is truly a team? Imagine a four-cylinder engine. A cylinder is a giant tube in the engine where the piston moves up and down to compress the gas and ignite the combustion. If that doesn't sound right, blame Google — I barely know on which side of the car the gas cap is located. My point is that there are four plurality cylinders that power the engine of the team. When these cylinders are working well together, the engine of team not only starts easily but also accelerates quickly to help the church move forward.



Let's examine each plurality cylinder below and consider a few warning signs that may flash across the dashboard.

### THE AGREEMENT CYLINDER

(INDICATOR: DO WE AGREE WITH EACH OTHER?)

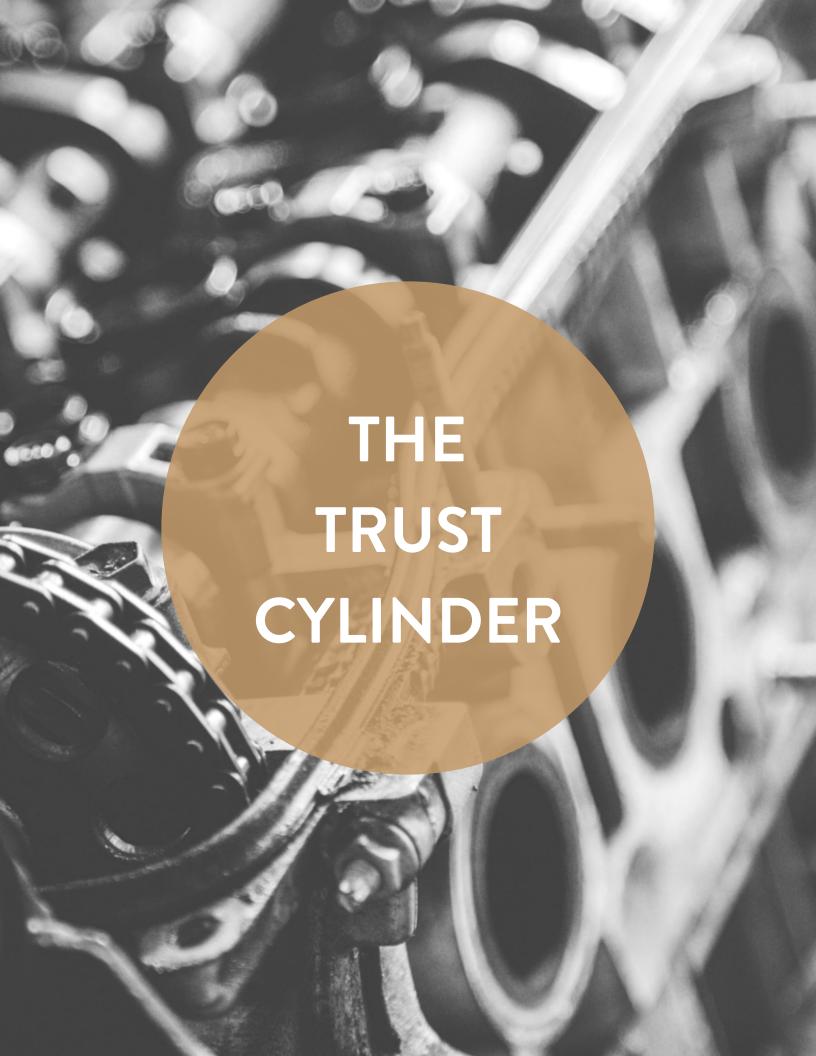
Many well intentioned—and faithful!—men have sought to build a church around oversimplified belief statements such as, "We believe in Jesus. Period." This serves neither the church, who looks to leaders for clarity, nor the elders who live confused over what truly unites them. A plurality grounded upon abstractions will never become a team. When elders are united around the lowest common denominator, they find that the agreement cylinder often breaks down causing the engine to decelerate, and sometimes completely stop.

A call to eldership includes defining and protecting the doctrinal borders of the church. Elders need not agree on everything, but they do need to be unified on essential doctrines, beginning with the gospel. The church is a theological entity and therefore theological men united by theological agreement must lead it. This begins with a doctrinal unity (Eph. 4:1-16) grounded upon a statement of faith or some common creed(s) to which all subscribe. Some questions to evaluate the scope of your unity, and therefore inspect the Agreement Cylinder, include:

- Do we agree on what is meant by the word "gospel"? (1 Cor. 2: 2-5; 15: 1-9; Gal. 1: 6-12;
- Is the doctrinal basis of our unity as a team well-defined? Do we have a statement of faith, and if so, do we all affirm our statement of faith? (Eph. 4:1-16)
- Do our terms mean the same thing? (2 Tim. 2:13-14)

There's a second part to the Agreement Cylinder though; far more subtle yet no less important. It becomes apparent when you inspect how well the eldership talks about what they believe. Elderships become teams through theological discussion that is timely, consistent, respectful, and vigorous. That's why the other part of this cylinder probes the care and wisdom we employ when discussing and debating our beliefs, perhaps even our differences. It explores whether we can divide doctrines without dividing relationships. Some questions to monitor the quality of these conversations include:

- Are we growing together theologically through study and discussion? (2 Tim. 2:15)
- When we disagree on less important doctrines or methodologies, do we do it wisely and with love? (Eph. 4:1-3)
- Is it clear to me that you have worked hard to understand my positions and can represent them without exaggeration or misrepresentation? (James 1:19)



Some assume that disagreement or dissent clog up the Agreement Cylinder. But it's a common fallacy that confuses dissent with disrespect or disloyalty. Humble elders who debate in ways that uphold the law of love actually improve the overall engine performance of the team. They know that mindless uniformity among elders weakens the church. They comprehend that a misguided deference to the loudest voice or the naïve admiration of a plurality for its lead pastor triggers warning lights.

In his bestselling book *Outliers*, Malcom Gladwell tells the story of a commercial aircraft accident where the co-pilot was politely and deferentially suggesting course changes to the captain to avoid a collision. The more experienced captain readily dismissed the co-pilot's understated advice, quite possibly because it was obscured by his careful mitigation and equivocation. The pilot never got the point. Minutes later, the aircraft splattered onto the side of a mountain. The point? Hyper-deference comes at a steep cost.

A final word of wisdom regarding dissent. As a co-equal elder, you are issued the privilege of dissent. Exercise it honestly, wisely, and... sparingly. It's easy to take that governing privilege and use it as a political tool to lobby a personal agenda, or relieve yourself of decision-making responsibility. To avoid those temptations, use these questions to help inspect the integrity of this cylinder:

- When we dissent, is it sufficiently principled and coming from a heart that honestly believes this decision may contradict our values or harm the church? (Matt. 12:34)
- In areas where we may differ on important matters with each other or the leader pastor, am I confident you will speak up in a respectful, clear and honest way?
- Will you wisely represent the position of the plurality to others, whether you agree or disagree?

# THE TRUST CYLINDER

(INDICATOR: DO WE TRUST ONE ANOTHER?)

Trust lies at the heart of a healthy plurality. Each man must be convinced of the sincerity and integrity of the other. Knowing the elders will speak honestly to the church, to each other, and to the lead pastor encourages them all to be vocal about their concerns and vulnerable about their weaknesses or temptations. Integrity deepens trust. Proverbs 10:9 says, "Whoever walks in integrity walks securely." Elders with integrity foster a culture of security.

One way to check the operation of the trust cylinder is to specifically measure confidence in loyalty. Some questions to spark the ignition for conversation include:

Care is not first something that elders get, it's something they give.

It is not typically a culture you inherit; it's one you must build.

- Will you be loyal to God's Word by being completely honest with me? (Col. 1: 28-29)
- Will you judge me or exploit me when I show weakness? (Luke 6:37)
- Will you be patient with me in areas I need to grow? (1 Thess. 5:14)
- Can you be discreet once you really know my temptations? (Prov. 3:21)
- Am I confident that you will not share what I confide with anyone who should not know? Do you have my back? (Prov. 16:28)

To achieve genuine loyalty, each elder must be confident in how each team member will respond to the particulars of their fallenness. Remember, serving as an elder situates each man on a perch with a pretty good view into the lives of the other elders. You pray together, work together, think together, counsel together, rejoice together, assess together, and confess sins together. Sharing these experiences forms a pretty large window into the scope of each man's gifts, struggles, strengths, and weaknesses. You stand armed with perspectives that can unite or divide, refine or weaken, build up or tear down. How you handle it will determine whether men trust you.

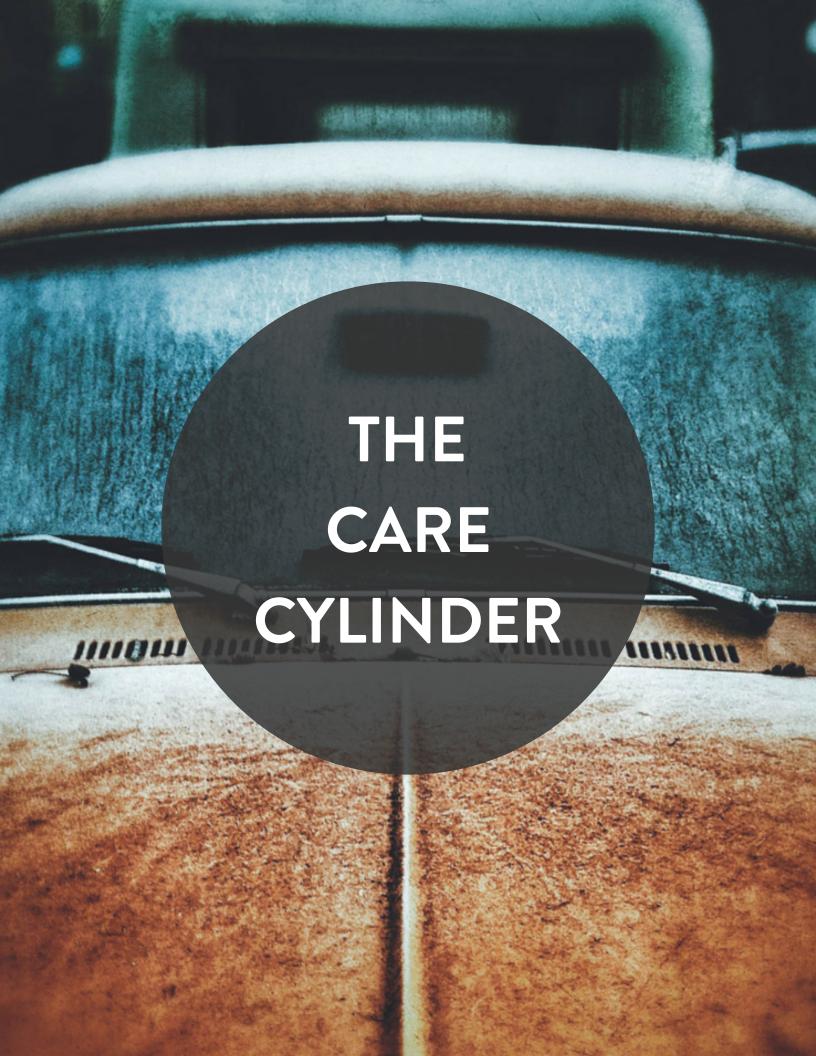
Recently I sat with a small group of men confessing some struggles with the past and some fears about the future. My confidence in their loyalty, my certainty that I will hear either correction or compassion as it seems wise to them, liberated me to speak freely. Let's face it: Absent that kind of confidence, elders stay pretty superficial lest their temptation or weaknesses become poker chips played against them in the future. Team means loyalty, and loyalty says, "I will encourage your strengths without ignoring or exploiting your weaknesses."

This leads to a second check for the trust cylinder: the presence of humility. To move from a plurality to a team, each man must realize they need the other men. They must experience and model Paul's analogy of the body (1 Cor. 12:12-27) which assumes, "To grow, I need your help." Inspecting the presence of humility can start with a few simple questions:

- Are you quick to listen or quick to speak? (James 1:19)
- Will you withdraw when there is misunderstanding? (Matt. 5:23-24)
- Will you be humble if I risk correcting you? (Prov. 9:8)

If community tests humility, then creating a team is like sitting for the bar exam—longer, trickier, and absent immediate results. But this humility, purchased over time through men who suspect themselves and not others, becomes a rich oil that lubricates the relationships and powers the Trust Cylinder to help push the engine of team forward.

This Trust Cylinder—loyalty and humility—will help you navigate many treacherous seas. And if you find yourself on turbulent waters right now, remember that the beauty



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and simplicity of the cylinder design is embedded in time-tested glory of the Golden Rule (Luke 6:31). As elders, we are simply agreeing to respond to life together in the same way we teach others to respond. And amazingly, as we apply, trust and loyalty abound.

For a plurality to become a team, agreement and trust are essential. Yet the truth is, your elder team and church can't survive on just these 2 cylinders. They'll carry you down the road for a few miles, but you'll eventually sputter out without the other 2 cylinders: *Care* and *Fit*. These four cylinders working together, firing in unison, will accelerate you forward toward a healthy team and a stronger church.

# THE CARE CYLINDER

(INDICATOR: DO WE CARE FOR EACH OTHER?)

By now you are probably beginning to see how each cylinder is connected to the others. How can a man be cared for by those he neither trusts nor seems to agree? The notion is unrealistic, and probably a little naïve. According to Jesus, it's our love for one another, not our productivity and performance, that is supposed to mark our distinction (John 13:34-35). When elders love one another, the channels of care open wide and shepherds enjoys the blessings of being shepherded.

God loves elders and he wants their souls to be nurtured and tended. So he supplies sufficient grace to convert pluralities into teams. When a team identity begins to form, the care of each member becomes even more important.

In a world where almost anything can be professionalized and outsourced, it's easy for pastors to farm out their care by finding the primary help for their soul outside of the eldership, sometimes even outside of the church. This is not a subtle attack on counseling, coaching, or para-church ministries. I serve on a para-church board and have benefitted from both counseling and coaching from outside of our pastoral team. But those services must always supplement the care from the local church, never replace it.

Lead pastors, think about this: One of the quickest ways to undermine the health of a plurality is by informing them, through your words or actions, that they are incompetent to care for the complexities of your position or your soul. The role you occupy does not come with a special "get-out-of-local-church-care-free" card to be slapped on the plurality table when ministry gets particularly difficult. Build your primary network of care from within and then enjoy the delight that comes from a "neighbor who is near" (Prov. 27:10b).

Where there are pluralities, there are problems. The wise team is the one who minimizes these problems through regular inspections.

A wise elder understands this principle. We can't preach the principle that people should receive care through their local church pastors, then exempt ourselves from the same kind of care. As I said earlier, as elders go, so goes the church. When applied to care, this means the manner in which pastors receive care is the very method and model they reinforce for the church.

This cylinder is powered by a culture of care. The culture comes as each elder commits himself to providing care for others. Note that I used the word "providing." There's a growing trend, particularly among younger leaders, to see care as primarily something I need rather than something I give. This means it's defined more as personal need to be met in me rather than a ministry of love provided by me. In my travels I'm constantly bumping into elders starving for soul care; searching the world to scratch the itch without ever seeing or developing the potential within their own plurality.

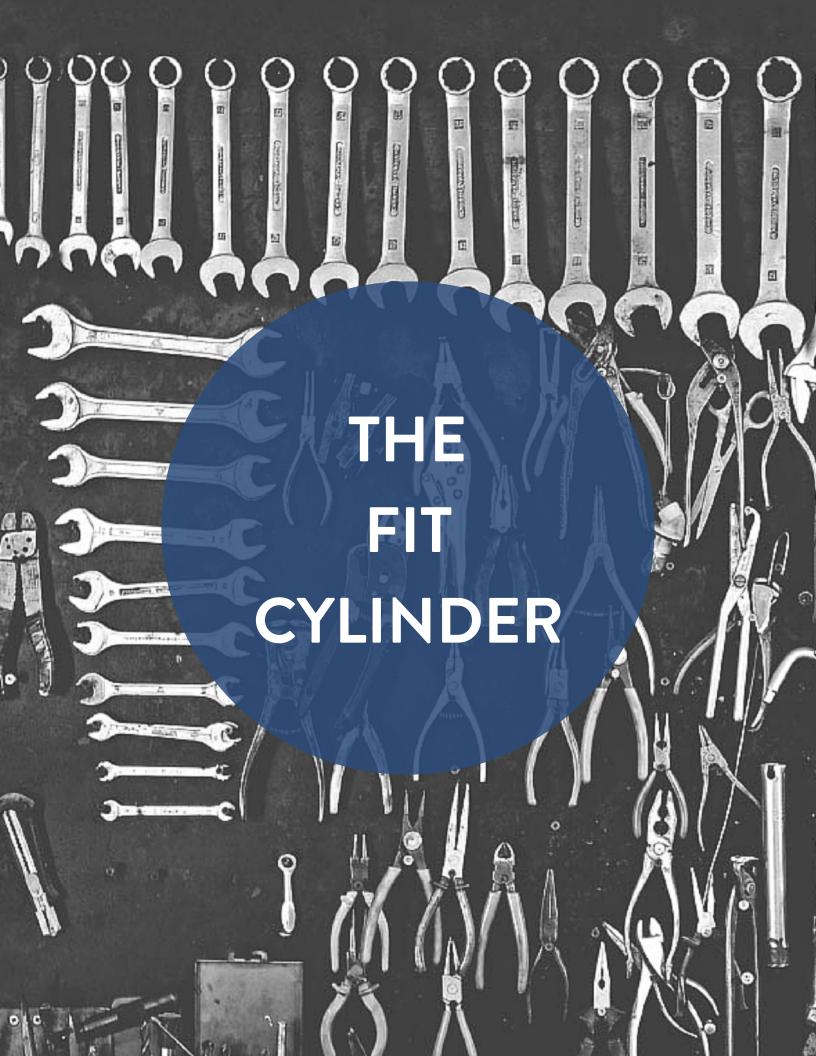
Lead pastors, listen up.

Care is not first something that elders get, it's something they give. Care is not typically a culture you inherit; it's one you must build. A lead pastor can't assume a culture of care nor simply wish hopefully for it to appear—it must be constructed. This culture develops as the lead pastor begins to "care for others the way he would want to be cared for by others" (adapted application of Luke 6:31).

Lead pastors, it starts with you. This doesn't mean you need to do it all. You just need to accept the responsibility to help build the culture to ensure it gets done.

Elders, here are some questions that may help you assess how well your care cylinder is functioning:

- Is it clear to each of us that our state of soul matters to each other as much as (or more than!) our performance? (John 13:34-35)
- Are our conversations more likely to be filled with encouragement or critique? (Eph. 4:29)
- Can we point out specific times (not merely once) where we talk about our lives, families, struggles and/or temptations (something apart from ministry!)? (James 5:16)
- Does my feedback on your performance include encouragement? (1 Thess. 5:11)
- Does someone on this team know the temptations to which I am vulnerable? (Gal. 6:2)
- Would my wife feel free to call you if I was tanking? Why or why not?



### THE FIT CYLINDER

### (INDICATOR: DO WE ENJOY BEING WITH EACH OTHER AND KNOW WHERE WE FIT?)

A team that enjoys one another, unites around theological convictions, and models genuine love towards each other enjoys the fruit of trust, agreement, and care working together in harmony. But there's one more thing. In fact this final cylinder is often overlooked, yet possesses the potential to shut down the other three when they are not operating together.

Elders need to know they fit. Tensions arise when a man desires a role to which he is not suited. A pastoral candidate whose personality does not mesh well with the team may dramatically shift the culture of the plurality and, indirectly, the entire church. 'Fit' is perhaps the most complicated cylinder to assess, but perhaps these categories and questions will supply a way to measure it.

### **ENDOWMENT**

*Endowment.* This idea remembers that as created beings, we are hardwired with certain strengths, talents, and proclivities. These are endowed by God. By following the path of endowment, we find the kinds of roles and service, and even people, with whom we best fit. The path leads us into vineyards where we will find the largest fruit from our labors.

Some questions to evaluate endowment are:

- Though each elder is distinct, does my personality appear to mesh with these men?
- Are we able to work together in ways that deepen our relationships rather than strain them?
- Does our time together (or with a potential elder) incite greater joy and creativity in my role or frustration and discouragement?
- How well do we understand the gifts God has given each of us and how well are our responsibilities aligned with those gifts? (Rom. 12:6)

### **EXPECTATIONS**

Next comes *Expectations*. Healthy pluralities spring from defined roles and clarity on the hopes and expectations of the role. Questions to ask could include:

- Do I know my role and what is expected of me? (Acts 6:1-7)
- Do I have a written job description?
- Do I know to whom I report?

Healthy pluralities spring from defined roles and clarity on the hopes and expectations of each role...

We must always define faith in a way that encourages us to be open, clear and bold with our expectations.

 Is my commitment to serve the church thorough enough to support a change of roles? (Mark 10:45)

This cylinder's operation requires that we dispense with the faux-spirituality that resists defining our hopes for a role or ministry. We must always define faith in a way that encourages us to be open, clear and bold with our expectations. As servants of Christ committed to the best for his church, we realize that sometimes our expectations or roles need to change to best serve the church. Maturity matters. This important principle is as old as the New Testament church.

In Acts 6, each widow had the daily attention of the apostles. It was a beautiful, organic, relational picture of a wonderful phase of the Jerusalem church. But growth happened and the organism had to organize. This meant the apostle's roles needed to change. The delivery of care to the widows would now come through different hands as the apostles needed to give their attention to more strategic service, namely, "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

Each day the apostles served in a particular, perhaps predictable way. They were among the people serving those with desperate needs. The expectations were clear. But growth happened and their roles and expectations had to change. Sometimes it is for the better where we move on to things we enjoy more. Other times it is service, where we empty ourselves and take the lower seat (Phil. 2:5-11; Luke 14:10). For the Jerusalem church, the result was even greater fruit as "the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

The point? Finding the fit and defining the expectations led to a healthier church and a people more satisfied in their service. Organizational discipline and adaptation becomes important for any church moving on toward health.

### **EVALUATION**

Last comes *Evaluation*. To arrive at different roles, the leaders of the church had to engage in some touchy, seemingly dispassionate examination. Should the roles of those serving the widows be changed? This question was dangerous—widows were among the most vulnerable people in the land. God himself joins the discussion when the care of widows is being evaluated (Ps. 68:5; Jer. 49:11; James 1:27). Nevertheless, these leaders engaged in a difficult assessment of their roles, their daily to-do lists, their responsibilities, and their gifts. From this Spirit-led evaluation came fruit and growth.

When one reads the requirements for elders or deacons, it's clear that 'evaluation' is a doorway to ministry. When Paul tells Timothy to "keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching" (1 Tim. 4:16), it's clear that evaluation doesn't end at the front door.



Here are some questions that will help elderships inspect the place evaluation presently plays within their culture:

- Have we clearly defined how we will evaluate one another and what determines
- Am I aware of the specific and regular contexts where we will evaluate our fruitfulness as a team?
- Have we clarified the process by which I can share concerns about how I am being handled or assessed? (Titus 1:3-9)

# INSPECTIONS AND PROGRESS

Central to all of this is the gospel with its God-preeminent, church-sacrificing, flesh-killing claims. A healthy elder team won't happen overnight. You won't walk into the perfect situation, and you won't luck into it. It'll take hard work and dedication. Pride will be crucified, fears pushed down and promises pulled forward. But in the end the fruit is sweet. The gospel works gloriously in your team and into the hearts of your congregation.

In the state where I grew up, cars had to be inspected once a year. Sure, it was a hassle, but through the inspection you often learned about parts that needed attention or replacement. As a new driver, you learned that inspections help maintain the car, keep you safe, and keep the car moving forward.

We should build (and join) an eldership with the same expectation. Starting with these four cylinders (agreement, trust, care, fit) should help. Inspect them immediately, inspect them regularly. Remember, finding a problem is not an indictment on the leadership or the quality of the church. Where there are pluralities, there are problems. The wise team is the one who minimizes these problems through regular inspections. It keeps the four cylinders running smoothly and powers the engine of plurality in the direction of team ministry.



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19

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