

“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint, but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” - 1 Peter 5:2-4

The Lord Jesus is the Chief Shepherd of His people. He cares for our souls, tends, guides, protects, and feeds His flock. God is not remote, solitary, nor uninvolved in the details of the lives of His people. He lives among them as friend and guide. It therefore should be no surprise that those who lead local churches should be seen as undershepherds.

Today there are various names used for leaders of the church, each reflecting a different perspective of shepherding. They may be called *elders* (Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5), indicating that the man himself is more mature and older in experience in the faith. They may be called *overseers* (some Bible translations use the word *bishop*) (1 Tim. 3:1,2; Titus 1:7; Acts 20:28), indicating the work of those who look after the flock of God. The passages show that both terms are used interchangeably and refer to the same person. The term *pastor* is another translation of the word *shepherd*, used in 1 Peter 5:1,2. This is another way of describing the work of those who oversee the people of God. Here then is not a hierarchy of leaders, one over another, but a



description of the simple pattern which the Lord presents for the caring of His people. It is leadership of the local church by a team of elders or shepherds. This Biblical description of a team of shepherd-pastor leaders bears little or no resemblance to the pattern generally seen among churches today. Often there is a division between those called the *clergy* (those in professional positions of leadership) and those called the *laity* (or common people). Most of the clergy are called by special titles and may wear certain garments to set them apart from the laity. They are usually trained outside of the churches in graduate schools and seminaries. Our goal as a local church is to adhere as closely as possible to the pattern for church leadership as is outlined and demonstrated in the New Testament. Let us briefly examine several areas.

Plurality of Shepherds

The model presented in Scripture is one of team leadership, not of one single pastor-teacher. In Philippians 1:1, a group of elders and deacons are addressed, along with the saints, not a single pastor-teacher. Titus was sent to Crete to appoint elders, not a single pastor (Titus 1:5). Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church they established (Acts 14:23).

When Paul went to Ephesus he called together the elders of the church (Acts 20:17). Peter addresses his letter to the elders and called himself one of them (1 Pet. 5:1,2). The concept of a single pastor is absent from the Acts and the Epistles.

The New Testament pattern of shared leadership certainly is not without its difficulties. Greater demands are placed upon several men to study,

work, and lead since they cannot simply leave it all to one pastor. They may not know how to assume shepherd duties unless someone trains them. There may be none willing or able to help them develop needed experience over a period of time. It is much easier to delegate everything to a paid staff to do all of the important duties, especially teaching and shepherding. Nevertheless, the advantages of a spiritual, plural leadership are significant. Plurality leads to a greater development of spiritual gifts among the men, especially in preaching and pastoral work. Scope is given for all the spiritual gifts to function, rather than expecting most gifts to reside in one person. It gives greater responsibility to the male leaders who function as shepherds when they are no longer termed laity or lay persons. It decreases the tendency to focus on one man's gifts or abilities. In any case, no one man can have all the requisite gifts or bear the strain of carrying the entire load himself.

Responsibilities of Shepherds

What are the varied duties of overseers?

Unfortunately, among most churches there is very little resemblance to the picture presented in Scripture. In a typical church the elders attend a monthly meeting and review issues that have little or nothing to do with the care of souls. They may head administrative committees such as preparing the church budget, or distributing the elements at the communion service.

The Biblical picture is entirely different. Overseers must be able to teach the Word (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9), take real spiritual leadership, and watch over the souls of the flock for whom they are responsible to God (Heb. 13:17). They have the task of genuine pastoral care (1 Pet. 5:2). This work involves the guidance, correction, and protection of the sheep (1 Pet. 5:3; Acts 20:28). They are the doctrinal guardians of the fellowship (Acts 20:29-31). Certain

elders are to be financially supported by the local church, especially if they labor hard at preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17,18). This implies a full time service to the local assembly. In summary, the elders do the work normally considered the sole responsibility of the pastor-teacher of a typical local church.

Qualifications of Shepherds

God tells us that spiritual or character qualities (rather than persona) are what are required of those who would lead and shepherd His church. The Lord considers spirituality as the most important mark of a godly leader. 1 Timothy. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 give us the definitive outline on the qualifications for spiritual leaders.

The first quality mentioned in 1 Tim. 3:1 is the ***desire to fulfill the role***. It is something more than mere human ambition.

This would be demonstrated in a genuine love and concern for God's people. The Lord stressed to Peter the care of His sheep as a test of love for Him (John 21:15-17). A man who

is reluctant to tend the sheep does not have the right preparation for the job. This is especially true if it is due to secular interests or unwillingness to bear the burdens associated with pastoral work.

There is a difference between qualities important in worldly leadership and those in God's leaders. The Lord made a distinction between the two in rebuking the disciples ambition to be preeminent as leaders, as the heathen. He said, "...it shall not be so among you." Instead, leaders must take the place of servants. The greatest leader of all, our Lord, exemplified the servant attitude. The corresponding quality of ***humility*** is evident in several places. For example, there is warning about the danger of conceit, hence the barring of new converts from the role (1 Tim. 3:6). There is also the disqualification of one with a contentious or

It is the responsibility of the elders to do the spiritual work of teaching, guiding, correcting and leading the people of God under their care

argumentative spirit (1 Tim. 3:3); also the self-willed, quick-tempered, and pugnacious man (Titus 1:7). The shepherd must lead by moral example.

The shepherd's role is restricted to a **one-woman man** (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6). Even though this phrase has occasioned much debate as to its precise meaning, a central idea must be marital fidelity. It would certainly eliminate polygamists, bigamists and unrepentant adulterers. It is important that a shepherd be an effective **leader of his wife and children**. (1 Tim. 3:4,5). Otherwise how can a man properly care of the church of God?

A shepherd must be **able to teach** (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). This is vital as he strives to maintain sound doctrine in the church. It is not said that he must be a gifted preacher. He should be able to teach others when required. Therefore he should be well grounded in the word of God.

Appointment of Shepherds

The local assembly is not a democracy, but a monarchy directly ruled by Christ our King. Shepherds should serve as His local governing representatives. The question arises, "Who then appoints the elders?". Ultimately their appointment should stem from the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). The congregation should recognize those who both exhibit the qualifications and are doing the work of a shepherd leader.

The scriptures help us to see a pattern of how elders were recognized in the early church. Titus appointed elders under Paul's authority (Titus 1:5). Paul and Barnabas appointed them in every church they established (Acts 14:23). No doubt such men had

already passed the test of life and character prescribed. In the present absence of apostles or their delegates, the existing elders, or the missionary who sets up a new local church would be the appropriate person to make the appointments among qualified men. The people should recognize those who are qualified and active among them (1 Thess. 5:12,13). If there are no existing elders, no missionary, and no church planter, then believers should recognize among themselves the most spiritually qualified people who are already assuming leadership. The elders should be a recognized body, just as with deacons, about whom more will be said later (Acts 6:6; Phil. 1:1). Since deacons were to be tested by prior responsibilities (1 Tim. 3:10), it is also logical to test potential shepherds in this way.



How long do elders serve? No fixed age is indicated in scripture, nor length of service. Moral failure, family breakdown, absenteeism, and failure to do the job are the typical reasons why elders should step down or be removed. In short, the shepherd serves as long as he is able to function effectively and

enjoy congregational support. The wise shepherds will help train younger men as successors and make way for their replacements to become active workers.

Training of Shepherds

Pastors do not seem to have been hired from outside the flock in Biblical times. The system of search committees, job interviews, sample sermons, investigation of candidates from other parts, and financial inducements is one of later development. There was no such thing as assignment of pastors to churches by officials or governing groups. Rather,

the shepherds arose from within the flock itself on the basis of willingness to serve and spiritual qualifications. In many churches outside of the western world this is still the way it happens.

In the early church, overseers came entirely from within the fellowship. Just as many groups have seen the wisdom of promotion and development from within, so should the local church. The logical and most effective method for spiritual development is personal discipleship. This was patterned by the Lord Jesus with the Twelve, as well as Paul with the several young men with whom he worked. Discipling involves regular interaction. It includes teaching in the Word, mutual prayer, serving together, and on-the-job training that is carefully supervised. The important thing is to be committed to training and discipling future leaders.

Assisting the Shepherds

No group of men which takes care of the flock and ministers the Word can do this well while being weighed down by too many unrelated duties. Elders should not be responsible for the more mundane but necessary matters relating to church function. The apostles saw this in establishing the first group of men to handle material needs of the church (Acts 6:2-6). These responsibilities of taking care of the temporal needs of the assembly are continued today by the office of deacon (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13). Other ministry leaders must also assist the elders, including those of music, youth, children, women, and many other specialized ministries. Their

qualifications should also include being high in morality and spirituality. Such should be subordinate to the elders, working as team load lifters to them. This training can be good preparation, in some cases, for becoming an elder.

Response to the Shepherds

The people of God are told to esteem, heed, and respect their overseers (1 Thess. 5:13). Popular culture is often defined by a resistance to authority, but believers are told by the Word to obey those who rule over them (Heb. 13:17). Resistance to authority is said to be resistance to God (Rom. 13:1-5). There is an order

of submission to authority laid down in scripture (Eph. 5:21-6:9; 1 Cor. 11:3-12). Of course, no one should do anything that is illegal, immoral, or a clear violation of a good conscience. No genuine spiritual leader would ask this. Leaders are entitled to protection against unconfirmed or malicious charges (1 Tim. 5:19). They ought to have prayer support from the entire assembly (1 Tim. 2:1,2).

The many areas discussed above indicate an uncommon pattern that is rarely seen in churches throughout the world. But a dynamic church needs a dynamic leadership which is empowered by the Spirit of God. Whereas we recognize that a correct form will not cure a lack of spirituality or initiative, we are nevertheless committed to following this pattern of spiritual, plural leadership in our local church.

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