

Shepherding the Shepherds

Detailed Outline

Part 1 of 4

Introduction

“Thirdly, the church of Ephesus clearly had a team of presbyter-bishops. Similarly, Paul appointed elders in every Galatian church. As we’ve seen, later he instructed Titus to do the same in Crete. There is no biblical warrant either for a one-man band (a single pastor playing all the instruments of the orchestra) or for a hierarchical or pyramidal structure in the local church (a single pastor perched at the apex of the pyramid). It is not even clear that each elder was in charge of an individual house church. It is better to think of them as a team, all sharing the pastoral care of Christ’s flock. We need today to recover this concept of a pastoral team in the church.” – John Stott

A. We come mostly from an ecclesiological frame of reference that sees the value of plurality in leadership that governs the flock of God.

1. Too often, we replace the one man at the top of the pyramid, with a group of men we call elders.
2. And there’s a mindset within that structure that can quickly and easily become distorted, to the point that there is a top-down mentality that discounts the role of the body in terms of the shepherding of the flock.

B. Take a look at Acts 20:28.

“Watch out for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I am gone fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Even from among your own group men will arise, teaching perversions of the truth to draw the disciples away after them. Therefore be alert” (Acts 20:28-31 NET Bible).

1. Keep this in mind: the church at Ephesus was a New Testament church.
 - a) It was governed by a body of elders.
 - b) It was basically instructed by Paul and later Timothy and others concerning the way in which a church ought to function.
2. To those elders, Paul says, as he gathers with them, “Be careful because there will be those that rise up even from your own number, who seek a personal following. In order to gain that following, they will distort the truth so that men will follow them, rather than the elders of the body at Ephesus.”

I. Elders Must Be Individually Accountable.

A. The elders' first responsibility is to watch out for themselves.

In order to care for the flock, you must first watch out for yourself. This self-policing element is one that I don't hear anything about, outside or inside New Testament churches.

B. I think what Paul is saying is that shepherds need shepherding and supervision. The church needs to be guarded so its shepherds don't go off course. If the shepherds go off course, the church will go off course.

C. Take caution related to your own number, because people will tend to arise to seek authority and a position for themselves. That threat can come without, but can also come from the very group of people that are currently governing the church.

II. Elders Must Be Corporately Accountable to Fellow Elders.

A. Protection comes from maintaining plurality.

1. A group of elders has the tendency, like any group, to have someone rise to a level of dominance that is unhealthy.
2. Illustration: I have a friend who is now with the Lord. He put together a meeting of the top 25 evangelical preachers and leaders in the country. They had a whole weekend of gathering together, and it was probably the only time they'd been together in a non-competitive environment. Someone in the group said, "Let's do this again!" My friend said, "Never! The reason is because one of you will start vying for pecking order and you will start sorting yourselves out so that someone gravitates toward the top." The whole purpose of that meeting was for men to deal with each other on an equal level.
3. Too much power and too much authority in the hands of any single elder are dangerous.

B. How does one man gain a following for himself? By false teaching.

1. That's why Paul commends the Ephesian elders to the Word of God's grace. Paul is leaving, so he cannot watch out for false teaching.
2. The way that men will rise is they will depart from the Scriptures.
3. The way to discern false teaching is to stick to the Scriptures. When they depart from the Scriptures, you have people that will follow.
4. Illustration: One relative of mine, who attended a liberal church, said about the pastor: "He teaches the gospel the way I like to hear it." You want to say in response, "That is the problem!" The gospel must be preached in the way we need to hear it.
5. The danger that is within the church becomes a danger when true plurality is set aside and dominance begins to occur. It will occur through a departure from God's Word in some way, that attracts a following.

C. Don't look at Acts 20 and say that this is hypothetical.

1. Look at 1 Corinthians 1.

"Each of you is saying, 'I am with Paul,' or 'I am with Apollos,' or 'I am with Cephas,' or 'I am with Christ'" (1 Cor. 1:12).

2. Paul makes it clear – it isn't about Paul or Apollos or Cephas.

- a) Paul uses those names metaphorically, because in every church, you will have to figure out who these men are. They are beginning to gain a following.
- b) People find their identity and pride from identifying. That's why, in some communities, they don't care if the pastor has a \$5 million mansion, because they identify with him. His success is their success. They find a vicarious fulfillment in identifying with someone like that.

3. The threat is men rising up to undo and unbalance authority, position and status within the plurality of elders, usually at the expense of doctrine and therefore bringing harm to the church. Therefore, elders shepherd the flock first of all by shepherding themselves. Otherwise, they are going to have problems.