Shepherding the Shepherds

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 pyramidical 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.


“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.
III. Elders Must Be Corporately Accountable to Fellow Elders (cont.).

D. There is an individual component!

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16 ESV).

1. Every one of us, in our personal walk with the Lord, have a stewardship and an accountability to him that we are walking as we should. We are to watch that we are walking as we should and that our teaching conforms to what our Lord Jesus says.

2. The problem is, when you get people out of line, they will tell you that their spirituality is their business, not yours. Therefore, they isolate themselves from any correction or discipline that might (and should) take place within the church.

3. There is individual accountability, but it does not nullify what Paul says about corporate accountability to all the elders.

   a) Ideally, every elder is accountable and in submission to all the elders. No elder is trying to drag other elders under him.

   b) Rather, he is submitting himself to where the leadership is going. That is real plurality.

E. Sometimes, form and function don’t match.

1. I can tell you about churches that have a top-down structure, but they have a humble leader. They are actually doing a better job at this than other places that are adhering to New Testament forms.

2. Any time you have forms, people will find a way around it.

3. If you want to do what Paul is warning against, it can be done. And it can be done in a way that looks so pious. We all need to be aware!

IV. Elders Are Accountable to the Flock.

“Elders who provide effective leadership [elders who rule well] must be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in speaking and teaching. For the scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and, ‘The worker deserves his pay.’ Do not accept an accusation against an elder unless it can be confirmed by two or three witnesses. Those guilty of sin must be rebuked before all, as a warning to the rest. Before God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, I solemnly charge you to carry out these commands without prejudice or favoritism of any kind” (1 Tim. 5:17–21 NET Bible).
A. Here’s how I understand it:

1. 1 Timothy 4:16 – “Elders, you have an individual accountability before God, Timothy. You need to keep things straight in your life and your doctrine.” Amen!

2. Acts 20 – “Elders, you need to police your own body. You need to shepherd yourselves in such a way that you do not allow dominance to arise in an unbiblical way that leads to taking the flock astray.”

3. 1 Timothy 5:17–21 – I hear Paul saying, “Elders, you’re not only individually accountable to God, you’re not only accountable to your fellow elders, you are accountable to the flock.”
   a) This passage doesn’t just talk about elders who find sin. It says, if there is any accusation of impropriety or of sin about a particular elder.
   b) The text requires two or three witnesses. That was what everyone was entitled to! In biblical times, no one could be indicted on the testimony of one person.

B. Elders don’t get any advantage when it comes to discipline.

1. They get the same rights as everyone else. That is, if there is an accusation, it should be documented and acted on.

2. Because elders are examples to the flock, they are examples when they do right and when they do wrong.
   a) By dealing with sin publicly in the presence of all, people see that this church takes sin seriously and nobody is exempt from it. “Strike the scoffer and the simple will learn” (Prov. 19:25 ESV).
   b) Illustration: Years ago, there was a very well-known man. There had been some very serious sin that seemed to be well documented. I remember one of his board members said something like this: “This is such a great work [speaking of the man’s ministry], and he is such a great man, we just can’t let it stop.” No, you just can’t let it go on! You cannot look the other way when sin is being dealt with.

V. Does Plurality Mean Total Equality?

A. When I talk about a plurality of elders, I’m not talking about equality in the sense that:

1. Everyone has the same gift, or

2. Everyone puts in the same amount of effort, or

3. In the case of our text, everyone gets the same level of remuneration.

B. Paul says very clearly that there are some elders who devote themselves especially to teaching the Word, and they are worthy of double honor.

1. In other words, they are worthy of their pay.

2. It’s only right that they be paid in proportion to the contribution that they make and the dedication and sacrifice that they make for the ministry.
C. **Not all elders have the same gift. Not all elders should have the same function.**

1. That’s why, personally, I disagree with round-robin preaching, where every elders is given the exact same amount of exposure.
   
   a) It is obvious that there is some distinction in gift.
   
   b) If some ought to do more than others, I don’t see why everyone should have to be held to the same volume of preaching.
   
   c) As this text says, gifting and other things come to bear on this. (I’m not saying some elders ought not to teach!)

2. You have differences of gifting and ability, but there is an essential equality that is in all these texts.
VI. Implementing an Accountability System

A. If elders don’t take the lead in the implementation of these levels of accountability, how will it ever happen?

How do you implement what Paul is saying, for the health and the safety of the flock? If we’re talking about caring for the flock, Paul says it begins by elders caring for one another.

B. Regular evaluation of each other by the elders

1. “Brother, you are so good at this. I find that really edifying and a blessing. I hope you do more of that,” or, “Brother, we’ve noticed that you’ve sort of slacked off in this area. We think you ought to be thinking about how to deal with that.”

2. Illustration: One of the greatest failures that I’ve participated in at our church was the failure to take an elder who was becoming dominant and shepherd him. I think we looked the other way when certain things were said, rather than calling them out. And we began to be swayed in one direction because of the forcefulness of the man’s character. We just backed off.

3. Is there a time when the elders sit down with one another, confess their weaknesses, and expose areas that need attention?

C. Evaluate based on qualities required of elders

1. In our church, the way we deal with elders is, an elder is:
   a) Already doing the work
   b) Meets the qualifications for an elder
   c) Recognized by the body as functioning in that capacity

2. If you make the assumption that “once an elder, always an elder,” that’s really an unhealthy thing.
   a) It is not a principle found in Scripture.
   b) I know of churches where elders are senile, and no one does anything about it.
   c) Do you think that enhances the status of the whole group? No!

3. We need to look at the list of qualities we require from our elders and evaluate men.
   a) Is it possible that, over 5, 10, or 15 years, one or more of those elements are no longer present in a man’s life?
   b) If he doesn’t meet the qualifications, then why is he still an elder?
c) How do you recognize that someone has now come short of the requirements, unless the individual himself acknowledges his lack and resigns? Basically, you have churches with lame-duck elders. That really is not a healthy thing.

D. Evaluation forms

1. At our church, we have an elder evaluation form. When we have someone we are considering as an elder, we have the qualifications from Scripture written out.

2. We ask the church about these qualifications, and what ministry do you see the man under consideration doing that indicates he is an elder or deacon.

3. At the beginning of our time as a church, we added another line to this questionnaire: is there any existing elder in our body who you think has ceased to function as an elder?

4. I know it would take someone with nerves of steel to answer that question. It inadvertently got dropped off the questionnaire eventually.

5. But don’t you think that there is a time that the church should stop and consider who are the people that are really qualified and functioning as leaders?

E. Be careful when dividing up administrative turf

1. I know this is different in every church, and that in every church there are many different areas of responsibility.

2. Our church has assigned different programs to each elder.

3. The problem with that is, each elder now “owns” a piece of turf. It seems to me that is not true plurality.

4. So is there a way in which the elders can function corporately and not have individuals with autonomous authority over certain areas?

5. One way to do this is, whenever a decision of substance (regarding policy or money etc.), the individual brings that decision before at least two or three other elders. We do this at our church, and I believe that helps to maintain the plurality of our eldership.

F. “Friday Forum”

1. In all the 35 years I have preached, we have had what we call the “Friday Forum.”
   a) The Friday before I preach a message, I sit down with a group of six men and talk through the text and where I’m going to go with the message.
   b) Also open for discussion is the past Sunday’s sermon.

2. If I’m a little off the mark or my logic doesn’t flow very well or my exegesis of the text isn’t that good, and someone calls it to my attention, it saves me from a lot of embarrassment on Sunday. I would far rather be corrected in that group than standing up on Sunday and making a fool out of myself.

3. Doing this communicates that no one is autonomous and that everything is done in the plurality of people who are trusted.
4. Also, through this practice, over the years a number of very good preachers have emerged. Half of them have not been seminary students. They followed the preaching process for so long and received advice from the group of men, they became very good at it.

5. Illustration: A seminary student got up and spoke on a particular text. He did a terrible job. One of my preacher friends, who was blind, sat down with his Braille Greek New Testament and asked the student: “There are three parallel participial phrases in the Greek text. How do you understand those?” The student was floundering for an answer, because he didn’t know anything about the Greek text. He had placed his own message on the text rather than the message coming out of the text. When we got through, the student asked us, “Isn’t there anything good you can say about that message?” One of my fellow elders said to him, “Brother, when you stand behind this pulpit, you speak for God. And you’d better not be sloppy when you do.” The young man called me several years later and said that meeting was a turning point in his life. He never forgot that rebuke.
Part 4 of 4

VII. Sharing the Shepherding Load

A. As leaders, elders ought to push ministry outward, rather than collecting it inwardly. Shepherding is not only their turf.
   1. Even if all the elders were functioning at 120% and doing a marvelous job, the shepherding work would still not be done because there’s too much work to be done.
   2. Shepherding takes place as the body ministers to itself.

B. Some statistics:
   1. According to a survey recently done, 1,500 pastors leave the ministry permanently every month in the U.S.
   2. 80% of pastors and 85% of their spouses feel discouraged in their roles.
   3. 70% of pastors do not have a close friend, confidant or mentor.
   4. Over 50% of pastors’ wives feel that their husband entering the ministry was the most destructive thing that has happened to their family.
   5. 30% of pastors said they either had an ongoing affair or had had one in the past.
   6. 71% of pastors said they were burnt out and that they battle depression and fatigue on a daily basis.
   7. Only 1 out of every 10 ministers will actually retire as a minister.

C. Part of the problem is ecclesiology.
   1. No one can handle the load! What is true for one man is also true for a small group of leaders as well.
      a) From Paul’s teaching, I understand that part of the job of elders is the corporate task of ruling and leading the flock so that the flock ministers to itself.
      b) But, all of the ministry isn’t focused on the elders.
   2. I know there are many churches where the elders are not doing what they should. But even if the elders were doing what they should, they should still be encouraging other people to minister.
   3. In Ephesians 4, Paul talks about the body building itself up in love. He says that apostles, prophets, pastor-teachers and evangelists are to equip the body, and the body does the work of the ministry.
      a) So the elders are to be helping off-load ministry and encouraging people who have the diversity of gifts and experience (2 Corinthians 1).
b) God makes us a steward of our sufferings.

   1) And when he comforts us in our suffering, he does so in order that we may administer that comfort and share it with others.

   2) If you say to someone, “I’ve experienced what you’re experiencing, and here’s what God taught me,” it means a whole lot more than words from someone who hasn’t been there.

D. Elders need to recognize and encourage spiritual gifting.

   1. They need to teach it, and to encourage people in their function.

   2. They need to “lead from behind.”

      a) Sometimes it’s best for leaders not to be in front, because if you’re in front, there won’t be a line.

      b) Sometimes, you need to stand back and give the task to someone else.

      c) If you’re always there or you always open your mouth, the people will look for you to do it.

Conclusion

In the shepherding of the flock, the elders are responsible to shepherd themselves. And they are also responsible in an administrative leadership way, to encourage shepherding of the body to the body so that all the shepherding needs of the body are met.