

Biblical Eldership

Part 2

1 Peter 5:1-4

Elders are charged with the awesome responsibility of shepherding God's flock for the glory of Christ.

LTS: Psa. 116

Last week we began considering the biblical concept of eldership in the local church. As we will see this morning, eldership is primarily about shepherding the flock of God. I will tell you right from the start that I want us to study three things this morning:

1. The God who Shepherds
2. The Men Called to Shepherd
3. The Labor of a Shepherd

Now, in order to get a firm grasp on this we will do well to look back at the ministry of our Lord and consider how the Scriptures present God as a Shepherd.

I. The God Who Shepherds:

In John 10:11, 14 Jesus declared, "I am the good shepherd." Now this is a profound statement because by saying that he is the good shepherd he is identifying himself as God whom the O.T. repeatedly speaks of being Israel's shepherd.

Most famously, Psalm 23 says, "The Lord is my shepherd..." God took on the responsibility of personally feeding, leading, and protecting Israel. We see this image of shepherd and sheep throughout the psalms. For example, Psalm 80:1 "*Come, let us worship and bow down. Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker, for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand.*"

And yet, while God was Israel's ultimate Shepherd He often assigned the role of shepherding to men. For example, Moses was called to lead and care for God's flock as kind of an "under-shepherd" who led God's sheep away from the danger in Egypt to the green pastures and quiet waters of the Promise Land. Likewise, the leadership of King David is spoken of as in shepherding terms. The Lord had said to David (2 Sam. 5:2), "*You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler.*" Again, the kings of Israel were all to serve as shepherds of God's people. As sinful men, however, they often failed to do so. For example, the Lord spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying (Jer. 23:1-2),

Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!" declares the LORD. ² Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending

My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD.

Likewise in the prophet Ezekiel we read (Ezk. 34:1-3),

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?’ ³ “You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock.

The reason Israel went astray was owing to the fact that their human leaders - the “shepherds” of Israel – had wandered far from the Lord had and turned the high calling of God on their lives into a means of exalting themselves and getting rich off of God’s sheep. But God had a plan. Through Jeremiah God prophesied (Jer. 23:5–6),

“Behold, *the* days are coming,” declares the LORD, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; And He will reign as king and act wisely And do justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ “In His days Judah will be saved, And Israel will dwell securely; And this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The LORD our righteousness.’”

This promised King would be the great shepherd of Israel. And the fulfillment of that promise occurred when Jesus arrived on the scene and declared, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.*” “*I am the good shepherd, and I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*”

Jesus was the Good shepherd and his people were like sheep who followed the shepherd wherever He would lead. Jesus said, “*My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they follow me.*” Indeed, we will follow Him all the way to His Father’s house where He has prepared a place for us – a place of eternal security and fellowship with the Good Shepherd.

In the meantime, however, Jesus has turned the immediate ministry of shepherding his people to imperfect but faithful men.

II. The Men Called to Shepherd:

1. Do you remember the conversation Jesus had with Peter in John 21? Three times Peter had denied Him. Now, after the resurrection He asks Peter, “Do you love me?... Then “tend my lambs,” “shepherd my sheep,” and “Tend my sheep.” At the end of Jesus’ ministry on earth the one thing that dominated His concern was the care of His sheep. The whole point of the apostolic ministry was to care for Jesus sheep.

2. Turn with me to 1 Pet. 5:1-4. We know this is how Peter understood his calling because when it came time for him to write his own letter to the elder of the local churches of his day he said (1 Peter 5:1–4),

I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being

examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

3. Like Paul, the apostle Peter leaves no ambiguity about the kind of leadership the Lord wants over His church. He requires that there be human shepherds who would lead His flock. The question you may ask, then, is; why then do we call them elders? So let's talk for a few minutes to study this out.

4. There are 3 key terms in the NT that we need to understand whenever we consider the issue of biblical eldership. They are,

- A. *Presbuteros* (elder), which we discussed last week;
- B. *Episkopos* (bishop or overseer), from which the Episcopalian church gets its name.
- C. *Poimen* (pastor or shepherd).

5. Now, these three terms are important because all three in the NT refer to the same office. For example, the qualifications for a *bishop*, listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, are virtually the same as the qualifications for an *elder* in Titus 1:6-9. In fact, in Paul's letter to Titus, he uses the terms *Bishop* and *Elder* to refer to the same man. He writes (Tit. 1:5-7),

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders (*Presbuteros*) in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer (*Episkopos*) must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed...

6. Luke also uses these terms interchangeably in the book of Acts (20:17, 28):

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders (*Presbuteros*) of the church." Then in verse 28 Paul charges the elders: "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*Episkopos*), to shepherd (*Poimen*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

7. Coming back around to Peter's first epistle (1 Pet. 5:1-2) we see Peter using all three terms to speak of the same office in the church:

Therefore, I exhort the elders (*Presbuteros*) among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd (*Poimen – Pastor*) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (*Episkopos*) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God..."

8. The point I am trying to make here is simply that in the NT these three terms (elder, Bishop/Overseer, and Shepherd/Pastor) are used interchangeably to speak of the same group of men charged to give leadership to the local church.

9. Now, as you well know, there are many denominations of Christianity which take these three terms and separate them out into at least three different offices to make a kind of an ecclesiastical hierarchy. But that kind of man-made structure is completely foreign to the word of God. Nowhere do we find in the NT any single man to whom God gave ultimate authority

over the affairs of His church. Nowhere! Rather, what we do find again and again throughout the NT, are groups of men who were appointed to the special assignment of working together as co-laborers in Christ giving leadership to the church.

10. It would be appropriate to call these men pastors, shepherds, bishops, overseers, or, as we know them at Calvary Bible Church, elders. All of these titles in the NT make reference to the same group of men.

11. Another way of looking at it might be to say:

- A. The term Elder refers to name of their *Office*,
- B. The term Bishop/Overseer refers to their *Function* as leaders,
- C. The term Shepherd/Pastor refers to their *Attitude* in ministry. That is, they hold the office of elder whereby they function as overseers with the attitude of a shepherd.

12. This is the vocabulary of the NT whenever it speaks of the leaders of the local church. Among other things what this reveals to us is that much of our modern church vocabulary is unscriptural and terribly misleading. Words such as *clergyman*, *layman*, *reverend*, *minister*, *priest*, and *father* convey ideas contrary to what Jesus and His apostles taught.

13. In my early years of pastoring I used to introduce myself on Sunday morning as “one of the pastors,” and from time to time people would ask why, since at the time I didn’t even have an associate. The answer is simple: that’s who the Bible says I am. I am not “*the* pastor” or “*the* minister” or “*the* holy reverend” or “*vicar of Christ*” or “*grand poobah*” or any other officer in a man-made hierarchical system of spiritual leadership. I am indeed “one of your pastors.” There are, in fact, four (4) other pastors in this little church and we are hoping to add one or two more in the next year or so. Why? Because it is biblical! It is the way God ordained it. And we simply want to serve in obedience to what He has revealed.

14. So whenever we approach the issue of church leadership, we need to approach it with the vocabulary of Scripture, being careful not to insert our own prejudice perspectives and personal opinions.

15. With that in mind, we are now ready to tackle the next major question, “What are the elders supposed to do? I find it interesting that when the Scriptures set out to answer that question, the biblical authors often return to the illustration of a shepherd.

II. The Labor of a Shepherd:

1. The church at large would do well to pay special attention to this. For many modern pastors the model for their ministry is either corporate America with its marketing strategies and power leadership seminars, or the entertainment industry with all of its flashy media productions and live stage shows. The idea of approaching ministry like a humble shepherd usually doesn’t even register a blip on the radar. But that’s the image we find again and again in the NT.

2. Look again at 1 Pet. 5:1-2 “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you... shepherd the flock of

God.”

- A. Here we find Peter writing to suffering Christians who are scattered throughout the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1).
- B. The fact that Peter can address in one letter the elders of churches in five Roman provinces demonstrates that the elder system of government was standard practice.

3. But notice the imperative here. What does he command the elders to do? Shepherd. Peter is passing on the commission he received from the Lord to the elders of the existing church. What is the main business of the elders of a local church? It is to *shepherd* the flock of God. If we love Jesus Christ, if we are devoted to serving Him with our very lives, then our highest calling is the shepherd God’s flock. What does shepherding involve?

6. First, shepherds are careful to *feed the flock*.

- A. The NT places an extraordinary emphasis on the centrality of Teaching God’s Word.
 - 1) Jesus, the “Good Shepherd” was preeminently a teacher. He taught His disciples and commissioned them to teach others to obey everything He had commanded them.
 - 2) The apostles were teachers and the early Christians were devoted to their teaching. (Acts. 2:42)
 - 3) Barnabas sought out Paul to come to Antioch to help teach (Acts 11:25-26)
 - 4) Paul exhorted young Timothy to “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13)
- B. So being a faithful elder means being devoted to teaching God’s people the Scriptures. That’s why we find that the only variance between the qualifications for Deacon and Elder given by Paul is that the Elder must be “apt to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2).
- C. And to Titus, Paul says that an elder must be able “both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.”
- D. When Ezekiel presents a picture of the bad shepherd, his first charge against them is, “[they] do not feed the flock.
- E. Beloved, everything depends on the proper feeding of the sheep. There is so much spiritual “junk food” available to God’s sheep that unless they are being shepherded by men who are faithful to the word, the sheep will not be properly nourished and eventually become sick. Our nation is full of sick, spiritually anemic believers who are being led by spiritual shepherds who devote themselves to everything else but the teaching and preaching of the word.
- F. Clearly, feeding Christ’s sheep is the first duty of all faithful shepherd/elders.

7. Second, faithful shepherd/elders are devoted to *leading the flock*.

- A. In Titus 1:17, Paul insists that a prospective elder be morally and spiritually above reproach because he is “God’s steward.” A steward is nothing less than a “household manager,” someone with official responsibility over the master’s servants, property, and even finances. Elders are stewards of God’s household, the local church. (Strauch, p. 25)

- B. The reason elders are called “overseers” is that they are charged with the responsibility of providing leadership to the church. They are to “oversee” the affairs of the church. Peter even says so in our text (1 Pet. 5:2) “shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (Episkopos).
- C. Alexander Strauch, in his excellent book entitled *Biblical Eldership*, comments:
 The same leading and managing principles involved in shepherding sheep also apply to shepherding a local church. A congregation needs leadership, management, governance, guidance, counsel, and vision. The eldership must clarify direction and beliefs for the flock. It must set goals, make decisions, give direction, correct failures, affect change, and motivate people. It must evaluate, plan, and govern. Elders, then, must be problem solvers, managers of people, planners and thinkers. A healthy, growing flock of sheep doesn’t just appear; it is the result of the shepherd’s skillful management of sheep and resources.
- D. If that all sounds like an enormous amount of work to require of men who, for the most part, maintain careers and families away from the church, you’re absolutely right. And the only way it can be achieved is through self-sacrifice, self-discipline, faith, perseverance, hard work and the power of the Holy Spirit. It’s a big job. And it’s not for everyone. In fact, the only way one can keep up with it all is if God calls and empowers men to do it.
- E. Faithful shepherd/elders not only feed the flock, they also lead the flock. And they lead not only on an official level as teachers and office-holders, but unofficially by the example of their lives.
- 1) A faithful elder needs to be able to say to the sheep as Paul did, “Follow me because I am following Christ.”
 - 2) It doesn’t matter if a man is successful in business, an excellent decision maker and manager and a natural leader. If his personal walk with the Lord is lame, feckless, and lacking devotion to the word of God, prayer, and personal holiness – if he doesn’t love the sheep, than he is unfit for the office of elder.
- F. The call to be a shepherd/elder is a high calling. And one that will incur a stricter judgment on the day of Christ. The author of Hebrews says, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account*” (Heb. 13:17).
- G. So faithful shepherd/elders feed the flock, and lead the flock. But there is one more responsibility they must never take for granted.

8. Third: Faithful shepherd/elders *protect the flock*.

- A. One of the greatest dangers to the flock of God is false teachers who roam about, deceiving the sheep and causing them great harm.
- B. Acts 20:17-31 is one of the most profound texts on this subject.
- 1) In verse 17, Paul calls the elders of Ephesus to himself.
 - 2) Then, beginning in verse 28, he warns them of the dangers that will befall them in the near future. (read 28-31)

C. Shepherd/elders are called to be protectors, watchmen, defenders, and guardians of God's people. In order to accomplish this, they must remain spiritually alert and deal with dangers courageously. That means dealing with:

- 1) False teachers who come into the church (Jude);
- 2) Disciplining sin (Mat. 18);
- 3) Protecting the unity of the body (Paul)
- 4) Dealing with factious people who cause division (Titus 3:10)

D. So, faithful shepherd/elders feed, lead, and protect the flock. And they do it realizing whose flock it actually belongs to.

9. Peter says (1 Pet. 5:2) "Shepherd the flock of God".

- A. You see, the church does not belong to the elders. We are simply stewards of someone else's property. The sheep belong to Christ.
- B. Christ has been and always will remain the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4), the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-14), and the Great Shepherd (Heb. 13:20). The elders, then, are Christ's "under-shepherds". We are charged with the responsibility of caring for the Lord's sheep on His behalf.
- C. So ultimately, the shepherd's job is not to lead the flock in such a way that makes himself look good, but to lead in such a way that honors the Chief Shepherd Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

10. This is what being elders in the local church is all about.

Biblical elders are charged with the awesome responsibility of shepherding God's flock for the glory of Christ.

11. Next week we will look at the qualifications of biblical elders as found in 1 Timothy 3.