

# Shepherd the Flock

*1 Peter 5:1-5*

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1 Peter 5:1-5

So 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: <sup>2</sup>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; <sup>3</sup>not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup>And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. <sup>5</sup>Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:1-5).

## Introduction

I have not kept statistics on this, but if you were to ask me the primary reason people have given for leaving their previous church it would not be theological or doctrinal disagreements, it would not be ethical infractions on the part of the leadership, it would not be due to programs offered or not offered.

The primary explanation I've received from people leaving their previous church has to do with ecclesiology – the way the church is run – the function and disposition of the leadership. You don't leave the church because the guy next to you is grumpy, disagreeable, unreasonable or is making heavy handed, thoughtless decisions about the direction or tasks of the church. But the same cannot be said if the grumpy, disagreeable, unreasonable, heavy handed, thoughtless person is an elder.

Seeking to give people the benefit of the doubt, I tend to think that the unfortunate situations regarding church leadership don't begin as a premeditated plan. Pastors and elders, for the most part, don't have a deliberate plan to abuse their power or become contentious (as we have seen so much). I rather conclude that this takes place because they have a faulty view of their *job description*, *misplaced priorities* and an *unrealistic expectation* of what it feels like to be in the ministry. One might say that the

same things that produce difficulties in a marriage produce difficulties in the church.

In the minutes following I will attempt to locate and offer some biblical admonitions regarding the job description, priorities and expectations regarding being an elder – although many of these can be applied to those seeking to serve Christ in any capacity. It is my prayer that we would, as a result, enter into (or for some of us, continue) this office with a healthy, biblical perspective on our calling.

It should also be helpful to the congregation that they might know what is to be expected and not expected when it comes to the leadership of the church – many of these things applying, not only to elders but, to deacons as well. Add to that the sad fact that modern western evangelicalism has a very low view of the church and the elders – almost as if it/they are an expendable entity to their spiritual well-being. One is hard-pressed to find a more unbiblical thought. There is a call the church has in response to its elders. Although that is not my focus here, the implications should not be missed.

We begin with the job description.

## **The Job Description**

### **A Plurality**

Something that should jump out at anybody engaging in a cursory study of elders is that in the over sixty times the it is used in the New Testament, the word “**elder**’ *presbyteros* is always plural except when Paul is writing about an accusation against a specific elder (1 Timothy 5:19) and in the introductions of 2 and 3 John where John is referring to himself as the one writing the letters.

This is not to say that an elder does not have individual duties in visiting the sick, praying for those in need, instructing the uninformed or improperly informed, comforting those who mourn and so forth. But the church is not governed by isolated elders operating independently. The church is to be governed by a plurality of elders functioning as a single session. A single elder cannot excommunicate, determine theology or

policy. It is the corporate conscience of Spirit-filled, Christian men that Christ has determined to rule in His church (1 Timothy 5:17).

The individual members of the session must be willing to submit to the corporate conscience of the session. If a decision is on the table in the session and it passes eight to one, the one elder who voted against it must recognize that as his decision as well. When asked, "How did the session vote?" His answer should be, "We voted 'yes'."<sup>1</sup>

## Quit Serving Tables

The elders must quit serving tables. It was not out of laziness that the **"twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables'" (Acts 6:2)**. It was a matter of priority and recognizing their human limitations.

It might be argued (in part) that the office of elder was instituted because of God's concern for the fatigue of His ministers. When Moses was settling disputes and making known the statutes of God and his laws to the people, he did this **"from morning till evening" (Exodus 18:13)**. Jethro **"Moses' father-in-law said to him, 'What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup>You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone" (Exodus 18:17, 18)**. He counseled Moses to look for **"able men" (Exodus 18:21)** to lighten the burden on Moses.

Moses was limited and worn out so we have elders. The elders are worn out and limited so we have deacons. The deacons are limited and worn out so who do we have? The rest of the saints. The specific offices in the church enumerated in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) are not called to do all the work. They are called to equip the saints for the work (Ephesians 4:12). William Hendriksen comments:

**The important lesson taught here is that not only apostles, prophets, evangelists, and those who are called "pastors and**

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, if the majority of the session has become so corrupt that the single elder's conscience does not allow this submission, he must appeal to a higher adjudicatory (presbytery or general assembly).

**teachers,” but the entire church should be engaged in spiritual labor. “The universal priesthood of believers” is stressed here.<sup>2</sup>**

The long and the short of it here is if it is not unique to your job description (if being an elder or deacon isn't required for the activity) let someone else do it. They may be better at it than you. Being worn out is a common problem of those in leadership.

Years ago I played a volleyball tournament and two members of the Olympic team were on my team. I recall early in the tournament a ball was served and almost hit this one player in the foot. He made no effort at all to pass the ball to the setter (it wasn't his skill, it wasn't his position). We all looked at him with quizzical expressions and someone asked, “Why didn't you pass that?” He simply said “I don't pass.” For the remainder of the tournament the job descriptions were very clear. All the confusion was gone. Simply put elders – whatever you can not do, don't do. There are a lot of other people here.

## **Watch the Doctrine**

Among the things you should not avoid is the watching of the doctrine. Paul writes:

**Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:28-30).**

In chapter X of our Form of Government the elders are exhorted that...

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<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of Ephesians* (Vol. 7, p. 198). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

**They should have particular concern for the doctrine and conduct of the minister of the Word and help him in his labors.**

Good elders work at being good theologians. We need to be aware of doctrinal aberrations in our own church and in the church at large and be ready to address them. You are called to keep an eye on my doctrine and conduct as the teaching elder and whoever may, someday, take my spot. And you must be willing to engage.

This doesn't mean being unnecessarily contentious. Some issues are not as critical. Not every Christian with doctrinal confusion is a Pharisee. We needn't produce John the Baptist's winnowing fork sermon for those struggling through difficult doctrinal issues. But not all slippery slopes are fallacies and it is the elders who are called to be on guard.

### **Watch the Flock**

Another specific item on the elders job description is the watching of the flock; or as Peter puts it, "**shepherd the flock**" (1 Peter 5:2). Of course this includes the watching of the doctrine, but it also includes the general oversight and intimate love and concern for the lives of those to whom we must give an account to God (Hebrews 13:17).

From time to time I have noticed the temptation (I am as guilty as any) to allow our session meetings to be more akin to a business meeting. For this reason we have implemented shepherding meetings where we don't talk business. We share the needs, pains, hurts, struggles of those under our care. We pray for them and consider the best course of action to love, protect and counsel.

We might want to view the members of the church as your own children. We are to seek to notice who is here and who is absent. Who is sick, who is upset, who is tempted to sin and rebellion, who is in need and so on. We are to corporately shoulder the weight of the well-being of the congregation the way a father might shoulder the weight of the well-being of his own family.

And we are to take every opportunity to nurture the "**unity of faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.**" We are to pray and counsel the

congregation **“to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”** that they **“should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting”** (Ephesians 4:13-15).

We want to produce Christian grownups that capable of, and eventually will, replace us in God’s ongoing advancement of His kingdom throughout history.

## **Watch the Attitude**

The job is not always easy. So we need to watch our attitudes? One thinks of the frustrations of the Apostle Paul or Moses. Sometimes we are called to strike the rock (Exodus 17:5) and sometimes merely speak to the rock (Numbers 20:8). Certainly the congregation is called to make our task joyful (Hebrews 13:17) but not everyone has read that verse.

I don’t doubt that Paul included himself when he wrote:

**We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,<sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.<sup>14</sup> And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14).**

I don’t think Peter was pulling a problem out of the air when he exhorted the elders not to be **“domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock”** (1 Peter 5:3).

Certainly there is much more that can be said regarding the job description but we must conclude here and more onto priorities.

## **The Priorities**

### **Watch your Life**

Simply put, watch your life. As we wrestle through doctrine and counseling and policies and decisions in and for the church, we are

protected by one another. The one elder who was overruled by the other eight is not disqualified from ministry because he was overruled. But he can be disqualified if he falls into egregious and besetting sins.

It has been said that when a man goes into ministry the devil puts a bulls-eye on his back. To what extent that is true I couldn't say, but those ethical considerations that qualified you to be elders should not only be maintained but improved upon. Be above reproach, sober-minded, self-controlled, mind your liquor, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy and one who manages his own household well.

Never lay your family at the altar of your ministry. I will not be disqualified from being a dad if I can't manage the church but I can be disqualified from ministry if I don't take care of my family. For many years I was the only full-time ordained pastor on staff in this church. A Friday would not come when I surveyed my week only to realize there were multiple issues or people I had not addressed or contacted. With some exceptions my decision had to be 'so be it.' It's time to be home. Don't be seduced into neglecting your family even for a worthy cause.

## **The Expectations**

### **The Allure of Reciprocation**

Finally let's speak of the expectation. Many years ago I had a conversation with someone who decided to leave the ministry at a particular church. When I asked why, they said the church had robbed them of their joy. I felt bad for them. I didn't know how to respond. I've thought about that statement a great deal over the years. The ministry can and should be a joy. But it can also be very difficult and feel unrewarding.

When I was studying to be a teacher it was explained to us that even though we might not make a lot of money we would enjoy what they called 'psychic income.' You would receive kudos – pats on the back and the warm feeling of appreciation from grateful students and a thankful administration – maybe if you worked in the school district of Oz.

One of the primary cautions I would offer those seeking to serve Christ is to be aware of the allure of reciprocation. I must say that I generally feel very supported and encouraged by the members of our



church. But it hasn't always been that way. And it certainly isn't that way for many in the ministry.

It wouldn't be too difficult to put the desire for reciprocation under the category Peter addresses when he commends the elders shepherd the flock with no concern for **"shameful gain" (1 Peter 5:2)**. We generally think of that in financial terms, and it certainly would include that, but it is equally shameful to shepherd the flock for the prestige, psychological or emotional benefit you're hoping to extract from them.

When Israel was cut to the heart through the reading of the law which affected their hearts with the sorrow of their own transgressions, they were not to seek joy so much from one another, but rather cherish the joy associated with the sacred feast which pointed to the good favor of God through Christ for **"the joy of the Lord"** was their strength (Nehemiah 8:10). And that is a joy which cannot be stolen.

## **A Crown**

It is no small thing that Paul writes that **"anyone who aspires to the office of overseer...desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1)**. It is a good work that the elders desire. And over and above the accolades of man, the prestige of culture or the emotional or psychic income which this good work provides – the expectation that the elder should enjoy and upon which he should meditate is the unfathomable joy which is promised in Peter's words toward the elders:

**And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:4).**

## Questions for Study

1. What is ecclesiology and why is it important (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is meant by a plurality of elders? How should we understand the authority and decisions of the session (pages 3, 4)?
3. Why did the apostles quit serving tables? How does this speak to the offices and roles of elders and deacons (pages 4, 5)?
4. Is doctrine important? Describe the role of elders when it comes to doctrine (pages 5, 6).
5. What does it mean to shepherd the flock? What are some temptations which might avert the attention of the elders when it comes to this critical responsibility (pages 6, 7)?
6. Can you think of spiritual leaders in the Bible who struggled with a bad attitude toward those under their care? What can be some difficulties that will challenge the elders' attitude (page 7)?
7. Why is it such a priority for an elder to watch his life (pages 7, 8)?
8. Discuss dangerous expectations of the ministry? What is the true expectation (pages 8, 9)?