

Gospel-Shaped Elders

1 Peter 5:1-4

At a Boy Scout camp several years ago, the camp directors took the boys deep into the wilderness and divided them into three teams. Each team was equipped with their scouting handbook and then assigned their task: first, each team needed to choose leaders for themselves to guide them through the wilderness. But second, they needed choose people for the right kind of leadership roles, the ones described in the handbook. And then third, they had to make sure that those leaders carried out their roles in the right way, for the right purposes, again according to the handbook. Only then would their team be properly fit for finding their way through the wilderness and arriving safely at home.

The first team was skeptical of the idea of leadership. In fact, they were suspicious of any and all authority structures. They saw them as thinly disguised attempts at exercising power and control over others; even the handbook itself was guilty. So they decided that everyone on their team would be the leader. No one's ideas were more right than anyone else's; everyone was equal and therefore must play the same role—'we're all leaders.' Which of course meant that no one was leading. And they're still wandering the wilderness to this day . . .

The second team saw the wisdom in selecting leaders, but rather than closely follow the categories of leadership laid out in the handbook, they simply assigned the kinds of leaders they had all become used to. The kind of leaders their troop had always had, and the troop before them, and before them. Sure they were different from what the handbook described, but there were some similarities. And after all, we've learned a lot since the handbook was published. But this led to confusion at times as they tried to apply the handbook to their new kind of leader; it didn't always fit and some things got left out. That created a growing distrust among some team members, who watched their inconsistent application. They did eventually make it through the wilderness, but not without great difficulty and division in their ranks.

The third team followed the handbook very closely when it came to the kind of leaders they were to select. In fact, they prided themselves in it as they watched the other teams struggle in that area. But once they had assigned the right kind of leaders, they assumed they were good, and failed to consult the handbook in terms of *how* they should lead. Their new leaders charged the way forward, determined to be the first ones through the wilderness. They were so focused on making progress that they didn't notice that some were having a hard time keeping up. When they finally realized it, they chided them and questioned their commitment. Team members began feeling abandoned and used. Distrust and disunity cropped up here too. They did in fact reach the edge of the wilderness first, but not without leaving several team members behind.

There is of course a moral to this parable: the dead end of having no leadership, the difficulty of having the wrong kind of leadership, and the danger of having the right kind but wrong quality of leadership.

And there is another lesson to the parable, that had they followed the handbook, much of their woe and trouble would have been sorted out. Not that they wouldn't have faced problems, but they would have known how to handle them.

And so when we think about leadership in the church today, God has not left us to figure out everything on our own. He's given us a handbook—the Scriptures, which tell us that we do in fact need leaders; we need the *right kind* of leaders—namely, elders and deacons; and we need those leaders to carry out their roles in the right way, for the right purposes. To put that another way in light of our current series, we need *gospel-shaped elders and deacons* at the helm of our local churches.

That we need leaders should be obvious. Yet one of the fruits of postmodern philosophy in recent years is a deep-seated suspicion toward anything that smells of authority. We're so afraid of being taken advantage of, or perhaps of giving others the impression that we're trying to take advantage of them, that we're afraid to have leaders with any conviction. A little over ten years ago a whole church movement was formed in the U.S., built in part on this premise. 'Nobody's necessarily wrong, we're all just having a friendly conversation, and nobody's really leading anybody else.' It shouldn't be surprising that this movement has been defunct for nearly five years.

Leadership makes sense. But it's not just logical, it's also very biblical. God talks a lot about church leadership in the Scriptures. Last week we looked at church leadership in general in Ephesians 4. But God gets pretty specific about what kind and what quality of leader he wants in his church. This has been confused through centuries of churches selecting for themselves the kind of leaders they're used to, rather than carefully following God's Word.¹ But if we let the handbook, the Scriptures, give us our categories, we see that there are two specific offices that Christ has given for the leadership of his church—elders and deacons. I want to talk about eldership today, and we'll look at deacons next week.

When Christ's apostles established the church in the book of Acts, one of their goals was to appoint elders in each congregation for the ongoing oversight and guidance of the church. For instance, we read in Acts 14:21-23:

When they [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.²³ And when they had appointed *elders* for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Similarly, Paul instructs Titus in Titus 1:5, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint *elders* in every town as I directed you . . ." And notice how Paul sometimes calls elders "overseers," as he does two verses later in Titus 1:7: "For an *overseer*, as God's steward, must be above reproach. . . ." (cf. 1 Tim. 3:1). The word overseer is

¹ Note how frequently denominations and traditions are named according to their particular leadership structure: *Episcopalian, Congregational, Presbyterian, Free Church, Independent Baptist*, etc. For a brief but helpful summary of the history of changing church leadership structures, see ch. 3 in Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010).

sometimes translated “bishop,” as in the old King James, but it refers to the same office as elder.² Elder and overseer: two words, same office.

And according to the New Testament, this office is to be filled by qualified men, who are above reproach in character, faithful in marriage, self-controlled, humble, hospitable, able to teach, not lovers of money, but good stewards of their own families and home (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:1-7; Tit. 1:7-9). It’s given to men, not because women don’t belong in ministry—every other office and leadership role is open to both men and women. And not because of ability, or the culture of the time, or as a result of the fall. But as a reflection of God’s order in creation. “Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim. 2:13). Just as God rules his creation, so he rules his church, and he’s woven into it a reminder of his rule by shaping the church’s leadership structure after his created order.

But what are elders supposed to do? How are they supposed to do it? And how should the gospel of Jesus shape all of that? We need to ask those questions because having the right kind or categories of leaders doesn’t solve anything by itself. They need to have the right quality among them—to carry out their roles in the right way, for the right purposes.

Turn with me to 1 Peter 5.

The Gospel-Shaped Calling of Elders

“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: *shepherd the flock of God that is among you . . .*” (1 Pet. 5:1-2).

What is it that elders are supposed to do? Their essential calling is to shepherd the flock of God. Not their own flock—the church does not belong to them. It belongs to God, bought with the blood of Christ. But they are called to shepherd it with the gospel and by the gospel.

Unfortunately, this is not always what happens in the name of elder leadership. Too often we assume that because we have the right category we’re good. And then we fill in the responsibilities from other models or standards of leadership—we assume being an elder is like “administering a school, running a company, commanding a warship, managing a project, directing operations, overseeing subcontractors, serving on a board of trustees.”³ Those are all useful skills, and may overlap here and there, but shepherding God’s flock is a unique calling and responsibility.

So what does it mean to be a shepherd? Think of the metaphor itself. A shepherd is responsible for the wellbeing of the sheep. That means *feeding* them, *leading* them to where they need to go, *protecting* them from wolves or predators along the way, all of which requires *knowing* the flock, being acquainted with them, living among them. Timothy Witmer, in his excellent book, *The Shepherd Leader*, suggests that these four categories capture the essential responsibilities of elders: knowing, leading, feeding, and protecting the flock.⁴

² See also Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; 1 Tim. 3:1.

³ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders* (9Marks; Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 15.

⁴ Witmer, 101-106.

First, shepherds are called to *lead* the sheep. We shepherd, v. 2, by “exercising oversight.” There is a leadership responsibility in guarding the wellbeing of the flock and guiding them through the wilderness of this fallen world. But the elders don’t set the agenda; we are under-shepherds of the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4; cf. 2:25). And it’s his Word, and ultimately his gospel that shows us the way forward during this “time of exile,” while we wait for his return (1:17). Notice how Peter exhorts the elders in v. 1 not only as a fellow elder, but as a witness to the *sufferings* of Christ, as well as a partaker in the *glory* that is going to be revealed. He looks back on the cross—the power and pattern of our leadership—and forward to the new creation—our direction and goal. So elders lead the flock according to the gospel.

But to do that, they must also *feed* the flock with the message of the gospel, the Word of God. Think of what Jesus charged Peter in John 21—the same Peter writing these words to the churches: “Feed my sheep” (Jn. 21:17). Think of what Paul charged Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:2: “Preach the Word.” Christ rules his church by his Word. So elders, as shepherds, must be faithful teachers of God’s Word.

Now you might be saying, ‘I thought that’s what we hired pastors to do.’ I’m glad you brought that up! What *is* the relationship between pastors and elders in the Bible? It’s very simple: there’s no difference. Pastors are elders, and elders are pastors. Or you might think of it: elder is the office, and pastoring is the chief responsibility (cf. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). In fact, the word *pastor* simply means “shepherd.” That’s what we’ve been talking about all along.

So why do we have both pastors and elders here at Westgate? If we want to use biblical categories (and our bylaws actually reflect this), what we have is a team of elders, two of whom happen to make their living at it—me and Pastor Bruce. But we have no more authority than the rest of the elders. And we serve a common purpose in shepherding and overseeing the flock.

The fact that we make our living as elders does free us up to give more time and attention to it, and among the elders we have been entrusted with specific responsibilities, such as preaching God’s Word, which is the one time the whole flock is gathered together under God’s Word. But the pulpit is not the only way to feed the flock, and every elder needs to know their way around the Bible and be able to give counsel from it, regardless of whether they’re gifted at public speaking. We must feed the sheep.

But we must also *protect* them. Because this fallen wilderness is fraught with pits and full of predators. And we protect the flock by guarding sound doctrine and tracking down the strays.

When Paul handed off his ministry to the elders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20, he gave them this charge:

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

Elders must guard sound teaching in the church, keeping the life-giving message of the gospel unpolluted. As D. A. Carson says, a good pastor is like a plumber: “his responsibility is to make

sure that the nourishing water flows in for the good and the life of the entire community, and the rubbish, the excrement, and all the garbage flow out.”⁵

We must protect healthy doctrine. But we must also go after sheep who wander from the fold, whether through false teaching or false living. This too is part of gospel ministry. “Elders profoundly embody the gospel when they search out wandering members. Keeping watch and tracking down the strays is a Jesus-shaped activity.”⁶ This is where pastoral ministry gets messy and uncomfortable. But if we love the sheep as Christ loves his sheep, then it’s worth it.

So elders lead, feed, and protect the flock according to the gospel—that’s what a shepherd does. But all of this requires *knowing* the flock. As my friend Jeramie Rinne puts it, elders should smell like sheep.⁷ Because you are one—we are part of God’s flock, not above it. But also because if you don’t know the flock, it’s hard to lead them, feed them, or protect them. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me” (Jn. 10:14). A good shepherd has relationship with his sheep.

Rinne explains, “By contrast, overseers operating in an elder-as-trustee model need not be among the people. They can attend monthly meetings, participate in board debates, cast votes, and then go home with a sense of having fulfilled their duties.”⁸ But that’s not shepherding the flock.

It matters to God not only that we have leaders, but the right kind of leaders (elders) who pursue the right calling (shepherding the flock). You don’t send an electrician in to do a plumber’s job, even if they both have a contribution to building the house. Elders are not a board of directors, they are a team of shepherds, which means knowing and loving and serving the flock of God, even when it gets messy and costly.

We are growing in that as elders at Westgate. We have not arrived, but we’re trying to grow. In fact, we have a retreat coming up, and part of that retreat every year is training to become better shepherds. So if you think about it, pray for us. We want to serve you as Christ would have us.

But there’s one more thing that makes eldership hard. And that’s the heart of the elder.

The Gospel-Shaped Character of Elders

Pastoral ministry is hard, whether you’re paid for it or not. It’s not uncommon for elders to struggle with their motives and methods in what they’re doing. It’s tempting to think that ministry would be easy if it weren’t for people. But as Jared Wilson reminds us, “The primary problem in pastoral ministry, brother pastor, is not them. It’s you. You are your biggest problem.”⁹ Think again what Paul charged the Ephesian elders: “Pay careful attention to *yourselves* and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). The elder’s shepherding responsibility begins with by watching his own heart. It’s not enough to shepherd the flock *with* the gospel, the elder must also shepherd *by* the gospel—applying it first to his own heart.

⁵ D.A. Carson, “The Blessed Gospel of our Glorious God,” audio sermon, Jan. 18, 2009. Available at: http://college-church.org/av_item.php?avid=502.

⁶ Rinne, 68.

⁷ Rinne, 31-43.

⁸ Rinne, 37.

⁹ Jared Wilson, *The Pastor’s Justification* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 29.

Peter gets at this in ch. 5:2-3: “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; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” Notice how he outlines three competing motivations or methods that flow from the heart of an elder: willingness vs. compulsion, eagerness vs. shameful gain, and being an example vs. domineering. It’s only as the gospel works on our hearts personally that these become healthy in our lives and ministries. I want to look briefly at each one.

1. Shepherd willingly, not under compulsion.

The question is pretty simple: *Am I doing this because I want to, or because I have to?*

Elders should be elders, in part, because they want to be. “If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Tim. 3:1). That’s not the only qualification, but willingness is important. Without it, you’re likely to burn out pretty fast.

On the other hand, if I’m doing this because I feel like I have to—whether out of guilt (‘people are counting on me; I don’t really want to do this, but I’ll feel bad if I say no’), or because I feel like I have something to prove (‘this is what real leaders do’; or, ‘if I can just accomplish this or that as an elder, then people will finally respect me’), then that’s neither healthy for me or the congregation.

Now it’s okay if someone simply does not have a desire to serve as an elder; not everybody needs to serve as an elder. But for those who do, it’s the gospel that sanctifies that desire and frees it from compulsion. I don’t have to operate out of guilt, because my guilt is taken care of in the cross. And I have nothing to prove, because my sufficiency and identity are fixed in what Christ has done for me. There’s no reason to be feel forced into it; it’s simply a matter of being willing.

2. Shepherd eagerly, not for shameful gain.

The question here: *Am I doing this because of what I get out of it, or because of what I can give?*

Apart from the gospel, I will be tempted to turn elder ministry into a means of gain. Maybe not like the “Preachers of LA,” but shameful gain comes in all varieties. Whether it’s power, or notoriety and prestige, or simply a paycheck. If my motivation in being an elder is more about what I get out of the deal, than what I can give to Christ, then I using the office for shameful gain.

But Christ wants elders to shepherd with eagerness—not for what I can get, but what I can give. And it’s reflecting on the gospel that makes this possible. When I consider who Christ is and all that he’s done for me in his life, death, and resurrection, I realize that there’s nothing on this earth that I can gain that’s better than what Christ has already given me the the cross. Moreover, there’s nothing I stand to gain on earth that can compete with the crown God has promised to his faithful servants in the end—“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet 5:4). The gospel frees me to shepherd not for shameful gain, but with grace-fueled eagerness.

3. Shepherd as an example, not domineering.

The difference here is simple as well: shepherding is about serving Christ and the flock; domineering is about using Christ and the flock. And nobody wants to be used.

If I lose sight of what Christ has accomplished for me, and approach the responsibility to be a shepherd with the weight on my own shoulders, I'm going to be pretty controlling. 'Here's where we're going, here's how we're going to get there, everybody get on board or you're going to get left behind.' It's incredibly easy to slip into that mindset, and it can have a devastating effect.

Jared Wilson offers five signs to help us discern if you've moved from shepherding to domineering:¹⁰

1. You insulate yourself from criticism and/or interpret any criticism as attacks or insubordination.
2. You have a paranoia about who is and who isn't in line.
3. You have a need to micromanage or hold others back from leadership opportunities or other responsibilities.
4. You have an impulse to hoard credit and shift blame.
5. Your progression has regressed to reaction.

That's a lot to think about. That is not leading or feeding or protecting others with the gospel. And so we need the gospel once again to rescue our hearts from the temptation to lord authority over people, and free us instead to serve as examples to flock. Modeling humility and dependence on God's grace, being approachable and willing to be wrong. Loving the sheep as Jesus has loved us, even if that means we can't control the outcome of our service. Even if it means that we might not be the first ones through the wilderness, because we have a responsibility not just to an idea, but to real people—the flock of God entrusted to our care, whom we should lead as models and examples of godliness. But we will have nothing healthy to exemplify if we are not first and foremost depending on the gospel in our own lives.

God has not left us to ourselves to figure out the best models of leadership; he has given us elders to shepherd the flock. And faithful elders will shepherd the flock with the gospel and by the gospel. It's the good news of Jesus that makes all the difference.

¹⁰ Wilson, 45-47.