

The Biblical Pattern: Introduction to the Roles of Elders
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Synopsis: This lesson will overview the Bible teaching on the work of an elder and the nature and purpose of his rule with example cases and discussion on the challenges of spiritual shepherding.

Introduction: Spiritual leadership is a perpetual concern for God's people.

- A. The Holy Spirit reveals Paul's determination that churches should be shepherded and overseen by mature, godly believers, evident as early as his first preaching journey where he appoints "elders in every church" (Acts 14:23).
- B. Paul later writes to Timothy, further west in Ephesus, and to Titus on Crete, describing the qualities of those who should be appointed as elders (1 Timothy 3:1-6; Titus 1:5-9).
- C. When Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, he identifies "shepherds" (ESV) as among those given by the Lord to "equip the saints for ministry" and for "building up the body of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11-12).
- D. Yet when the Lord, through John, addresses the Ephesian church a generation or less later, they had "abandoned the love you had at first," and had "fallen" and needed to repent (Revelation 2:4-5).
- E. Elders are a feature of the Philippian church (1:1) when Paul writes to them.
- F. Peter, an elder himself in addition to serving as an evangelist and apostle, emphasized the critical role of elders in implementing the aims of the Chief Shepherd, and the necessity for Christians to be in subjection (1 Peter 5:1-5).
- G. The importance of stable spiritual leadership for God's people can also be seen in the descriptions by Old Testament prophets in texts such as Jeremiah 5:31, Ezekiel 22:26, Hosea 5:1, and Micah 3:9-12.
- H. The Lord's concern for his sheep, and His wrath toward the lack of leadership (or worse, perverted and corrupt leadership) is perhaps nowhere more clearly seen than in the scathing denunciations of Ezekiel 34:1-10ff.

I. "Qualifications:" Checklist, Portrait, Job Description – or what?

- A. Probably the most frequently used term among brethren today is "elder" (although I am sensing a healthy trend toward more frequent use of the description "shepherd"). The term "elder" is not, however, used exclusively for "church leaders," but sometimes simply denotes an older person (1 Timothy 5:1-2; Titus 2:2-3) -- someone who has lived and learned long enough to acquire some wisdom.

B. An equally important descriptor is the term often translated “overseer,” designating someone responsible to see that things are done properly (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1). Other terms such as manager, guardian, or superintendent, can be synonymous (though care must be taken lest we allow the world’s perspective of such terms to skew the divine model).

Still, these terms would eliminate from consideration someone who might have sterling qualities and some Biblical knowledge, but could not organize a three-car parade – and would not given such responsibilities on their job, or in other groups of which they might be members.

C. Another term, often overlooked in consideration of this topic, but clearly used in Titus 1:7, is “steward.” The term frequently denoted a slave who had proven over time to their master that they were trustworthy. Considering their service, they were assigned various responsibilities in the execution of household matters. Though in charge of many things, they were ever aware that what they managed was not their own, and that they were accountable to their master for their service.

D. The lists of qualities enumerated in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 might seem at first glance to be an objective list of requirements – what many have called a “checklist.” But most of us likely have wrestled with the somewhat “subjective” nature of many of the “qualifications.”

1. What qualifies as “apt to teach?” Someone who is an abysmal teacher does not fit the description – but what of someone who has demonstrated “marginal” teaching ability? Or “moderate?”
2. What does “husband of one wife” (literally, “one-woman man”) mean? Married only once? His first wife has died and he is now scripturally remarried? (And, can he continue to serve in the interim?) Not a polygamist (to set the bar really low)?
3. Obviously someone who practices no (or only minimal?) hospitality would not meet that qualification. But must someone be spectacularly hospitable to meet the qualification? Or does someone only modestly so “qualify?”
4. Is someone who got into a shouting match in the lobby a few years ago “self-controlled,” or “temperate,” or not? What constitutes “contentious?”
5. If a man has only one child, but that child is a “believing child,” does he meet the qualification? Or if he has one believing child – among three or four children? If his children have fallen away 20 years after leaving home, does he still “qualify”
6. And so on

E. The “bottom line” consideration is often: who will a congregation follow? Can a shepherd lead effectively when the flock refuses to follow? (Which raises a whole other bucket of questions about the attitude of congregations toward their overseers – see 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

F. "I fear that in the American church these days, 'submit' has taken on the meaning of 'coincidentally go along with until I disagree.' However, if all we really are doing is submitting to an eldership until they ask us to do something we don't want to, who really is our authority? Is it them, or is it us?" -- Matt Bassford

G. One resource which addresses many commonly-posed questions about elders, eldership, and the tasks of shepherding and overseeing, is ***A Crisis in Leadership: Truth Lectures for 2010***, ed. Mike Willis (Bowling Green, KY, 2010). Begin with Steve Wolfgang, "Simon Peter: Everyman as Leader" (pp. 9-35); Notes and Bibliography will lead to many other resources, as do several essays in ***Guard the Trust: Studies in Paul's Letters to Timothy and Titus***, ed. Dan Petty (Florida College Lectures, 2009).

II. ***"Qualified" to do what? The tasks prescribed!***

A. Invoking a rough analogy of a want-ad job search: often such ads begin with a sort of "minimum-requirement" list, e.g., must have diploma or GED, CDL, certification on certain software programs, so many years prior experience, etc. THEN what often follows is the actual job description (what the applicant must actually be able to DO), e.g.: must be willing to travel, able to converse in another language, demonstrate certain "people skills," etc. Without the first set of "credentials," the candidate is not even considered for the job. But possessing a diploma or certificate is no guarantee that s/he can actually do the work.

B. So, are there other texts which help to understand what the work of shepherding, overseeing, feeding, guiding, guarding, and so forth actually is supposed to look like?

C. Consider Acts 20, where Paul seems to be describing, and modeling, what a shepherd would look like. Paul there personally addresses the elders who are only mentioned or abstractly described in Ephesians 4 and 1 Timothy 1:3, 3:1-7). At the conclusion of his in-person remarks to those elders, he ends with this exhortation: "In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35, ESV).

D. Describing what he had done, is not Paul modeling what they should do as shepherds and overseers of the Ephesian church?

-- Serving with humility through trials and tears (v19)

-- Not shrinking from declaring the whole counsel of God (v20)

-- Teaching publicly and aching from house to house (v20)

-- Proclaiming the profitable word to Jew and Gentile alike (v21)

-- Adopting a sacrificial lifestyle rather than counting his life as precious (v24)

-- Being on guard for the flock, and themselves (v28)

-- Admonishing night and day, even with tears (v31)

-- Coveting no one's possessions, but providing for others (vv33-34)

"In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (NASB95)

III. Consider the Concept of "Servant Leadership"

- A. This is a modern management/leadership concept popularized by former AT&T executive Robert Greenleaf, endorsed and referenced by Stephen Covey (best known for his **Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders**, Ken Blanchard (developer of the **One-Minute Manager** concepts), and others who have devoted themselves to a study of "leadership" and what it means to be a leader.
- B. It is perhaps an example of how "worldly wisdom" occasionally discovers a Biblical truth, or stumbles upon a principle which is consistent with, or at least not at odds, with divine wisdom.
- C. The Servant Leader "is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature."
- D. "Servant-leaders achieve results for their organizations by giving priority attention to the needs of their colleagues and those they serve. Servant-leaders are often seen as humble stewards of their organization's resources (human, financial and physical)."
- E. See Robert Greenleaf, **Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness** (25th Anniversary edition, ed. Larry Spears, Foreword by Stephen Covey; Indianapolis: Robert Greenleaf Center, 1977; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002).
- F. Characteristics of Servant Leaders: Listening, Empathy, Healing, Awareness, Persuasion, Conceptualization, Foresight, Stewardship, Commitment to others' growth, Commitment to building "community"

G. “The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is:

--Do those served grow as persons?

--Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

--What is the effect on the least privileged in society?

--Will they benefit or at least not be further deprived?

Robert Greenleaf, *Servant as Leader*; Larry Spears, ed., *Insights on Leadership: Service, Stewardship, Spirit, and Servant-Leadership*; Ken Blanchard, *Servant Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

IV. Issues and Concerns:

1. Start with the obvious: why are there so many churches without elders?
 - A. A question which has long perplexed me as I read from Peter the impetuous disciple who grew to become an effective evangelist and apostle, as well as a shepherd under the Chief Shepherd: why are there so many churches without elders? I don’t know of anyone who would estimate it as more than one in three; after preaching a half-century in more than 40 states, I would put it more like one in 4.
 - B. Why is that? Why so many flocks in the chaos of sheep without shepherds, where work is done and decisions made (or not, and simply defaulted to majority opinion) by those who are not spiritually qualified to do so? Why so many leaderless flocks simply milling around, sitting ducks (to mix metaphors) for every false-teaching ravenous wolf?
 - C. Why so many churches that exist for decades without developing even 2 such men as described in Biblical texts? And why so many on the margins, barely able to produce 2 or 3 (and thus perpetually only a heart attack and/or job transfer away from plunging back into leaderless chaos or stagnation)? Thoughts?
 - D. What can (or should) a church do about unqualified elders – “shepherds” who do not actually shepherd, who overstep their authority, who “lord it over” the flock,” or become mere “checkbook elders” who see their task as “giving account for the money?” In short, those who fit the description of Ezekiel 34 “elders?”
 - E. A simple historical fact is that a great many churches which have apostatized were led over the cliff of digression by the elders who were “leading” them.
 - F. When does a man become “disqualified?” When his wife dies? His children fall away (even decades after leaving his home)? He becomes contentious?

V. *Discussion Questions and “Issues”*

- A. What role do (should?) elders’ wives play in fulfilling their roles? How can they avoid becoming veritable “she-elders”? Should wives be consulted in the selection process? Who better to know how well a man fits the description or meets the “qualifications” than his wife? What if she renders less than a “ringing endorsement?” (and would this potentially put her at risk with a man who is less than “elder material” but wants to be one anyway?)
- B. An elder must desire the office. He should not serve “under compulsion, but willingly.” (1 Pet. 5:2). However, is it fair to say that someone who is qualified otherwise *should* be willing? Is it true that “any qualified man should want to serve?” James 4:17 says if we know to do good but don’t do it then we sin? Does this apply to a otherwise “qualified” man unwilling to serve as an elder?
- C. Is an elder’s “authority” limited to simply serving as “an example?”
- D. Romans 12 speaks of those who have the gift of leadership. That implies that some have it and some don’t. Does this mean the two-talent man should be rebuked, or disregarded, for not being the five-talent man?
- E. Can’t churches lacking scripturally qualified men still be about the Lord’s business? Is there truth in the old description that churches can be: 1) Scripturally organized; 2) scripturally unorganized; 3) unscripturally organized; or 4) unscripturally unorganized?

CONCLUSION:

- A. I watched my father and grandfather, godly men who served several sizable churches as shepherds for 70+ years between them, wrestle to provide guidance for the myriad problems and issues facing Christians. I know well that elders are by no means perfect – since I served as one myself for a decade. I can testify personally to the challenges, failures and successes, and the black-hole time commitment involved, in shepherding, overseeing, and trying to exemplify the Lamb who is also Shepherd.
- B. If you are in one of the minority of churches which has godly, competent, spiritual men who understand the concept of shepherding and servant-leadership, breathe a prayer of thanksgiving to God! And express that gratitude to those men — often! Maybe even give a second thought and hold fire before sniping and griping about some decision they have made which doesn’t suit you — but might benefit the rest of the flock.
- C. “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: 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. 5 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 5:1-4 ESV