

SHEPHERDING GOD'S FLOCK The Responsibilities of Elders

Philip H. Curtis
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Don't overlook the importance of Philippians 1:1! Paul's initial greeting to the church in Philippi provides a basic organizational chart for the local church: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (ESV throughout). What are the components of an established New Testament church? Paul and Timothy, mentioned first, were the church-planting missionaries, who, along with Silas, founded the church in Philippi (see Acts 16). They were not permanent members of the Philippian church but were instrumental in its beginning. The church itself was composed of (1) "all the saints," that is, God's holy ones, believers in the city of Philippi (notice that Paul addresses them first); (2) "overseers" – some translations say "bishops" – that is, the supervisors who were the primary human leaders of the church (these men are also called "elders" in other New Testament passages); (3) "deacons," the official "servants" of the church and helpers of the overseers/elders (notice that both of these terms – overseers and deacons – are in the plural); and (4) Christ Jesus. Let's not forget him! Paul and Timothy are writing to the "saints *in Christ Jesus* at Philippi." These people had become united with Christ by faith. Christ Jesus is the most important member of any local church. He is the Head, we are his body. According to 1 Peter 2:25, he is "the Shepherd [or Pastor] and Overseer [same word as in Phil. 1:1] of your souls."

At Exeter Chapel we believe in a plurality of leaders, both elders and deacons, in the local church. Currently, we are down to one elder and a group of deacons, and the leaders believe it is time to begin the process of finding additional elders and deacons to serve our church family. This message is about the *responsibilities* of the eldership – which Paul calls "a good work" (lit., 1 Tim. 3:1). **A study of the responsibilities of elders in two key New Testament passages will help us to discover those whom God has appointed to this office.** Future messages will cover the *qualifications* of elders and the *responsibilities and qualifications* of deacons.

1 Peter 5:1-5

1 Peter 5:1-5 is one of two passages in the New Testament where an apostle gives direct instruction to elders about their responsibilities (the other, as we will see, is Acts 20:28-32). "Peter, an apostle of Christ Jesus, . . . exhort[s] the elders [plural] among you" in the churches of five provinces in what is today the land of Turkey (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1). He exhorts them "as a fellow elder." Perhaps Peter is remembering the threefold charge that the risen Christ had given to him personally in John 21:15-17: "Feed my lambs. . . Tend my sheep. . . Feed my sheep." Peter writes this first letter in partial fulfillment of the shepherding assignment he had received from the Lord.

Peter also describes himself as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed" (v. 1). The letter of 1 Peter was written to churches that were living under the threat of suffering and persecution. Peter knew that church leaders often bear the brunt of such persecution – "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (Zech. 13:7; cf. Matt. 26:31). Thus, he encourages the elders by his own witness to the sufferings of Christ and his participation (by faith and anticipation) in the future glory of the saints. After suffering comes glory!

I am reminded of the pastoral ministry of Dietrich Bonhoeffer during World War II, while he was living under the Nazi regime in Germany. In fact, for a brief time in 1939 he secured a ministry position in New York City. But after twenty-six days he returned to his homeland: "I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live

through this difficult period of our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I shall have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”¹ He returned to his shepherding responsibilities in Germany, and he did indeed share in the trials of his people, even unto martyrdom. But, as Peter says, Bonhoeffer is also “a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed.”

In verse 2 Peter gives direct instruction to the elders about their responsibilities. What is their *ministry*? “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you.” At least one translation reads, “*Feed* the flock of God,” but the verb used is wider in meaning: “*Shepherd* the flock of God.” In other words, you elders should do all that is required in the task of shepherding (as the metaphor implies): seeking, guiding, feeding, protecting, and caring for God’s people. Notice that Peter describes the church as “the flock of God.” The flock belongs to God; it is *his* church. Elders are stewards of God’s property (Tit. 1:7). This shepherding, according to Peter (v. 2), involves “exercising oversight” [not included in all translations], a verbal form of the title, “overseer,” which we saw earlier in Philippians 1:1. The elders supervise or superintend God’s flock.

Then Peter focuses on the *manner* in which elders should carry out their ministry, using three contrasting pairs: (1) “Not under compulsion but willingly.” And he adds, “as God would have you,” or, literally, “according to God.” In other words, elders should shepherd the sheep as God himself would shepherd them. (See Ezek. 34 and John 10 to see exactly how the Lord does it.) (2) “Not for shameful gain, but eagerly”; and (3) “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” A good shepherd does not drive his sheep but leads them; or, as the church father Athanasius said of elders long ago, “The life should command and the tongue persuade.”² Jesus himself taught his disciples that they were not to lead his church like the Gentile rulers: “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

What is the proper response of the members to this kind of servant leadership? Peter exhorts the younger members of the churches in verse 5: “Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders.” While on the one hand, elders are not to lord it over the flock, members of the flock are to submit to their authority. As Hebrews 13:17 exhorts us, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Peter concludes this section of his letter with an exhortation to both elders and people, “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5).

Elders then are not to follow the example of Diotrephes in 3 John 9-10, who domineered over the flock. The apostle John says of him, “I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.”

Instead, elders should follow the servant example of Christ himself, who, although he was their Lord and Teacher, humbled himself to wash the feet of his disciples and said: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just

¹ Eric Metaxes, *Bonhoeffer* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 321.

² D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 Peter* (Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1992), 305; quoted in G. F. C. Fronmüller, *The Epistles General of Peter*. Lange’s Commentary on the Holy Scriptures. Reprint. Translated with additions by J. Isidor Mombert. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n. d.), 87.

as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15). Here is humble leadership by example, just as Peter taught the elders to exemplify in 1 Peter 5:3.

Acts 20:28-32

At the end of his third missionary journey, on his way to Jerusalem, Paul desired to have one more training session with the elders of the church in Ephesus (on the west coast of modern Turkey). He had spent three years planting this church, and he called the elders (plural) to the town of Miletus for a special meeting (Acts 20:17). In Acts 20:18-27 he describes in detail his ministry to the Ephesian church, no doubt, as an example to these leaders. In verses 28-32 (like the apostle Peter in 1 Pet. 5:1-5), the apostle Paul gives direct instruction to the elders.

In verse 28 Paul gives them a twofold exhortation: (1) “Pay careful attention to [keep watch over, take heed to, be on guard for] yourselves.” The elders are first to shepherd themselves, to watch over their own lives and each other’s lives – including such concerns as personal character, marriage and family life, doctrine and teaching, and reputation in both church and community. (See the qualifications for elder in Tit. 1:5-9 and 1 Tim. 3:1-7.) (2) “Pay careful attention to . . . all the flock,” that is, *all* the sheep whom God had entrusted to them (no playing favorites!).

Why should the elders give such careful attention to their flock? Because it is “the Holy Spirit” himself who “has made you overseers.” Notice that the terms “elders” and “overseers” are used interchangeably in this passage (vv. 17, 28) – they refer to the same office in the church – and they are regularly used in the plural. The Holy Spirit is ultimately the one who appoints these leaders. The church’s responsibility is to recognize those whom he has chosen.

Like Peter, Paul says that the responsibility of overseers is to “care for [lit., shepherd] the church of God.” It is *his* church, “which he obtained [purchased] with his own blood,” referring, of course, to the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ. What a privilege! What an awesome responsibility: to shepherd the blood-bought people of God! To feed them, lead them, protect them, and care for them. Jesus is the good shepherd who laid down his life for his sheep (John 10:11, 15, 17). His undershepherds should be willing to do the same.

In Acts 20:29-30 Paul emphasizes to the Ephesian elders the importance of protecting the sheep from a twofold danger: (1) “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.” Jesus himself had warned against this peril: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves” (Matt. 7:15). (2) But there is also another danger – from within. “And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” False teachers can arise from within the church itself.

Paul instructs the elders how to protect the sheep from this twofold danger. “Be alert [don’t fall asleep on your watch!], remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears” (Acts 20:31). Paul points the elders to his own example of tireless (night and day for three years), compassionate (with tears), individual (lit., “each one”) ministry to the sheep of the Ephesian church. Then Paul commends the elders to God’s own care and “to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (v. 32). In other words, although the apostle will no longer be with them, they will have God himself and his word for their own upbuilding and for the upbuilding of the church.

This passage in Acts shows the importance of the Word of God in the ministry of the elders. In fact, this emphasis on the Word is what primarily distinguishes the ministry of the elders from the ministry of the deacons. This emphasis is brought out in other New Testament passages:

- According to Titus 1:9 the qualifications of an elder/overseer include: “*He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*”
- In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul admonishes the church in Ephesus: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching [lit., “in the word”] and teaching.*”
- The writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers to “remember your leaders, *those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*” (13:7).

An example of the importance of the elders’ ministry of the word is seen in Acts 15 at the Jerusalem Council. The new Gentile churches planted by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey were being threatened by the false gospel of the Judaizers: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1; cf. v. 5). According to the Judaizers, God’s grace received by faith in Jesus Christ was not enough. Observance of the law was also required in order to be saved. The Jerusalem Council met to consider this all-important issue of salvation. Who made up the Jerusalem Council? It was the apostles *and the elders of the church in Jerusalem* (15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4). The personal ministry of the apostles ended long ago, but we do have their authoritative writings in the New Testament. And we have present-day elders in local churches who are charged with feeding their flocks with biblical (apostolic) truth and protecting them from error.

The elders have other important responsibilities (such as praying for the sick in James 5:14ff.). But in summary, their ministry is the good work of shepherding the flock of God. Understanding their ministry can help us to determine whom God has called to serve as the elders/overseers/shepherds of Exeter Chapel. On the one hand, the elders’ task is daunting: “to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). On the other hand, it is a task that promises great reward. Earlier, I skipped over an important verse in 1 Peter 5 addressed to the elders: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (v. 4). Notice that Jesus is the chief Shepherd (the “senior Pastor”) of his church. Elders are his “undershepherds.” When our Lord appears the second time, he will reward his undershepherds with “the unfading crown of glory.”

As I write this message, the 2018 World Cup of soccer is in progress – probably the biggest sports event in the world. This tournament is the culmination every four years of soccer matches involving 211 national teams around the world. Each time thirty-two teams reach the World Cup tournament. In 2006 it is estimated that the championship match in Berlin, Germany was watched by 715.1 million people – 1/9 of the total world population. Let me ask you, do you even remember who won the World Cup in 2006? The winning team that year received only a fading crown (cup!) of glory. (I will inform you; it was Italy.) But to his team of faithful undershepherds, the chief Shepherd promises an *unfading* crown of glory.