

Leading God's Church: A Timeless Metaphor

1 Timothy 3:1

"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."

Introduction: A friend of mine recently shared his frustration with a job search in churches around the country. Now this friend is gifted, experienced, and educated, and any church would be blessed to have him lead. What he was told time and time again was some combination of the following: *we are looking for a man with experience who is a gifted teacher, visionary, who will draw in young people, who has a doctorate, relatable to the young but does not alienate the old, energetic, think like a CEO, who has 25 years of leading and is 30ish years old!* Sound like a good pastor! Obviously, this is not only a ridiculous list that contradicts itself, it illustrates a point that churches have both **unrealistic expectations and confusion on Biblical standards of Pastoral leadership.**

As we pick back up to what Paul charges the church with, we are reminded of a few things: 1) Everything we have celebrated and prayed for this last month, from commissioning of Rancho, to **PRAY-PLAN-RISK**, to our Missions weekend is a **result** of a healthy view of God's church. In other words, these should all flow FROM and TO the local church; 2) We want to continue to understand what makes up a healthy church, how we function according to God's will, and how we mature into Christlikeness together; 3) We are going to look at not only the **structure of leadership** but also how God designed the church to thrive **under leadership**. For the next few weeks we will look at the purpose of both **elders and deacons**, and how each position helps care for those in the church and equip them for ministry. Our hope is that over the next few weeks/months we will be able to present three new elders, as well as begin to understand how deacons will help our elders care for and mobilize our church as a whole.

We will begin with a Biblical look at what elders are, how they should function, and the character they should possess. We are only going to look at one verse in 1 Timothy 3 today, in verse 1, which says, *"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the **office of overseer**, he desires a noble task."* Before we talk about the office of overseer, or *elder*, we want to look at a Biblical metaphor that helps explain this often misunderstood role within the church. Now, when we talk metaphor there is a potential for it to breakdown or fail to carry over into modern vernacular. This morning we will look at how an **elder is compared to a shepherd**, and how this is timeless throughout Scripture. Today, we use metaphors or analogies for pastors like a **CEO, manager, or coach**, but each of these fall short of a Biblical standard. Though shepherding itself is foreign to most of us experientially, the concept is NOT overly complex. A shepherd is one who **knows, leads, feeds, and protects** his sheep. Sheep are not the brightest of creatures, and NEED care to survive and thrive, which is why the Bible mentions sheep more than **500 times** (more than any other animal) and compares US TO SHEEP. In order to get our minds around the role of a pastor/elder/shepherd, let's look at what Scripture says about shepherds.

Shepherding is modeled in the nature of God

There is a fascinating text in the book of Matthew, as Jesus began His public ministry, He saw the crowds, *"He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."* (Matt. 9:36) The heart of God is to function with us as a caring shepherd, one who is kind, compassionate, and caring.

God the Father as a Shepherd

Whether someone is a believer or not, church attendee or not, one of the most often read passages at funerals is **Psalm 23**. At the point of death, no one is wrangling whether the metaphor of shepherd

plays in modern culture, but take comfort in the fact that God is described as a **Shepherd**, and not only a random one, but a personal One, "**The Lord is MY shepherd, I shall not want**" What a promise! As the Psalm unfolds, we see that He: *makes me lie down, He restores my soul, He leads me in paths of righteousness, He is with me, He comforts me, He prepares a table for me, He anoints my head with oil, and allows me to dwell in His house forever.* This is not a distant God who is only concerned with our disobedience and ready to pour out wrath, but a caring and compassionate shepherd of our soul who walks with us in an intimate way. This is why, whether someone knew this in life or not, we want to cling to when facing death.

The nature of God the Father is of a Shepherd. Jacob knew it in **Genesis 48:15**, saying "the God who has been my Shepherd all my life long to this day." He is seen as the Shepherd of Israel (Psalm 80:1), and in **Isaiah 40:11** He is described as a Shepherd who will **tend his flock, will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.** Every form of church leadership should take its cue from God the Father in His loving, tender, compassionate leading as a Shepherd.

Jesus as the Good Shepherd

How God lead His people in the OT, Jesus came to manifest in person on earth. in one of the 7 profound "I am" passages of John (or 8 if you count 8:58), Jesus presented Himself as the **Good Shepherd**. "I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." (John 10:11). He pointed out this was different than a hired hand and not a shepherd, since a hired hand would run when he sees the wolf coming. But Jesus laid down His life for His own, since He knows them and they know Him. "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed. Fro you were straying like sheep, but have now returned **to the shepherd and Overseer of your souls.**" (1 Pet. 2:23-24).

How did Jesus shepherd us? He died for us, in our place, taking the wrath stored up for us on Himself. It is why He is called "our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep." (Heb. 13:20), and our Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4).

Holy Spirit as a Guide in the Truth

Though the Holy Spirit is not identified as a Shepherd per se, He also has functional leadership in our life of a shepherd. In John 14, the Spirit is promised by Jesus to be a Helper who will dwell with us and in us (14:17), who will teach us all things and bring to remembrance what Jesus said (14:26), convicting the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (16:8) and guiding us in truth (16:13).

So the foundational reality of Shepherding comes out of the character of the Godhead, in how God loves, cares, protects, guides, and dies for the sheep. To disconnect any type of leadership in God's church from these anchors would fall short a Biblical model and fall short of true care.

Shepherding is embedded in the whole of Scripture

Is the picture of shepherding antiquated? Sure. I have to go to Ohio to see a 4-H competition and little kids trying to wrangle stubborn sheep. A few summers ago our girls got the shock of their lives when they saw lambs being born (not a pretty or clean picture). But shepherding has existed for as long as the earth was created, and spans the thousands of years over which the Bible was written, and continues to bridge to us today.

Servant Leaders Trained as Shepherds

Two of the greatest leaders in all of the world were trained as shepherds. **Moses spent 40 years** in the desert wilderness as a shepherd, which trained him to lead an obstinate, stubborn, ungrateful people

out of Egypt in to the Promised Land for 40 years (Exodus 2:11-25). **King David** cut his teeth as a shepherd, learning how to protect, guide, and lead the sheep given to his care. When he challenged Goliath in an epic showdown in the Valley of Elah, he drew on his experience as a shepherd to summon up the courage to fight a giant. He told Saul, "*Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.*" (1 Sam. 17:36) A shepherd puts himself between the sheep and danger, even at the cost of his own life and well-being. There was no better training nor crossover to lead God's people than learning to lead and protect a bunch of thick-headed sheep.

Downfall of Self-Serving Shepherds (Ezek. 34)

God had always sent representatives to lead His people. He gave prophets, priests, judges, and kings to lead on His behalf, and He expected them to lead with the same care as He would. Ezekiel 34 provides an impressive backdrop of failure of those that neglected their role. Much like today, there was a lack of true leaders in Israel, and the consequences were massive. Look briefly at the case God built against the failures of the **shepherds of Israel**. (Note how many times the word "shepherd" shows up here)

- **Neglected their role in selfishness (2-3)** - They were concerned about their own welfare, money, and possessions instead of caring for those they lead. Shepherds are to lead by example (1 Tim. 4:6, 16), and these shepherds viewed their role as a way of personal gain
- **Neglected their role of pursuit (4)** - Shepherding ain't glamorous. Though there is time for leadership development, shepherding is dealing with those who are **weak, sick, strayed, injured, and lost**. This means people must be **strengthened, healed, bound up, brought back, and sought after**. *Sound glamorous? Sound like a hands off, part-time, spend time being comfortable position?* Not even a little.
- **Neglected character** - Notice that the shepherds of Israel functioned with harshness and force, which is definitely one way to lead. You can **rule, not lead. You can instill fear rather than personal relationship, intimidation rather than compassion, harshness rather than love**. A leader can do that, but it is NOT SHEPHERDING. I read on Friday that a well respected leader of Acts 29 (the CEO ironically) was removed from his role with the accusation of bullying and control.¹ Unfortunately, a leader can view his role as one of control and power rather than serving and sacrifice. These OT shepherds leveraged their positions for personal gain and power, seeing people as pawns rather than ones to be served.
- **Neglected Stewardship** - (6) These leaders saw people as "theirs", rather than God's sheep. A good leader in God's church remembers that all who are there are God's people, since its ultimately His church
- **Neglected Protection** - (8) - They were so lazy and selfish that they stopped protected the sheep from the wild beasts and instead fed themselves. This happens when people are not the priority, when personal agendas take precedence, and leading becomes about position rather than protection.

What was God's response? He would take the place and shepherd His sheep (11-22), and would set over them **one shepherd, and He shall feed them and be their shepherd (23)**. This was the promise of Jesus Christ, the Chief shepherd. All of this informs us of the role of elder in the New Testament church, and it comes out of the character of God and the way He expected His leaders to lead timelessly. So lets look briefly at how these characteristics play out for us.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/february/acts-29-ceo-steve-timmis-removed-spiritual-abuse-tch.html>

Shepherding is timeless in the function of a Leader

In his book *"The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in your Church"*, Timothy Witmer identifies **four major roles** of a shepherd leader, and sees these play out in both *macro and micro ways*. We see this as we look at the major texts dealing with elders:

Know (1 Pet 5:1-3)

*"So 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**, 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."*

- **A note about words used** - There are three words used to describe an elder, and each of the three are used in these verses: **elders** (*presbuteros*), **shepherd** (*poimante*), and **overseer** (*episkipos*). These three words describe and make up the same role/office in the church, which is that of pastor/elder. It describes the office, function, and design of an elder.
- **Notice the proximity of a shepherd** - There are many jobs that can be outsourced today. When we call to change our cable or phone plan, we can be talking to someone almost anywhere in the world with an internet connection. Jobs can become automated so that we can do banking, shopping, and education from our couch without interacting with a banker, checker, or teacher present. But **pastoring is NOT that way**. Notice that elders work **among** the members of the church, not in a distant, decision making function but one that shares life and rubs shoulders. A shepherd would never go too far from the flock and would spend extended time wandering around finding the best watering holes and fields of grass. My brother-in-law's dad raises sheep on his farm today, and during the winter months and birthing times, he is on call at all times of night and day to make sure that the lambs are warm enough and cared for. Pastors/elders are known by the church, and know those in the church. This takes place on the macro scale of prayer and structure, and personal level of discipleship, counseling, and visitation.

This is one of the reasons that every leader who desires to teach also functions as a leader in our **shepherding groups**. This is a place that we share life, get to know each other, understand the real needs, and care for those needs in real time. A pastor/elder who does not spend time with people in the church is not functioning like a shepherd but something else.

Lead (1 Tim. 4:12)

"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity."

A pastor/elder is to lead, but the main venue of leadership is not done in a meeting, but in setting an example for others. An elder says, "**follow me as I follow Christ.**" This means that he has a life worth emulating, one that consistently pursues Christ in all aspects, from personal, family and professional worlds.

One of the hardest realities is to realize that a leader in one area of life is far from it at home. The pastor whose wife is neglected, the coach who talks a big game but is a wimp off the field, the boss who preaches sacrifice for the company and himself is unwilling to do so. I loved being able to hang out with Steve Severance over a few weeks in January. I've never been in a church that he's been a pastor, yet he has shepherded me over the years. Each time I've seen him, he asks me about my Bible reading, prayer life, and if he can pray for me. Every time. Every place. Whether he remembered my name or not. That is the kind of leader that leads by example and guides people into Christ-likeness.

Feed (2 Tim. 4:2)

"...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

There is one tool that rules them all for an elder. It is not experience or fiscal management (although those don't hurt). The role of a shepherd was to make sure the sheep were fed and watered, and it was his job to search and plan out the best routes and best areas to go to. The pastor's way of feeding is through the Word, in teaching/preaching with patience. This happens corporately in formal gatherings, but it should also happen in times of counseling, over coffee, and taking in the ballgame. Sometimes it means simple encouragement when hard circumstances hit, or it is giving hope in times of loss. Other times it is equipping us to understand the character and nature of God, how to pray, or the goodness of Jesus. The point is that a pastor/elder has a mastery of Scripture, or rather that the Scripture has a mastery of him. He oozes Scripture, not in an "in your face" way, but it is simply on his mind, heart, and lips. This is the area that an elder must feed himself first, feasting on God's Word so that he has something to offer to others.

Protect (Acts 20:28-30)

"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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

Finally, it is the role of the shepherd to get between the enemy and the sheep. He often carried his staff and sling, one to ward off wild animals and the other to correct and bring the sheep back close. That is the same role the pastor/elder plays. On a macro level, he makes sure that false doctrine veiled in the form of trends, popularity, and harmful people do not enter the church, and if they do, are dealt with. I was just talking with a new friend yesterday and she was telling me of a church plant that was divided by a "pied Piper" who drew people to himself and then led a revolt against the elders of the church. An elder will deal with "fierce wolves" who come in speaking twisted things.

The other part of protection is for the sheep themselves. The shepherd would do everything from pouring oil on the sheep's head to keep bugs and disease away, to correcting them with the rod, to sometimes breaking their leg and carrying them to make sure they did not wander off. While I don't think we'll get into the mob-like leg breaking business, an elder must be willing to confront wrong thinking, challenge decision making through a Biblical lens, and call out sin when it presents itself. It is the tough part of parenting, where there is discipline and correction, when you become the least popular person in the house in order to lovingly bring your child back to the wise path.

Concluding Thoughts:

Why is this so important? Because we all need shepherding, and none of us were supposed to live life on our own. We remember this morning that we have a **compassionate, kind, caring Shepherd of our soul** who knows us intimately, loves us completely, and is there to care for us in our time of need. We run to that Shepherd, not away from Him. We welcome His discipline, not shake our fist at it.

We also are reminded that we need human shepherds in our life. We need the guidance, leading, teaching, and protection offered in God's church through leadership. And though we have formal elders and pastors, we also have others in our lives that function this way with us, who know, lead, feed, and protect us. Our hope is that we continue to faithfully shepherd those who are here, those who will come, and train up more shepherds in the future.