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THE
SHEPHERD
LEADER

*Achieving Effective
Shepherding in Your Church*



TIMOTHY Z. WITMER

I
NOT A NEW IDEA: OLD
TESTAMENT THEMES



The Lord as the Shepherd of His People

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (Ps. 23:1 KJV)

THE BIBLICAL IMAGERY of the Lord as the shepherd of his people is plentiful and rich throughout the Bible.¹ It begins in Genesis where, as Jacob blessed his sons, he described the Lord as “the God who has been my shepherd all my life” (Gen. 48:15).

1. A more detailed exposition of the biblical theology of the shepherding metaphor can be seen in Timothy S. Laniak’s book *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

Jacob declared in faith that behind his tumultuous and often rebellious life was a faithful, patient Shepherd who provided for him and guided him. It was his intent to see his children blessed by yielding to the covenant lovingkindness of the Lord. The sense of personal care and blessing in covenant with the Lord is captured by the most familiar of psalms, which begins with the affirmation, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (Ps. 23:1 KJV). The Lord is the ultimate provider, protector, and guide for his sheep.

However, the relationship that God established was not merely with individuals, but corporately with his people. It is natural, therefore, that God's covenant people are described in terms of his "sheep" and "flock." The psalmist cries out, "Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock" (Ps. 80:1 NIV). The psalmist rejoices in the faithfulness of God to his covenant people, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (Ps. 95:6–7 NIV).

The description of the Lord as shepherd of his flock is often found in a redemptive context. There are numerous references, for example, that relate the redemption of the people from bondage in Egypt to the Lord as shepherd. "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (Ps. 77:20 NIV) reflects on the goodness of God in delivering his people through the Red Sea. The very next psalm recounts the destructive plagues poured out upon the Egyptians but then remembers that "he brought his people out like a flock; he led them like sheep through the desert" (Ps. 78:52 NIV). These accounts not only celebrate his protective care from the Egyptians but lay the foundation for the climactic redemptive deliverance yet to come.

The Lord's self-revelation as "shepherd" of his people is not merely a metaphor with which his people could clearly relate, but it is one that describes the comprehensive care that he provides for his people. Again, this is clearly seen in Psalm 23, where the Lord's care for his people leads to the superlative expression of gratitude and praise from his people, "I shall not want." Nothing is lacking in the care provided for the flock. Not only does he feed them, but he also leads them and protects them.

The reassurance of his faithfulness is given to them even when they are straying. Isaiah writes, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (Isa. 40:11 NIV). When the work of shepherding is difficult, the commitment of the shepherd is truly revealed. Yet shepherding is a labor of love to the one who truly is a shepherd.

The shepherding metaphor is not only comprehensive with respect to the nature of the care received but also with respect to the extent. This is one important distinction between the metaphor of father and that of shepherd. Children grow up and become less dependent on their earthly fathers, though the relationship continues. Sheep, on the other hand, are *always* completely dependent on their shepherd. They never outgrow their need for the shepherd to care for them, feed them, lead them, and protect them. The shepherd cares for the newborn lambs and is still there when the sheep grow old and weak. Therefore, the imagery of shepherd-sheep captures the comprehensive sovereignty of the shepherd over the sheep and the need of the sheep to yield completely to his care. The good news is that the Lord uses his sovereign power for the well-being of his flock.

Shepherd-Leaders of Israel: Moses and David

If the Lord is the shepherd and the people are his flock, we should not be surprised that he uses shepherding imagery to refer to those he calls to lead and care for his flock. The care of the Lord for his people is to be reflected in those whom he calls to lead.

Two of the preeminent leaders of God's people in the Old Covenant, Moses and David, are described in this way. In addition to the reference from Psalm 77 in the previous section, Isaiah identifies Moses as a shepherd of Israel. "Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people—where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock" (Isa. 63:11 NIV)? While the grammatical construction of the Hebrew text is difficult, E. J. Young definitively concludes that the "shepherd" is Moses: "On the one view it is God who delivered the people and with them the shepherd of His flock; on the other it is Moses who as the shepherd brought the people up from the Red Sea."² Moses was used by the Lord to lead God's covenant people, his flock, from bondage in Egypt.

David's leadership is also described in terms of shepherding. When the people of Israel rallied around him as their king, they reminded him that "the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler'" (2 Sam. 5:2 NIV). In recounting the glory of David's rule, the psalmist writes that "David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them" (Ps. 78:72 NIV).

2. Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 484.

In addition to these specific references to Moses and David as shepherd-leaders, there is a general reference to all of Israel's leaders as shepherds. In 2 Samuel 7, the Lord instructs Nathan to respond to David's desire to build a house for the Lord. In that context the Lord tells Nathan, "Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar'" (2 Sam. 7:7 NIV)? The previous rulers are described as those "commanded to shepherd" the people.

Did you ever think about that fact that Moses and David were called from shepherding *real* flocks to shepherd the people of God? It was while tending his father-in-law's sheep that the Lord spoke to Moses from the burning bush, calling him to deliver the covenant people (Ex. 3:1ff). The Lord took Moses' humble shepherd's staff and transformed it into the symbol of God's call and through which his mighty deeds were accomplished that brought the people out of bondage. "You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs" (Ex. 4:17). It was this staff that became a serpent in the presence of Pharaoh. It was through the staff that, in the Lord's power, the Nile was turned to blood, the dust was turned to gnats, the hail fell on Egypt, and the locusts came upon the land. It was when this staff was lifted up that the waters of the Red Sea parted and God's people passed through safely. When Moses raised it again the waters crashed down on Pharaoh's soldiers and chariots. It was with the staff that Moses struck the rock in Horeb and the water flowed in quantities sufficient to satisfy the thirst of his people in the desert.

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people and take with you some of the elders of Israel; and take in your hand your staff

with which you struck the Nile, and go. "Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Ex. 17:5–6)

It was this staff that Moses held high on the mountain while Joshua and the Israelites fought in the valley and won their first post-exodus victory over the Amalekites. As long as the staff was held high, Israel prevailed, but as Moses' arms grew weary and the staff came down, the Amalekites prevailed.

So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought against Amalek; and Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. (Ex. 17:9–11)

Aaron and Hur helped him hold the staff high, and the Amalekites were defeated. No wonder it was referred to as the "staff of God" (Ex. 4:20). Moses was the human "undershepherd," but there was no doubt that the "staff of God" revealed that it was the Lord who was protecting the people, providing for the people, and guiding the people.

David was another leader whom God called right from the sheepfolds. The psalmist writes, "He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance" (Ps. 78:70–71 NIV). In each case, David and Moses were prepared for service in the Lord's flock by working with real sheep. When David was persuading Saul to allow him to take

on the Philistine champion, Goliath, he used his experience in protecting the sheep as the foundation of his argument.

Then Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant was tending his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God." (1 Sam. 17:33–36)

David found courage to face Goliath in the strength the Lord had given him to protect his father's flocks from the lions and bears. Lessons learned in the sheepfold about feeding, leading, and protecting flocks would be essential in ministering to God's people. The Lord's purpose would be fulfilled in preserving a remnant of his people in his land from whom would issue the promised Messiah, the ultimate Shepherd of God's people. Moses, the prototypical prophet, and David, the prototypical king, are both described as shepherds. In providing shepherding care for the people of God, they were reflecting the shepherding care of the covenant Lord.

The Problem with Human Shepherds

Moses

The ultimate inadequacy of human shepherds is also clearly revealed in the Old Testament. The power of God was shown

mightily through Moses' humble staff, which became the "staff of God." However, misuse of that same staff became his stumbling block when Israel faced the need for water again in the desert: "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink" (Num. 20:8).

However, instead of speaking to the rock as the Lord commanded, Moses struck the rock with the staff. This act of insubordination and disrespect led to Moses' disqualification from entering the land. "But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them'" (Num. 20:12). There was to be no confusion over who was the shepherd of Israel. In the end there was no doubt that it was the Lord who brought the people into the land of promise.

David

King David also fell short when he abused his power as shepherd-king of Israel; first in his adultery with Bathsheba and then in the subsequent conspiracy in the murder of her husband, Uriah. The king should have been deployed with his army for the sake of the protection of God's people. Instead, he remained behind and abused the sheep. Nathan the prophet was sent by the Lord to confront David with his sin. Remember the parable that he told?

Then the LORD sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, "There were two men in one city, the one rich and the

other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat of his bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him; rather he took the poor man's ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." (2 Sam. 12:1-4)

The story Nathan told would have resonated with David as he understood the malice of this selfish shepherd. His own shepherd's instinct based on his experience evoked a response of righteous indignation.

Then David's anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. He must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion." (2 Sam. 12:5-6)

When Nathan told him, "You are the man!" David immediately understood the evil he had committed and repented.

David would never think of abusing sheep in that way, but he had committed an even greater transgression by abusing God's sheep. As Moses' failure as Israel's shepherd resulted in consequences for himself and the people, so with King David. Moses, the one who bore the staff of God, had failed and would not enter the Promised Land. David, who wore the crown of the "shepherd-king," would see the death of the infant son born from the illicit union with Bathsheba. His sin had an even

greater impact, as Nathan prophesied: “Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife” (2 Sam. 12:10). Though the Lord called men to shepherd his flock, it became more and more apparent with every succeeding generation that the people needed to look to the Lord as their shepherd and king and that the undershepherds themselves needed to be vigilant in following the Lord. Unfortunately, the frailty of human shepherds continued to be a major theme in Israel’s history.

Ezekiel 34

Moses and David demonstrated their fallibility as shepherds, but Israel’s shepherds as a whole incurred the chastisement of the Lord in an episode that should be sobering to all who are called to positions of leadership among God’s people.

Ezekiel prophesied among God’s people during a very difficult time in Israel’s history. He had been carried away into exile in Babylon along with the unfaithful Israelites. His ministry among them was manifold, including “to impress upon the exiles the fact that the calamity had come because of their own sinfulness.”³

The thirty-fourth chapter of Ezekiel’s prophecy represents detailed charges against the undershepherds of Israel, who should have been caring for God’s flock. These would have been the elders of the nation whose unfaithfulness was largely responsible for the circumstances in which the people found themselves. The Lord held them accountable for their failure to

3. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 244.

shepherd the flock. The chapter contains three major sections. The first section (34:1–10) includes the detailed indictment against the shepherds. The appropriate use of the shepherding metaphor is front and center throughout the chapter. What are the charges?

They fed *themselves* rather than the flock (verse 2); they failed to strengthen the sickly, heal the diseased, bind up the broken, and seek the lost (verse 4). The result for the people was that they were scattered, literally to a foreign land, and became food for every beast of the field (verse 5). As you can see, they failed to fulfill the most basic functions of shepherds: to feed, lead, and protect the sheep. Instead, the sheep were starved, lost, and the prey of wild animals. Even worse, those who were supposed to feed and protect God’s flock were actually feeding upon the sheep themselves: “You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock” (Ezek. 34:3).

Verse 4 also speaks of the manner of their approach, “with force and severity you have dominated them.” Laniak comments that this terminology of brutality is only used elsewhere in the Old Testament where it describes slavery in Egypt.⁴ The concluding verses (7–10) of the first section declare the Lord’s opposition to the shepherds and their removal so that they can do no more damage to God’s flock.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: “As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but rather the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed

4. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 153.

My flock; therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: "Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them."'" (Ezek. 34:7–10)

In the second section of the chapter (verses 11–22) God promises shepherding care for his people. Though they have been mistreated, God has not forgotten them.

For thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd cares for his herd in the day when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will care for My sheep and will deliver them from all the places to which they were scattered on a cloudy and gloomy day." (Ezek. 34:11–12)

Every failure of the undershepherds will be met by the Lord. He himself will seek the lost sheep, care for them, feed them, and protect them. He will lead them to rest, bind up the broken, and strengthen the sick. He also reiterates that he will hold those to account who have abused his flock.

One of the consequences of the failure to shepherd is that others will step in to fill the void. The strong will assert themselves and bully the weaker sheep.

Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them, "Behold, I, even I, will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you push with side and with shoulder, and thrust at all the weak with your horns until you have scattered them abroad." (Ezek. 34:20–21)

Faithful shepherds protect their flocks not only from harmful outside influences but from the self-serving among the sheep. Many congregations have experienced the intimidation of bullies within their midst when leaders fail to take responsibility to shepherd the flock. It is often the strong-willed, outspoken, highly opinionated folk who fill the void. There will *always* be leaders—the issue is whether they are the leaders called and gifted by God to shepherd his flock or those who push themselves forward so that they can push others around.

The third section of the chapter (verses 23–31) looks forward to the coming of the perfect shepherd. Would there ever be one upon whom the Father could depend to give faithful care to his flock? Ezekiel looks forward with prophetic vision to the shepherd who is to come. "Then I will set over them one shepherd, My servant David, and he will feed them; he will feed them himself and be their shepherd" (Ezek. 34:23):

The times in which Ezekiel wrote were long after the days of the shepherd-king, David. However, there was another shepherd-king to come, and his faithfulness would eclipse not only that of the unfaithful shepherds during Ezekiel's time, but that of David, Israel's revered shepherd-king. In fact, the one of whom Ezekiel speaks is the promised one to come who will have an everlasting reign on David's throne (see 2 Sam. 7:12). The one who is to come will not merely be a king but a shepherd-king. This concluding section once again sounds the notes of the shepherding metaphor but now in an eschatological key. There is yet to come a new covenant, a "covenant of peace," the blessings of which will be brought to his people by the Messianic shepherd-king. He will be the ultimate provider, deliverer, and guide.

The chapter concludes with two important statements. Verse 30 reminds the people of the personal covenantal relationship that God has established with them. “Then they will know that I, the Lord their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are My people,” declares the Lord God.” The covenant with Israel was established that they might be his people and that he would be their God, so they can be assured of his lovingkindness and comprehensive shepherding care.

As verse 30 reminds the people about the uniqueness of the relationship between the Lord and his people, the final verse of this remarkable chapter reminds the people that they must not forget that *he* is God. “As for you, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, you are men, and I am your God,” declares the Lord God” (Ezek. 34:31).

It is always incumbent upon the people of God to remember that he is not only their shepherd, but that he is the Lord God. Yet the sheep were not the only ones who needed to hear this message. The undershepherds of Israel failed to remember that they themselves were the Lord’s sheep, resulting in the scattering of the flock and their own condemnation. These words continue to serve as a vivid reminder to those who would lead his flock of their accountability to the Lord for the manner in which they care for his sheep.

The Shepherd to Come

As we have just seen, the closing words of Ezekiel 34 point forward to *the* Good Shepherd who will have none of the shortcomings of sinful human shepherds. However, Ezekiel wasn’t the only prophet who used the shepherding metaphor to describe the

coming Messiah. In a passage that closely reflects the structure of Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23 gives a more condensed version of the condemnation of the false shepherds.

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares the LORD. Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD. (Jer. 23:1–2)

As with Ezekiel, the hopelessness of the situation was not to prevail. Jeremiah also provides a promise of the coming Davidic shepherd-king:

“Behold the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘The Lord our righteousness.’” (Jer. 23:5–6)

The imagery of a well-protected flock is pictured as the prophet reflects on the current insecurity of Israel in Babylonian captivity. It is the “righteous Branch” from the lineage of David who will bring about deliverance for his people.

Later in redemptive history, Micah picks up this theme. Most are familiar with Micah’s prophecy about the place of the coming Messiah’s birth. However, many don’t recall Micah’s actual description of the One who is to come. After identifying Bethlehem Ephrathah as the birthplace of the “ruler over Israel,” Micah

describes him as the one who “will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth” (Mic. 5:2, 4 NIV). The gospel of Matthew quotes these words in the context of the search of the Magi for the one “who has been born king of the Jews” (Matt. 2:2). This promise was fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Shepherd-King. He would succeed in faithfully shepherding God’s flock where all others had failed.

For Further Reflection

1. Why is the metaphor of shepherd appropriate for the relationship between God and his people?
2. Compare and contrast the imagery of shepherd and father as descriptions of the Lord’s relationship with his people.
3. Why is the metaphor of shepherd appropriate for those who would lead the people of God?
4. Using the chart on the next page follow and identify the parallels between the Lord’s indictment of Israel’s faithless elders, his commitment to shepherd them, and the shepherd to come. Discuss implications for your ministry as shepherds of his flock today.

<p>Ezekiel 34:23-31 The Shepherd to Come</p>	
<p>Ezekiel 34:11-22 The Lord As Israel’s Shepherd</p>	
<p>Ezekiel 34:1-10 The Lord’s Indictment of Faithless Elders</p>	

FULFILLMENT: THE GOOD SHEPHERD AND THE APOSTOLIC IMPERATIVE



“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:1–3)

IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, Jesus declares, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). These words were rich with meaning to his original listeners. In addition to listeners’ familiarity with the vocation of the shepherd in their own day, they would have

heard Jesus' identification with the Lord, Israel's shepherd. Jesus, then, declares himself to be the Shepherd-King who had been prophesied by Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Where human shepherds had failed, Jesus as God incarnate would not.

He uses shepherding imagery to describe his relationship with the sheep. "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me" (John 10:14 NIV). But who are his sheep? Jesus makes it very clear that the identifying mark of his sheep is that they hear his voice. "Hearing" is not merely auditory perception but a spiritual understanding that responds in faith. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27–28 NIV). The sheep are drawn by the effectual call of the Good Shepherd into the safety of his fold. The identifying mark of his sheep is that they hear his voice and follow him by faith. On the contrary, those who are not his sheep do not believe. The identification of the sheep as sheep is determined ultimately in the sovereign plan of God.

Jesus as the consummate shepherd provides for the comprehensive care of his sheep. He knows that it is not merely sufficient for them to be fed with real bread—their need is far deeper. This spiritual hunger and thirst can only be met through faith in him. "Jesus said to them, 'I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst'" (John 6:35). His sheep will find their sustenance in him and his word as they walk with him.

Jesus not only provides for his sheep, but he calls them to follow wherever he lovingly leads them. A mark of true disciples is that they follow their shepherd. This theme is sounded in the call of the very first apostles. He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). Jesus also emphasized

that "if anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). Jesus goes on ahead to prepare a place for his sheep that where he is, there they may follow.

"Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going." Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:2–6)

Earlier in John 10 Jesus uses familiar shepherding imagery as he refers to himself as "the door of the sheep" (John 10:7). By using this language he defines the exclusive means of entrance into the flock. "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved and will go in and out and will find pasture" (John 10:9). Only those who enter through him will enjoy the comprehensive care that only he can provide.

All of these promises, however, are based on a unique element of his care for the sheep. Jesus describes himself as the one who "lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). While the work of the shepherd could be dangerous at times in warding off wild animals, giving up his life "must have been a fairly rare occurrence among Palestinian shepherds."¹ Ordinarily, the shepherd's calling was not to die for the sheep but to live for the sheep. Jesus'

1. Leon Morris, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 509.

charge was unique, however, as he came to provide protection from the ultimate eschatological danger of condemnation for sin through giving his life as the substitutionary atonement for the transgressions of his flock. He laid down his life and was able to “take it up again” (John 10:18), his resurrection from the dead being the exclamation point on his finished work on behalf of the sheep. The comprehensiveness of his care extends through eternity and, therefore, his sheep are absolutely secure.

The security of the sheep is seen in that “no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:28). The word describing the action of would-be thieves (“snatch”; *arpadzein* in Greek) means to “seize” or “take by force.” Any potential thieves and robbers must deal with Jesus, who has already conquered sin and death on behalf of his sheep. There is no chance that they can succeed. If this promise were not enough, Jesus reminds his listeners that to be secure in him is to be secure in the Father as well. Not only can no one snatch them out of his hand, but “no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:29). To be secure in Christ is to be secure in the Father, and that is to be secure completely and secure forever. Now that is security! Jesus is the promised Good Shepherd, and through him the sheep “will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

More Shepherds Needed

Jesus’ concern for the ongoing care of his sheep was clearly seen as he walked through the cities and villages of Galilee. “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). He not only saw their condition and their need, but he

saw the cause of the problem. As Ezekiel and Jeremiah had connected the weakened condition of the Israelites with the failure of the elders to shepherd the flock, Jesus also pointed to the absence of proper shepherds. “It is not simply human need that moves Jesus, but *their predicament as a flock not properly led.*”² His compassionate response was twofold. First, he commanded his disciples to “beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest” (Matt. 9:38). Second, his compassion led to action. He immediately authorized and sent his disciples to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:6). His mission was to become their commission. Jesus had every intention of providing shepherding care for his sheep, even in his absence. The apostles were to be the foundation of the perpetual ministry that Jesus intended for his flock.

The Apostolic Imperative

Exactly how would Jesus extend his shepherding care among his people after his resurrection and ascension? With the advance of his kingdom the shepherding metaphor does not retreat but continues to be at the forefront of Christian leadership. After all, it was in the context of the condemnation of the false shepherds of Israel and the promise of the Davidic shepherd that the Lord promised, “I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing; declares the LORD” (Jer. 23:4). Could Jeremiah be looking forward with prophetic vision to the

2. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 185.

calling of faithful shepherds who would carry on the mission of Jesus the Good Shepherd in the days of the New Covenant? The Lord would continue to provide care for his people through Spirit-filled, -gifted, and -called undershepherds.

Peter

An examination of the apostolic record in the New Testament reveals that the leader's function as shepherd is at the very heart of his calling. Peter's words to church leaders in the fifth chapter of his first letter are instructive:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, *shepherd the flock* of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4)

First of all, Peter refers to himself as a "fellow elder" (Greek, *sumpresbuteros*) demonstrating continuity in the authority of the office: "Though he was an apostle, he yet knew that authority was by no means delegated to him over his colleagues, but that on the contrary he was joined with the rest in the participation of the same office."³ There is not merely continuity in authority but also solidarity in the essential service of the office as well. That service is described in the urgent call to "shepherd the flock

3. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 144.

of God among you." The verb "shepherd" (Greek, *poimaino*) is in the emphatic position and the imperative mood, indicating that shepherding the flock is the essential work of the elder according to Peter. "There is no word in the whole round of primitive ecclesiastical phraseology which is more frequently used to express the relation of office-bearer than 'to shepherd.'"⁴

This should be no surprise after an examination of a cathartic event in Peter's life recorded in the twenty-first chapter of John's gospel. Commentators generally agree that this event "is meant to show us Peter as completely restored to his position of leadership."⁵ After his threefold denial of the Lord, he returned to fishing in Galilee. It was on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that the risen Savior appeared to the disciples for the third time since his resurrection. Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" not once, but three times, corresponding to his three denials. While commentators dispute the significance of the change in Greek words for "love" in the exchange (*agapao* and *phileo*), of great interest in our understanding of the importance of shepherding is the three-fold charge Jesus issued in response to Peter's affirmation of affection and loyalty.

After each reaffirmation of Peter's loyalty, Jesus responded with a command for him to heed. Have you ever thought about this? While there were any number of aspects of the work of leadership that Jesus could have stressed, each time he used terminology that brought Peter's attention to the imperative of caring for the flock. In the first and third instances, Jesus used the verb to "feed" (Greek *boskein*). In the second instance, he used the verb to "shepherd" (Greek *poimainein*). Trench observes

4. Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (Minneapolis: James Family Publishers, 1977), 162.

5. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 875.

that “*boskein* . . . is simply ‘to feed,’ but *poimainein* involves much more; the whole office of the shepherd, the guiding, guarding, folding of the flocks, as well as finding nourishment for it.”⁶ Morris adds, “Most people see the variation as no more than stylistic.”⁷ In *all three* imperatives the risen Christ calls Peter to the work of caring for the flock. The response of Jesus to Peter’s affirmations of love and affection *could* have included three *different* charges. For example, he could have said “preach the Gospel,” “make disciples,” or “love one another” or any other combination of imperatives. Instead, when he was in the process of restoring Peter, he responded in each case with imagery related to shepherding the flock: “Tend My lambs,” “Shepherd My sheep,” and “Tend My sheep” (John 21:15–17).

Returning to the fifth chapter of Peter’s first epistle, with the echoes of his Lord’s words in mind, Peter charged those elders who were to continue in leadership to “shepherd the flock of God.” This is the essential work of the elders of the church. Peter also spoke to their “hearts” to remind them of how they were to go about this work.

Peter’s description of elders serves as a stark contrast to the false shepherds described in Ezekiel 34. The false shepherds of Israel were condemned because they fed themselves and clothed themselves with the wool, but Peter tells leaders that they are to shepherd the flock “not for sordid gain, but with eagerness” (1 Peter 5:2). Ezekiel’s shepherds dominated the flock “with force and severity,” but Peter reminds the elders that they are not to shepherd “as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3).

6. Richard C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Company, 1894), 85.

7. Morris, *John*, 874.

Another parallel between Ezekiel’s words and Peter’s words is that shepherds are accountable to the Lord for how they lead. Peter describes Jesus as the “Chief Shepherd” (Greek, *archipoumen*) of the sheep (5:4), and Selwyn notes that the word “underlines its relationship to those who have pastoral charge in the Christian ministry. In relation to them Christ is the *chief* shepherd, set over them yet sharing their function.”⁸ In this context, however, Peter doesn’t set threats of judgment before them but rather the promise of the “unfading crown of glory.” If the faithless shepherds of Ezekiel’s day could expect judgment, how much more should faithful shepherds anticipate reward for fulfilling their calling from their Chief Shepherd? While the noun form of the Greek word for “shepherd” (*poimen*) is used only once in reference to church leadership (Eph. 4:11), the verb form is found numerous times as a description of the work of the elder. “Shepherd” or “undershepherd,” therefore, are both appropriate terms to apply to elders who, together with all who preceded them, are ultimately accountable to the Chief Shepherd for their charge to care for the flock entrusted to them.

Paul

The apostle Paul also connects the work of shepherding with leadership, particularly with the office of elder. The definitive passage is found in the twentieth chapter of the book of Acts, where Luke records Paul’s farewell to his beloved elders of the church in Ephesus. Beginning in the seventeenth verse, Paul defends his ministry among the Ephesians as one of faithfulness to the ministry of the gospel, “solemnly testifying to both Jews

8. Edward G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 231–32.

and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). For several verses he reviews his ministry among them, reminding them not only of his message but of his method among them. His address concludes with a solemn charge to the Ephesian elders: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28 NIV). When called to summarize the work of the elders in these final moving words, he returns to the imagery of shepherding. The elders are to be vigilant in "watching over" (*prosecho*) not only themselves but also the believers at Ephesus. It is noteworthy that they are described as overseers (*episkopous*). Calvin observed that "according to the use of the Scripture, bishops (*episkopoi*) differ nothing from elders (*presbuteroi*)."⁹ F. F. Bruce agrees with Calvin's assessment:

There was in apostolic times no distinction between elders (presbyters) and bishops such as we find from the second century onwards: the leaders of the Ephesian church are indiscriminately described as elders, bishops, (i.e. superintendents) and shepherds (or pastors).¹⁰

Lightfoot concurs, writing that "it has been shown that in the apostolic writings the two are only different designations of the same office."¹¹ The distinction between the terms elder and overseer (bishop) is described by Bruce in the fact that "the term

9. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 19:255.

10. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 415.

11. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1913), 193.

elder has mainly Jewish antecedents, while bishop has mainly Greek antecedents."¹² The synonymous nature of the two terms is confirmed by their usage together here in Acts 20.¹³ The action to which both terms point and to which elders and overseers must be committed is "to shepherd the church of God."

In summary, both Peter and Paul stressed the centrality of the work of shepherding when addressing the elders of the churches. In Peter's words we detect continuity with the words of reinstatement issued by his risen Lord, representing the necessity for the perpetuation of the work of shepherding throughout the ages. In the finality of Paul's words to the Ephesian elders he clearly emphasizes that their labors must be as shepherds of God's people.

Implications for Church Structure

The biblical material makes it clear that the heart of the work of the elder is to shepherd the flock. Having said this, it is important to note some important implications for church structure.

The plurality of leadership. Together with the picture of leaders as shepherds, the New Testament describes teams of elders working together within particular churches. As Paul and Barnabas planted churches they "appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust" (Acts 14:23 NIV). This implies a

12. Bruce, *Acts*, 4:16n56.

13. In chapter 3 we will see how these terms began to be applied to different offices to the detriment of the ongoing shepherding care of the church.

plurality of elders working *together* within each of the churches. When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, he “sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17 NIV). Paul continued this apostolic pattern, instructing Titus to “appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5 NIV), after which he outlined the qualifications Titus should look for in such men. John Murray summarized Paul’s teaching quite clearly: “Titus was enjoined to ordain *elders* in every city. He was not instructed to ordain an elder or bishop in every city. Paul called to Miletus the elders of the church and charged them, as a plurality, to shepherd the flock of God.”¹⁴

This pattern is not limited to the Pauline material. James urged those who were sick to “call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5:14). This text assumes a relationship between the sick person and a particular group of elders who are the elders of the church, that is, the sick person’s church. “One notices that in James it is not just any older person who is called, but officials, the elders of the church, which in this case is surely the *local congregation*”¹⁵ (emphasis added).

In Peter’s words “to the elders among you” he admonishes them to shepherd God’s flock “that is under your care.” The point is that each congregation had a number of men who were charged *together* with the responsibility of shepherding the flock. In your congregation, it is not only wise but biblical to develop a team of elders who are gifted and called to shepherd the flock. Of course, Presbyterian church government is designed to reflect this biblical model, and many other churches have seen the wisdom of the biblical pattern and sought to conform to it. For example, many

14. John Murray, *Collected Writings* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 2:345.

15. Peter Davids, *Commentary on James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 193.

independent and Baptist church leaders, whose commitments are rooted in congregational church government, have seen the importance of returning to this biblical model of church leadership. Baptist leader Mark Dever has noticed the trend:

As late as the early twentieth century, Baptist publications were referring to leaders by the title of *elder*; but as the twentieth century wore on, the idea seemed to vanish, until today it has become very unusual for a Baptist church to have elders. Today, though, there is a growing trend to go back to this biblical office—and for good reason. It was needed in New Testament times and it is needed now.”¹⁶

The casual observer can see the wisdom of the plurality of elders in a local church. That is, if it is understood that the elders are not merely called to be decision-makers but to be involved personally with the sheep.

The parity of church leadership: elders and pastors. “Parity” is a word that is used essentially as a synonym for “equality.” In discussions of the eldership it merely means that, with respect to authority and accountability, elders are on the same “level” with one another. As usual, John Murray gets right to the point: “There is not the slightest evidence in the New Testament that among the elders here was any hierarchy; the elders exercise government in unison, and on a parity with one another.”¹⁷

This doesn’t mean that they have the exact same responsibilities. For example, the New Testament teaches that there are elders

16. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 215.

17. Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:346.

whose gifts lead them to spend significant time in preaching and teaching the Word. Paul speaks of those who are “pastor-teachers” (see Eph. 4:11), those who are not only shepherds but who focus on teaching the Scriptures. In fact, these “teaching elders” might gain their livelihood from their teaching ministry. Paul speaks to this situation in his first letter to Timothy.

The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” (1 Tim. 5:17–18)

Paul was not only making the point that there are those whose gifts and calling require them to “work hard at preaching and teaching,” but that their efforts may be acknowledged in the form of monetary compensation. This, together with the references Paul offers in support,¹⁸ is the biblical precedent for compensating those leaders in the church who forego other means of gainful employment to carry out their calling to study, preach, and teach the Scriptures among the flock. There are obvious examples of people who have chosen to forego this rightful compensation for one reason or another. Paul himself served as the model “tentmaker” for those who by choice or necessity have not exercised their right to be compensated for their ministry of the Word. The text also implies that those who “rule well” might also be compensated for their labors.

One of the practical outcomes of the identification of those who give themselves to preaching and teaching is that these individuals have often become viewed as *primus inter pares*—first

18. See Deut. 25:4; Lev. 19:13.

among equals. This may have practical benefits in terms of providing initiative and direction in the local church. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the biblical picture of leadership is “team” leadership. All elders, including teaching elders (pastors), are called to shepherd the flock, but not all elders have the gift of teaching, though they should be apt to teach.

The point of this discussion isn’t who should or should not be compensated for their ministry but to focus on the fact that all who are called to be elders are called to the sheep-intensive work of shepherding. They are called to exercise their leadership *together* for the benefit of the flock. In many cases, probably because he is the one receiving a paycheck, the work of shepherding the people of God has fallen exclusively to the teaching elder or pastor. He is the one who visits the people. He is the one to whom people look for counsel. He is the one who is viewed as the “shepherd” of the local congregation. However, given what we have seen about the centrality of the work of shepherding to those who are called to be elders, this makes no sense! How is the teaching elder supposed to have the time to give careful attention to the preaching and teaching ministry of the Word if he is charged with shepherding the *entire* flock as well? No, the biblical picture is of a shared responsibility among all of the elders for shepherding the flock. If anything, the teaching elder should have *less* responsibility in some shepherding functions so as to have sufficient time to carry out his responsibilities in preaching and teaching the flock.

We look at the plethora of reports that come out year after year about pastoral burnout and the alarming number of clergy leaving their churches or leaving the ministry altogether. Might not one of the contributing factors be that they are not receiving the help they need in shepherding the flock prescribed in the Scriptures? Not only will our churches be healthier, but the

work of the pastor will also be more manageable if all elders take seriously the work that Christ has called them to do in sharing the responsibility to shepherd the flock.

For Further Reflection

Review Acts 20:17–38.

1. What were the elements of Paul's ministry to the people of Ephesus?
2. What are the terms used to describe the leaders of the church?
3. To what fundamental imperative does Paul's appeal build?

Review 1 Peter 5:1–4.

4. How does this text reveal the continuity and discontinuity between Peter the apostle and the elders to whom he wrote?
5. What imperative is central to his charge to elders?
6. Compare 1 Peter 5:1–4 with Ezekiel 34. Identify the stark contrasts between the behavior of the elders in Ezekiel 34 and the heart of an elder as described by Peter.
7. Do the elders of your church think of themselves primarily as shepherds or as a board of directors? How do they share the responsibilities of shepherding the flock?
8. Do the members of the church perceive their leaders as shepherds?
9. Does your form of church government reflect the biblical model of shepherding elders?

3

LOST AND FOUND: WHERE DID ALL THE SHEPHERDS GO?



A Brief Historical Survey

IF THE BIBLICAL material is clear that elders are to be shepherds and that the office of elder has been established by the Lord to care for the flock in a partnership of plurality and parity, why is there so much confusion about this in the church today? One of the answers to this enigma is that through the centuries the church has followed a circuitous route away from the New Testament pattern and back. The biblical understanding of the nature and work of the office of elder as shepherd has been “lost and found,” and sometimes lost again! This brief historical overview will help you see this journey and perhaps help you understand how your church came to its current practice. It cannot be exhaustive but will focus on key individuals and their impact on these issues.

Before the Reformation

In the previous chapter, ample biblical evidence was presented that in the apostolic era the primary task for elders was shepherding and that the different terms for elder (*presbuteros*, *episkopos*) are synonymous for the same office. In the inspired writings of both Paul and Peter it is clear that the work of the elder is shepherding and that the work is to be shared among a plurality of elders in a particular location. Paul sent for the “elders [*presbuteroi*] of the church” in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). Peter’s words were penned to “the elders [*presbuteroi*] among you” (1 Peter 5:1).

Outside the canon of Scripture, there is additional first century confirmation of the continuation of the plurality of leadership in the early church. Clement’s Epistle to the Corinthians (c. AD 96) represents this continuing practice. The occasion of the letter was rebellion by a few against the elders of the church. (Evidently, the church at Corinth continued its feisty ways long after Paul’s appeals for love and unity.) First of all, Clement argues for the validity of the offices of “bishops” and “deacons” in the local church.

So, preaching in country and city, they [apostles] appointed their firstfruits, having tested them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons, of those who should believe. And this was no novelty, for long ago it had been written concerning bishops and deacons. For the Scripture says, “I will establish their bishops in righteousness and their deacons in faith.”¹

1. W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed., *The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1937), 72.

He notes that the apostles appointed bishops and deacons (plural) with the implication that these were appointed wherever churches were established. Throughout his letter, Clement uses “bishop” and “presbyter” interchangeably. While there are those who disagree, this quotation confirms the ordinary and perpetual nature of the offices of bishop (presbyter) and deacon.

Clement goes on to praise those who were deposed and to question the actions of those responsible.

Blessed are the presbyters who have gone before in the way, who came to a fruitful and perfect end; for they need have no fear lest anyone depose them from their assigned place. For we see that you have removed certain men of good behaviour from a ministry blamelessly and honorably fulfilled.²

As the letter continues, he becomes even more pointed in his criticism and refers to the plurality of elders in the church:

It is disgraceful, brethren, very disgraceful, and unworthy of Christian conduct, that of the stable and ancient Church of the Corinthians, thanks to one or two persons, it should be reported that it revolts against its presbyters.³

He then suggests a course of action to those who have caused the trouble.

Who among you is noble? Who is compassionate? Who is filled with confident love? Let him say: “If on my account there are sedition and strife and schisms, I will depart, I will go wherever you wish and will do what is commanded by the

2. *Ibid.*, 74.

3. *Ibid.*, 76.

community; only let the flock of Christ be at peace with the appointed presbyters.⁴

Nearly two thousand years later, this problem sounds all too familiar! For the purposes of this chapter, you can see that it was the plurality of elders who were responsible to shepherd the flocks of believers in the Roman empire at the end of the first century. Consider church historian Thomas Lindsay's outlook:

These statements . . . prove to us that before the close of the first century bodies of presbyters existed as ruling colleges in Christian congregations over a great part of the Roman Empire. The Epistle of Clement proves this for the Roman Church. The First Epistle of Peter proves it for Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

The Apocalypse confirms the proof for Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamus, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. The Acts of the Apostles adds its confirmation for Ephesus and Jerusalem.⁵

The work of the elders in the first century was shepherding the local flocks of believers in their respective locations.

However, in the second century a gradual shift began that was to have dramatic ramifications on the nature of the organization and ministry of the church. Instead of the local church being overseen by a plurality of elders, with the assistance of the deacons, the seeds of hierarchical practice were planted. There arose a single person who became the "bishop" or "pastor" of a single church and then a group of churches.

4. Ibid., 79.

5. Thomas Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (New York: G. Doran, 1902), 163.

The change made consisted in placing at the head of this college of rulers [elders] one man, who was commonly called either the pastor or the bishop, the latter name being the more usual, and apparently the technical designation. The ministry of each congregation or local church instead of being, as it had been, two-fold—of elders and deacons—became three-fold—of pastor or bishop, elders and deacons.⁶

However, it wasn't until the third century that the seed planted in the second century came to full bloom as authority increasingly shifted from the plurality of the elders to one bishop.

Rather than seeing authority in the church and the care for the flock as the responsibility of all of the elders, a single bishop took the preeminent position. This was advanced largely through the work of Cyprian (c. 200–258). With specific respect to the effect of this change upon care for the flock, Lindsay provides this summary of the impact of Cyprian's perspective:

The bishop had entire charge of the discipline of the congregation. . . . It was his duty to instruct the people about what the discipline of the Church required, and to promote their growth in holiness. . . . In all this the elders and deacons might assist, but always under the control of the bishop. To him and to him alone belonged the right of "binding and loosing"—a right which had been given, he maintained, to St. Peter, and then to the other apostles, and which now belonged to the bishops . . .⁷

Together with this change was a drift to a sacerdotal focus in ministry, drawing a direct parallel between the Levitical

6. Ibid., 170.

7. Ibid., 303.

priesthood and the office of bishop in the New Covenant. Once again, Cyprian was a key catalyst.

Cyprian . . . applies all the privileges, duties, and responsibilities of the Aaronic priesthood to the officers of the Christian church and constantly calls them *sacerdotes* and *sacerdotium*. He may therefore be called the proper father of the sacerdotal conception of the Christian ministry as a mediating agency between God and the people. During the third century it became customary to apply the term “priest” directly and exclusively to the Christian ministers, especially the bishops.⁸

This served not only to distance the bishop from the laity but to elevate the bishop over the other offices in the church as well.

The focus of the ministry narrowed to the growing list of sacraments and the worthiness or unworthiness of members to participate. While there was some responsibility shared, it was quite clear that “no restoration of sinners was possible until the bishop had heard their confession, had approved of their signs of sorrow, or until he along with the presbyters and deacons, had placed his hands on their head in token of forgiveness.”⁹ As the church continued to move away from the parity of the elders in overseeing the flock, the hierarchy of the church gained more and more authority. Abuse of authority also grew to the point where no longer did the officers exist to serve the flock, but the flock was held increasingly captive by superstition and fear. Strauch summarizes the result: “Due to the ‘deceitful light of human authorities,’ which replaced the New Testament teaching on eldership, the Christian doctrine of eldership was lost

8. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 2:126–27.

9. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry*, 304.

for nearly fourteen centuries.”¹⁰ For more than a millennium, “pastoral care” became identified with the hearing of confessions by an anonymous confessor who would prescribe ready-made penance to the dutiful sinner.

The New Testament teaching not only on eldership but on even more fundamental doctrines of the faith had been eclipsed in the shadows of the increasing focus on the human traditions of the church. It would take nothing less than a return to the Bible to bring the church back to the foundational truths as well as to those truths which provided for the proper care of the people of God through active shepherd-elders. This return would come with the Reformation.

The Reformation

It was as early as John Wycliffe (1329–84), the “morning star of the Reformation,” that the recognition of the biblical warrant for the two-office view reappeared.

One thing I boldly assert, that in the primitive church, or in the time of the Apostle Paul, two orders of clergy were thought sufficient, viz. *priest* and *deacon*; and I do also say that in the time of Paul . . . a priest and a bishop were one and the same; for, in those times, the distinct orders of Pope, Cardinals, Patriarchs, Archbishops, Bishops, arch-Deacons, officials, and deans, were not invented.¹¹

10. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 11.

11. Cited in Peter A. Lillback, “The Reformers’ Rediscovery of Presbyterian Polity,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark: Essays Commemorating the Fifty Years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, ed. Charles Dennison and Richard Gamble

With the arrival of the Reformation in full force, not only were the foundational, Scriptural doctrines of the faith rediscovered, but progress was to be made in the biblical structure of the church.

While the original Reformation battles were fought largely over the fundamental issues of doctrine, attention was eventually paid to what constituted true biblical order in the offices in the church. John Calvin (1509–64) clearly saw that the biblical sword cut through the multilayered hierarchy of the day to reveal the simplicity of the divine pattern. “In calling those who preside over Churches by appellations of bishops, elders, pastors, and ministers, without any distinction, I have followed the usage of Scripture, which applies all these terms to express the same meaning.”¹²

However, he did not see these terms as synonymous with what we would call the “ruling elder” but with the office of “pastor” of the local congregation. Appreciation for the “lay” leader who would assist in shepherding the flock would become apparent later in his pastoral ministry.

He was deeply concerned for the care of the people of Geneva and urged the city council to clearly define the parishes of the city for this purpose. Unfortunately, they delayed in doing so. Calvin complained in a letter to Bullinger that this led the people to view their ministers merely as preachers rather than pastors.¹³ When he returned to the city in 1541 the council complied with his request.

(Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), 67.

12. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:324.

13. Amy Nelson Burnett, “A Tale of Three Churches,” in *Calvin and the Company of Pastors*, ed. Daniel Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services, 2004), 111.

He outlined his understanding of four offices¹⁴ for the ongoing work of the ministry in Geneva. They were teachers (or doctors), pastors, elders, and deacons. In the *Institutes* he provides a description of the work of the elder or “governor”:

“Governors” I apprehend to have been men of advanced years, selected from the people to unite with the bishops in giving admonitions and exercising discipline. For no other interpretation can be given that injunction, “He that ruleth, let him do it with diligence.” Therefore, from the beginning, every Church has had its senate or council, composed of pious, grave, and holy men, who were invested with that jurisdiction in the correction of vices, of which we shall soon treat. Now, that this regulation was not of a single age, experience itself demonstrates.¹⁵

Those given responsibility for the “care of the poor” were the deacons. The “Governors” or “ruling elders” were another category of elder in distinction from the pastors. The increasing importance of the “ruling elder” can be seen in his later exposition of 1 Timothy 5:17:

We may learn from this, that there were at that time two kinds of elders; for all were not ordained to teach. The words plainly mean, that there were some who “ruled well” and honourably, but who did not hold the office of teachers. And, indeed, there were chosen among the people men of worth and of good character, who, united with the pastors in a common council, and authority, administered the discipline of the Church, and were a kind of censors for the correction of morals. Ambrose complains that this custom had gone into disuse, through the

14. See *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541*.

15. Calvin, *Institutes*, 324–25.

carelessness, or rather through the pride, of the doctors [teachers] who wish to possess undivided power.¹⁶

The work of the ruling elders largely consisted in overseeing the respective congregations of the Geneva community:

The duties of the elders were “to keep watch over every man’s life, to admonish amiably those whom they see leading a disorderly life, and where necessary, to report to the assembly which will be deputized to make fraternal correction.”¹⁷

This order of the offices was reflected later in the French Confession of Faith (c. 1559) authored by Calvin and his pupil, De Chandieu:

As to the true Church, we believe that it should be governed according to the order established by our Lord Jesus Christ. That there should be pastors, overseers, and deacons, so that true doctrine may have its course, that errors may be corrected and suppressed, and the poor and all who are in affliction may be helped in their necessities.¹⁸

This succinct summary provides each office with a brief description of the functions of the offices as well. Pastors were responsible to see that “true doctrine may have its course,” overseers were to assure that “errors may be corrected and suppressed,” and deacons were to help the poor and needy.

16. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 21, ed. and trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 138–39.

17. Richard A. Gamble, “Switzerland: Triumph and Decline,” in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 57.

18. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 3:376–77.

Calvin’s interest in shepherding the flock was noteworthy:

Jean Daniel Benoit, the expert on Calvin’s work in the cure of souls, states boldly that the Geneva Reformer was more pastor than theologian, that, to be exact, he was a theologian in order to be a better pastor. In his whole reforming work he was a shepherd of souls.¹⁹

In summarizing Calvin’s influence, Strauch comments that Calvin

... decried the loss of the church eldership and promoted its restoration. The sixteenth century efforts, however, were only partially successful because the Reformers could not break free from the hardened soil of long-standing, clerical traditions.²⁰

However, even in the Reformed churches, the transition from monarchical episcopacy to the biblical parity of eldership in caring for the flock took time to develop in principle and practice. It can be argued that Calvin and the continental reformers were more attentive to challenge the complicated layers of prelacy in the Roman church than they were to sort out the role of “governors” and ruling elders. However, one can see that his convictions about the importance of the ruling elder grew over time.

Calvin’s views reverberated to the British Isles, where his most famous student, John Knox (1514–72), would introduce reform to Scotland. This was particularly the case with Knox’s view of lay elders. Knox followed Calvin in the view that the minister of the Word was supported by ruling elders in caring for the flock. In his account of the establishment of church leadership in Edinburgh:

19. John T. McNeill, *A History of the Cure of Souls* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 198.

20. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 11.

And because the Spirit of God will never suffer his awne to be idle and voyde of all religioun, men began to exercise thamesekfis in reading of the Scriptures secretly within thair awne houses; and varietie of persones culd not be kept in gud obedience and honest fame, without Oversiers, Elders and Deacons: And so begane that small flocke to put thameselfis in sick ordour, as if Christ Jesus had planely triumphed in the middes of thame by the power of his Evangell. And thay did elect sum to occupie the supream place of exhortation and reading [the Scriptures], som to be Elderis abd helpers unto thame, for the oversight of the flocke: And some to be Deacones for the collectioun of almes to be distributed to the poore of thair awne bodie.

Of this small begyninf is that Ordour, quihilk now God of his grit mercie hes gevin unto us publictly within this Realme. Of the principalls of thame that were knowne to be men of gude conversatioun and honest fame in the privy Kirk, were chosen Elders and Deacones to reull with the Minister in the publicke Kirk.²¹

The work of the elder was described in both the First and Second Book of Discipline:

Thair office is, als weill severallie as conjuntlie, to watche diligentlie upone the floc committit unto thair charge, bayth publickly and privatly, that no corruptioun of religioun or maneris enter thairin.²²

It continues to distinguish the functions of the elder from the pastor and doctor:

21. John Knox, *Works*, ed. David Laing, (Edinburgh: The Wodrow Society, 1861), 2:151.

22. *The Second Book of Discipline*, ed. James Kirk (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1980), 193.

As the pastouris and doctouris sould be diligent in teacheing and sowing the seid of the word, so the eldaris²³ sould be cairfull in seiking the fruict of the same in the peple.²⁴

Though the elders did not necessarily have gifts of teaching, there was no doubt that they were to share the responsibility for the care of the flock in the kirk:

The authority of the elders was high in the Scottish Kirk. In John Knox's liturgy there was provision for a weekly (Thursday) meeting of ministers and elders chiefly for mutual criticism, but also for consideration of the faults of the members. The elder's office was redefined in the Second Book of Discipline (adopted 1581) where elders were to assist in the examination of communicants and in visiting the sick, as well as to give "private admonition" and to join with pastors and "doctors" in "establishing good order and execution of discipline."²⁵

The ministers and elders met together *weekly* to consider the health and discipline of the flock.

Puritan England

While the idea of monarchical episcopacy saw its demise in Scotland under the leadership of Knox and his immediate

23. In the early documents of the Reformed Scottish church, elders were also known as *governouris* and *Seniors*. The term *governouris* is a direct connection to Calvin's terminology and *Seniors* represents the idea of maturity in years implied in the Greek *presbyteros*.

24. *Second Book*, 193.

25. McNeill, *History of the Cure of Souls*, 249.

successors, the struggle continued in England through the Puritans. Again, though their primary concern was to clearly articulate the Reformed faith, the Westminster Assembly (1643–49) sought to address matters of church order. There is little in the Westminster Larger or Shorter Catechisms concerning the office or functions of church leaders. There are only vague references to those we have come to know as lay ruling elders. There are references to “the minister” as the one who can rightly administer the sacraments of the New Covenant (Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 176). This is an explicit reference to the “teaching elder” in distinction from the ruling elder.

It is in chapter 30 of the Westminster Confession on “Church Censures” that there is a more general reference to the officers of the church and their function:

1. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government, *in the hand of Church officers*, distinct from the civil magistrate.
2. *To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed*; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.
3. Church censures are necessary, for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for deterring of others from the like offences, for purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for vindicating the honour of Christ, and the holy profession of the Gospel, and for preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer under His Covenant, and the seals

thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders.²⁶ (emphasis added)

Paragraph one refers to “Church officers,” and it is very encouraging that the accompanying biblical proof-texts offered in support²⁷ include general references to “elders” and “leaders.” Paragraph two recognizes the perpetual authority of the keys extended to the officers of the church, citing Matthew 16:19 and 18:17–18. Paragraph three makes an explicit reference to the believer’s covenant faithfulness as a basis for taking disciplinary action. The implication is that the officers of the church are responsible to keep watch over the flock, “. . . preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the Church, if they should suffer His covenant . . .”

Among the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly is “A Directory for Church-Government, for Church Censures, and Ordination of Ministers.” The following summary is found under the heading “Of the Officers of a particular Congregation”: “For Officers in a single Congregation, there ought to be one at the least, both to labour in the Word and Doctrine, and to Rule. It is also requisite that there should be others to join in Government.”²⁸ A few sentences later, the following guidelines are given for the ruling elders’ involvement in the oversight of a particular congregation: “Where there are many ruling officers in a particular congregation, let some of them more especially attend the inspection of one part, some of another, as may be

26. The Westminster Confession of Faith (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 119–20.

27. Acts 20:17–18; Heb. 13:7, 17.

28. *The Form of Presbyterial Church Government* (repr., New York: Robert Lenox Kennedy, 1880), 57–58.

most convenient; and let them at fit times visit the several families for their spiritual good.”²⁹ These words represent an important development in parity of the elders of the church in caring for the flock. A subsequent paragraph speaks of the partnership of “pastors and other ruling officers” in the exercise of discipline in a particular congregation.

It is noteworthy, however, that there is no order for the ordination of “ruling elders,” only for the “minister of the Word.” While there is occasional reference to ordination as “a solemn setting apart of a person unto some public church office,” the context is clear that the focus of the document’s teaching on ordination is the one who is referred to as the “minister of the Word, a minister for a particular congregation, and preaching presbyters.”

In summary, the Westminster Assembly articulated the existence of the office of ruling elder in its statements about “church officers” and “church-governors,” and it contends that these officers are, together with the “minister of the Word,” responsible for the oversight and discipline of the church.” However, “parity” with the “minister of the Word” was an expression that did not enter into the assembly’s vocabulary. There was still progress to be made toward the biblical ideal of recognizing ruling elders who actively shared the responsibility to shepherd the flock.

In Puritan England, and perhaps in the western church since the Reformation, there has been no more exemplary model of pastoral care than that presented and practiced by Richard Baxter (1615–91). It is no surprise, in light of what has been seen above, that the touchstone for his classic work, *The Reformed Pastor*, was the charge to “shepherd the flock” found in Acts 20:28. In commenting on this text, Baxter said,

29. Cited by Wayne R. Spear, “The Westminster Assembly’s Directory of Church Government,” in *Pressing Toward the Mark*, 90.

“A *little flock*” does not here signify the whole church of Christ, but that particular church of which those elders had charge. “*Overseers*,” that is, persons appointed by Christ to teach and guide those churches, or that particular church in the way of salvation. The same persons who before are called elders of the church of Ephesus are here called overseers, or bishops. “*to feed the church of God*”—by some rendering barely “*to feed*,” but by others, “*to rule*.” But it ought not to be confined to either. For it comprehends both, or the whole of the pastoral work.³⁰

Even though he hints at the parity of eldership in this quote, it is obvious that the focus of his exhortation is to the “pastor” as *the* shepherd of each congregation. In a subsequent section in which he outlines the presuppositions of his work there is no doubt where he places the overwhelming responsibility for the oversight of the flock:

It is here implied that every flock should have their own pastor (or more than one), and that every pastor should have his own flock. As every troop or company in a regiment must have their own captain, and every soldier must know his own commander and colors, so it is the will of God that every church should have their own pastors, and that all of Christ’s disciples should know their own teachers that are over them in the Lord. The church of Christ consists of particular churches, guided by their own overseers. And every Christian must be a member of one of these churches. . . . Though a minister is an officer in the church of Christ, yet he is in a special manner the overseer of that particular church which is committed to his charge. From this relationship of pastor and flock arise all the duties which we mutually owe to each other.³¹

30. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656; repr., Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace Publications, 1971), 1.

31. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 88.

Baxter did not see the ruling elder as a key partner in the work of shepherding the flock. This is further indicated by his suggestion that if a minister was overwhelmed with the size of his flock that he hire “one or two assistants”³² out of his own salary to help in the visitation of the flock. One is left to wonder how remarkable the impact would have been if Baxter had engaged the biblical office of lay ruling elder in the care of the flock of Kidderminster.

Of great encouragement in Baxter is his focus on taking a proactive and preventive approach to congregational care through regular visitation and catechizing of the families of the church. But it even took some time for him to commit to the work:

I wonder at myself, how I was kept from so clear and excellent a duty. But the case was with me, as I suppose it is with others. I was long convinced of it, but my apprehensions of the difficulties were too great, and my apprehensions of the duty were too small and so I was long hindered from the performance of it. I imagined the people would scorn it, and none but a few, who had least need, would submit to it, and I thought my strength would never go through with it, having such great burdens on me before; and thus I long delayed it which I beseech the Lord of mercy to forgive. Whereas, upon trial I find the difficulties almost nothing (save only through my extraordinary bodily weakness) to that which I imagined; and I find the benefits and comforts of the work proved to be such, that I would not wish I had forborne it, for all the riches in the world.³³

His words of admonition to be engaged in the caring discipline of the flock are also very challenging:

32. *Ibid.*, 93.

33. *Ibid.*, 43.

My second request to the ministers in these kingdoms is that they would at last, without any more delay, unanimously set themselves to the practice of those parts of Church discipline which are unquestionably necessary, and part of their work. It is a sad case, that good men should settle themselves so long in the constant neglect of so great a duty. The common cry is, “Our people are not ready for it; they will not bear it.” But is not the fact rather that you will not bear the trouble and hatred which it will occasion? If indeed, you proclaim our churches incapable of the order and government of Christ, what do you do, but give up the cause to them that withdraw from us, and encourage men to look out for better societies, where that discipline may be had?³⁴

Baxter’s concern for the care of Christ’s flock and his commitment to carry it out among the people is an example for any Reformed pastor. However, his care of the flock would have been enhanced by engaging those identified by the reformers as “governor” and by Calvin as one of two kinds of elders.

Scottish Presbyterianism

In the wake of the great impact of John Knox’s foundational work, it was the Scottish expression of Presbyterianism where the model of the engagement of all the elders in the care of the flock would continue to be developed. Even this took some time inasmuch as a primary concern of the day was the larger argument for Presbyterianism versus Episcopalianism. A good example of the Scottish viewpoint is churchman James Bannerman (1807–68):

34. *Ibid.*, 46–47.

The power of bearing rule and exercising government and discipline in the Church, is undeniably a lower exercise of ministerial authority than the power to preach the Gospel and administer the seals of the covenant of grace. And yet, by admission of all parties, presbyters are vested with this highest kind of power as their distinctive function,—a circumstance that renders it very difficult to believe that they are excluded from the lower power of ruling in the Church . . .³⁵

The argument against hierarchical authority found in “the bishop” over and above “the presbyter” was at the heart of the controversy. He appeals to the synonymous uses of *presbuteros* (elder) and *episkopos* (overseer, bishop).

It is not difficult to recognize the reason for the use of the two terms, *presbuteros* and *episkopos*, as applicable to the same undivided office. The first of these *presbuteros*, was the title appropriated to the office of elder in the Jewish synagogue. . . . The second of these *episkopos* was a word in general use among the Greeks to denote any kind of overseer. . . . But that these words were but different titles of the same official personage, is abundantly proved by a variety of passages in the New Testament. The proof indeed is so strong as to now be acknowledged to be conclusive as to the point by the most candid of the Episcopalian controversialists.³⁶

Again, though the point was being powerfully made in favor of the biblical view of the terminology, there was still more progress needed in making use of those who, together with

35. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:291.

36. *Ibid.*, 2:274.

the ministers, shared the “power of bearing rule and exercising government and discipline in the church.” There were two additional Scotsmen whose examples are helpful to examine; one a teaching elder (Thomas Chalmers) and one a ruling elder (David Dickson).

Thomas Chalmers

Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) truly had the heart of a shepherd. At that time it was not uncommon for those who shepherded rural congregations to visit their families annually: “It is the acknowledged duty and in rural districts the general practice of clergymen of the Established Church of Scotland to make an annual visitation of their parishes, when every house is entered and the general condition of each family as to education and church attendance is ascertained.”³⁷

When Chalmers became pastor of the Tron church in Glasgow he understood that personal shepherding ministry was not merely something for the rural population but for the city as well: “There was nothing in any town population so essentially different from a rural one as to render the ministrations of a devoted clergyman less efficacious in the one case than in the other.”³⁸ Therefore, he set out to visit every family in his parish personally. “Its population was not exactly known, but it was believed to contain somewhere between eleven and twelve thousand souls. To visit every family of such a population within a year or two was a Herculean task, yet Dr. Chalmers resolved to accomplish it.”³⁹

37. William Hanna, ed., *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1850), 2:118.

38. *Ibid.*, 2:118–19.

39. *Ibid.*, 2:119.

Needless to say, the visits were very brief, surprisingly allowing no time even for a prayer. On one occasion a dear old widow pleaded for a prayer to which Chalmers replied, "If I were to pray in every house I enter, it would take me ten years to get through the work."⁴⁰ His visits consisted of a series of brief but pointed questions as to the state of church attendance and education in the family.

Early in his ministry at the Tron he realized that his success would require the active involvement of his elders. This was not going to be an easy transition for many of them. "Some of the elders of the Tron Church were excellent men, but their chief duty was to stand at the plate, receive the free-will offerings of the congregation as they entered, and distribute them to the poor by a monthly allowance."⁴¹ Under Chalmers's leadership, they were going to do more than "stand at the plate." In order to accomplish the "Herculean" task of caring for the people, the city was divided into parishes, each having at least one elder and one deacon. He developed the shepherding skills of his elders by taking them along when he visited people in their district.

Here is a picture of Chalmers on visitation with an elder:

"Well," he said, looking kindly over the shoulder upon his elder, who, scarcely able to keep pace with him was toiling up a long and weary stair, "Well, what do you think of this kind of visiting?" Engrossed with the toils of the ascent, the elder announced that he had not been thinking much about it. "Oh! I know quite well," said Dr. Chalmers, "that if you were to speak your mind, you would say that we are putting the butter very thinly upon the bread."⁴²

40. *Ibid.*

41. *Ibid.*, 2:130.

42. *Ibid.*, 2:120.

The last comment about "thinly" buttered bread was undoubtedly a reference to the brevity of the visits and the vast numbers of parishioners that were being seen. Chalmers was determined to engage these undershepherds in their biblical ministry to the people. He was encouraged as newly ordained elders joined in the work. On the occasion of the ordination of new elders on December 20, 1816, his charge included the following words:

I am well aware how widely the practice of our generation has diverged from the practice of our ancestors—how, within the limits of our Establishment, the lay office-bearers of the Church are fast renouncing the whole work of ministering from house to house in prayer, and in exhortation, and in the dispensation of spiritual comfort and advice among the sick, or the disconsolate, or the dying . . . I shall therefore only say that I know of nothing which would give me greater satisfaction than to see a connection of this kind established between my elders and the population of those districts which are respectively assigned to them. . . .⁴³

His journal is filled with accounts of the visitation of the people with his elders.

Tuesday. - Met Mr. John Brown, elder, and took him and Mr. Montgomery to a visitation in the proportion [district] of the latter. Went through [visited] 230 people, and drank tea at Mr. Brown's⁴⁴

It is quite amazing that they had the energy or the time for tea after such a whirlwind schedule!

43. *Ibid.*, 2:505.

44. *Ibid.*, 2:180.

Chalmers had great vision for ministering to all of the needs of all of the people in the parishes he served. He brought about dramatic reforms in education and ministry to the poor throughout the city.⁴⁵ The elders and deacons of the church were key partners in shepherding, and this continued as he moved from the Tron to St. John's parish:

The parish of St. John's was divided into twenty-five districts, called proportions, each embracing from sixty to one hundred families. Reviving the ancient order of deacons, which in Scottish Presbyterian practice had long fallen into disuse, Dr. Chalmers appointed over each of these districts an elder and a deacon; the spiritual interests of his proportion being committed to the former, and its temporal interests to the latter.⁴⁶

The deacons became active partners in caring for the needs of the poor in each "proportion." There were regular meetings to consider the requests that would come to them on a weekly basis. He truly understood that the offices of elder and deacon represent the comprehensive care that Christ provides for his flock.

David Dickson

The perspective of the ruling elder can be seen in Chalmers's contemporary, David Dickson (1821–85). He served as a ruling elder in the Free New North Church in Edinburgh for more than thirty years. He promoted not only the dignity of the office but also a practical approach to the involvement of the

45. Chalmers's comprehensive attention to education, health, and poverty in Glasgow became known as the "parochial" system.

46. Hanna, *Memoirs*, 2:293.

elders in shepherding the flock: "I have a deep conviction that, though the scriptural standing of the ruling eldership has been always maintained and defended by Presbyterian churches, it has never been worked out in practice so as to do the good it might do."⁴⁷

"Working it out in practice" is just what he proceeded to do. He proposed "districts" for which each elder was responsible. He presented models for visitation of families, visitation of the sick, and guidelines for discipline. He also saw the importance of overseeing a member's participation in worship. The ruling elder "will find it useful to know where his people sit in church."⁴⁸ A unique focus in his work was his encouragement to elders to see that the members of the flock were engaged in the work of the ministry: "What a change would appear on the Church and the world if each professing Christian were doing something—something for Christ—even though it were a very little! Might not wilderness soon be turned into a fruitful field?"⁴⁹ This caring, "proprietary" attitude toward the flock was more characteristic of Scottish Presbyterianism than anywhere else.

Elders in America

When Presbyterianism spread to America, the Scottish church made a profound mark. "After the Restoration . . . Presbyterianism lost its vitality in England, but through force of example and by immigration, the Scottish church in later years became a very

47. David Dickson, *The Elder and His Work* (repr., Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1990), 2.

48. *Ibid.*, 15.

49. *Ibid.*, 59.

powerful influence in America.”⁵⁰ Would the Scottish emphasis on the importance of the shepherding elder be perpetuated in the American church?

Samuel Miller (1769–1860) was a good example of the efforts to represent the biblical perspective in the New World. He served as a pastor in New York City and later taught at Princeton Theological Seminary for thirty-five years. Noteworthy are his words on the authority of the ruling elder:

The ruling elder, no less than the teaching elder (or pastor), is to be considered as acting under the authority of Christ in all that he rightfully does. If the office of which we speak was appointed in the apostolic church by infinite wisdom—if it is an ordinance of Jesus Christ, just as much as that of the minister of the gospel—then the former, equally with the latter, is Christ’s officer. He has a right to speak and act in his name; and though elected by the members of the church . . . yet he is not to be considered as deriving his authority to rule from them, any more than he who “labours in the word and doctrine” derives his authority to preach and administer other ordinances from the people who make choice of him as their teacher and guide.⁵¹

Miller also outlined the practical duties of overseeing the flock:

But besides those duties which pertain to ruling elders, with the pastor, in their collective capacity as a judicatory of the church, there are others which are incumbent on them at all

50. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 330–31.

51. Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder* (1831; repr., Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1994), 12.

times, in the intervals of their judicial meetings, and by the due discharge of which they may be constantly edifying the body of Christ. It is their duty to have an eye of inspection and care over all the members of the congregation; and, for thus purpose, to cultivate a universal and intimate acquaintance, as far as may be, with every family in the flock of which they are made “overseers.”⁵²

Miller saw the need for elders to be concerned with the flock “at all times,” not merely when meeting as the “judicatory” of the church. He made it clear that the ideal was for the elders to be engaged in the visitation of the flock as well.

Miller’s work includes a fascinating letter to “Christian Brethren.” These are words to the members of churches to explain the work of the elders with a view to improving their understanding and to gain their cooperation. To the brethren on the matter of discipline, he wrote: “Your elders will sometimes be called—God grant that it may seldom occur!—but they *will* sometimes be called to the painful exercise of discipline. Be not offended with them for the performance of this duty.”⁵³ He also included information to members as to the elder’s work of visitation: “When your elders visit your families for the purpose of becoming acquainted with them, and of aiding the pastor in ascertaining the spiritual state of the flock, remember that it is not officious intrusion. It is nothing more than their duty.”⁵⁴ These quotations communicate both Miller’s high view of the office of ruling elder and his view that ruling elders should be regularly involved in the oversight

52. *Ibid.*, 17.

53. *Ibid.*, 26.

54. *Ibid.*, 27.

of the flock. This reflected not merely Scottish influence but also strong biblical and theological convictions.

Summary

In summarizing this brief historical overview it can be concluded that the history of the church reveals a perpetual struggle over not only who leads the church but what leaders are supposed to do. The recognition of the authority of the ruling elder for the well-being of the flock of Christ was virtually lost from the third century to the sixteenth century. Even among the reformers there was reluctance to apply passages referring to “elders” and “overseers” (Acts 20; 1 Peter 5; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1) to anyone other than the minister of the Word or teaching elder. The biblical basis for “ruling elders” or “governors” was limited to passages that spoke about the gifts of leadership or administration (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28). However, it is difficult to see how one can affirm the existence of the office of ruling elder and not apply the former texts to matters of calling, qualification, and function, given the complete biblical picture.

Though there continue to be differences in the understanding of the relationship between ruling and teaching elder, the Reformed churches, particularly in Calvin’s Geneva and Presbyterian Scotland, laid the foundation for the importance of the office of the ruling elder alongside the teaching elder in caring for the flock. Together they are responsible to identify local membership and to provide ongoing care, nurture, and discipline of the flock.

Throughout its history, when a clear biblical understanding of the importance of the office of elder and its shepherding func-

tions has been absent or impaired, God’s flock has suffered. On the other hand, when leaders have sought to care for the flock, it has prospered.

For Further Reflection

1. Investigate the history of how the “offices” in your church came into existence.
2. If your church (denomination) has a book of church order, look up the descriptions of the offices in the church.
3. Does your context give appropriate weight to the office of ruling elder (or its equivalent)?