

In Search of Shepherds - Roles and Functions

REVIEW: Okay, so far in this search for shepherds we have completed two major sections: The first on God's Great Design - how God designed us as men and as women to function in the world. The second section has really been the search for shepherds - looking for how the Bible lays out the biblical model, even if there is not a book of Lystra in which Paul lays out exactly the details of how a church should be run. We still have it well laid out in the NT that eldership is a supra-cultural principle and because it transcends culture, we can say with great confidence that eldership is the biblical model for all churches.

TRAN: Today we will end our search for shepherds for a time by starting to look at what the Bible says about what an elder does. We looked at one of the concepts two weeks ago with Peter and shepherding. We will briefly revisit that, but we will pull more from that idea of shepherding as we go.

The other thing we will do is contrast what the Bible says about elders, and their function with what our current system of government is. Do we have an office of the church that functions like the elders are said to function in the NT? If not, why not?

I. A little review

- A. We talked early on about the title of elder, and why the title is interchangeable with the title overseer
 1. In Jewish congregations, they already had elders in their culture, so carrying the title over and applying it to an individual or group of individuals doing much the same things seemed like a simple thing to do
 2. In Gentile congregations, the title overseer had been used in their culture for a person or persons performing similar tasks in the community so it seemed liked the best practice in the new church
- B. Some people like to argue, and I WAS one of them, that elder/deacon, or trustee/deacon, who cares, they all serve the same function so who cares what we call them
 1. The argument is only partially true
 - a) Because the early church had the freedom to call the office by different names, we would have the same freedom
 - b) So we could call them the Kermit's and the Miss Piggy's and it really wouldn't matter
 - (1) But please don't do that
 - (2) Miss Piggy beats up on Kermit - there is just too much baggage in those relationships
 2. The part of the argument that is false is regardless of nomenclature the offices have equal function

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- a) In other words, we can call them anything we want, but they function the same way as the biblical model
- b) The reality is few churches have offices that function in the same manner as the biblical model
- C. So for the remainder of our time, I will describe the biblical model - specific things that the elders are called to do
 - 1. When I say specific, that may still be rather general - a category of responsibility rather than a specific duty
 - a) So for example, James tells us that the elders are to pray for the sick, and anoint them with oil
 - b) That is fairly specific - but the part about the oil is not
 - (1) Is it used medicinally?
 - (2) Is it used topically?
 - (3) Is it used spiritually?
 - (4) No mention. So we have some freedom there about its use - as long as we do not slip into thinking the oil is somehow magical
 - (a) It is God that heals
 - (b) That is why we pray to Him and not the oil
 - 2. As I describe the specific things, hold the biblical model up against the current model in our church structure and I think you will see that they do not match
- II. We have two overarching functions for an elder, mentioned in Scripture
 - A. The first is managing
 - 1. Turn to 1 Timothy 3:4-5 (p. 1193)
 - a) An elder must manage his own family well - “if anyone does not know how to manage”
 - (1) This is the same Greek word
 - (2) 6 out of the eight uses in the Bible of this word, it has the sense of leading or managing - Rom 12:8; 1 Thes. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4,5,12; 5:17
 - b) But here is the thing, Paul use a different word when he ended the verse we just looked at - “how can he take care of God’s church”
 - (1) To understand what Paul was talking about with this word, I want you to turn to Luke 10:25-35 (p. 1040)
 - (2) When its says that the Samaritan “took care of him” and told the innkeeper to “look after him” - that is the same Greek word Paul used in 1 Timothy - by the way, the only three uses of the word in the NT
 - (a) The word carries the force of “to attend to or manage”

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2. So when we read 1 Timothy 3:5 - that an elder is to take care of, the picture of the Good Samaritan should pop into our minds
 - a) That is what Paul has in mind about managing God's church
- B. The second overarching function is shepherding
 - a) We talked about this in some detail two weeks ago from 1 Peter 5:1-4
 - b) I do want you to see Acts 20:28-30 (p. 1115)
 - (1) Paul is speaking to the elders from Ephesus
 - (2) He warns them that they are to be shepherds of God's flock
 - (3) Paul has the idea of protection in mind here because of false teachers
 - c) The general idea of a shepherd brings up lots of ideas of specific things a shepherd does - thankfully, the Bible gets a little more specific yet on what an elder does
- III. There are six tasks that the Bible talks about for elders
 - A. The first task for an elder is teaching Biblical truth
 1. This falls under both a managing/caring role as well as shepherding
 - a) Caring to make sure the sheep understand the truth of God's word
 - b) Shepherding because a shepherd drives the sheep to where there is proper food to eat
 2. It really stems from the great commission in Matthew 28
 - a) The disciples were to make disciples of all nations
 - b) And teach them all that Jesus had commanded them
 - c) Now, if you follow the history through:
 - (1) Just after Peter's big speech at Pentecost the new believers "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching"
 - (2) Then, when the Holy Spirit began doing radical things with the Gentiles in Antioch, Barnabas was dispatched to check it out. When he found it was of God, he and Paul taught the believers to remain true to God with all their hearts
 - (3) Then, on Paul's first missionary journey, they returned to the churches they established to "strengthen" and "encourage" the believers - little doubt teaching was involved
 - (4) Then, they established elders to carry on the teaching ministry in their absence - the passing of the baton
 3. "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." - Titus 1:9
 - a) This verse is at the end of the section on elders in Titus
 - b) First they must hold firmly to the message

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- c) And second they are to encourage other with sound doctrine (teaching)
- B. Our second task is modeling Christ-like behavior
 - 1. All of us know that teaching is only as good as the life of the person teaching
 - a) If you have a scrawny little guy that can hardly lift 50 lbs over his head opening up a weigh lifting gym for the purpose of training olympic weight lifters for competition - how seriously are people liable to take him?
 - (1) They are probably going to be laughed at (sort of like David vs Goliath)
 - (2) Give me the guy that can beach press a truck
 - b) The same is true with someone that is living a sinful lifestyle
 - (1) Don't be telling me how to live
 - (2) You need to get yourself straightened out
 - (a) And btw, we are talking about lifestyle
 - (b) NOT made a mistake, or doesn't realize what they are doing is sin
 - (c) There can be honest mistakes, but on the whole, their life should match their teaching
 - c) Look up these verses with me
 - (1) 1 Thess. 2:10-12 (p. 1187)
 - (2) 1 Tim. 4:12-13 (p. 1194)
 - (a) The pattern in each of these is model first, then teach
 - d) Check out Paul in 1 Cor. 11:1 "Follow my example as I follow the example of Christ."
 - (1) Bold statement
 - (2) Imitate me as I imitate Christ
 - 2. This is a great reason why Paul's list of qualifications focuses on character and not skills
 - a) The model you set out there speaks volumes
 - b) It will only enhance your teaching
- C. The third task is maintaining doctrinal purity
 - 1. This is certainly an extension of biblical teaching
 - 2. The first time we run across the example of this in scripture is Acts 15
 - a) The apostles and the elders at Jerusalem met to deal with the doctrinal dispute about whether Gentile converts had to follow the law to become Christians
 - (1) The elders were involved in the discussion and the decision making

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3. We see elders again being encouraged to hold the line on doctrine in Acts 20:30-31 (p. 1115)
 - a) They were to “be on their guard” because people from among them would crop up and distort the truth
4. We see the role of doctrinal purity handed off to the elders in no uncertain terms in Titus 1:9 (p. 1200)
 - a) Not only are they to encourage others with sound doctrine
 - b) They are to refute those that oppose it
5. Turn back one book to 2 Timothy 2:23-26 (p. 1198)
 - a) “opponents must be gently instructed”
 - b) So in this refuting of false teaching, elders are still supposed to be gentle in how they refute impure doctrine
6. So Paul tells us in no uncertain terms that “They (false teachers) must be silenced...” - Titus 1:11
 - a) Paul even gives us how - turn to Titus 3:10-11 (p. 1201)
 - b) One warning, and then a second
 - (1) After that, time to part company
 - (2) Because that false teaching will spread like a disease if it is allow to remain
7. I found a wonderful quote online for people that think that doctrine is not a big deal, and Christianity really is doing - serving - being merciful - etc.
 - a) It is from the Gospel Coalition and it says, “Christianity is MUCH more than getting your doctrine right. But not less.”
 - b) In other words
 - (1) If you think sitting around and being right is all God cares about, you have another thing coming
 - (2) God expects you to be busy about kingdom work, helping the poor, reaching out to the broken hearted, healing wounds in this world of sin
 - (3) But to reduce Christianity down to doing alone and forgetting about the doctrine is not possible
 - (a) I have told you many times and I will tell you again
 - (b) Doctrine (or right teaching) drives behavior (or right practice)
 - (c) If you have wrong doctrine, you will have wrong practice
- D. The fourth role that elders have is discipline of believers
 1. So I described the household model previously, and in it we described the elders as fathers of the church - the sacrificially love, give and protect their families - including setting the spiritual temperature
 - a) So just as good parents discipline their children

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- b) So too, good elders will discipline their “children” - the members in their church
- 2. The Bible describes their role as one of admonishing
 - a) Admonishing is one of those words I think we throw around like we know what it means, and really we don't
 - b) It means: to express warning or disapproval in a gentle but earnest manner
 - (1) So people that wave their hands furiously at you on the road, trying to not get you to continue down that path because they know the road is washed out are admonishing you
 - (2) They are earnestly yet gently trying to get you to change your behavior
 - (3) Not gently would be jumping in the hood of the car and trying to yank the wheel while you are driving, or feigning an injury like you hit them
 - c) 1 Thess. 5:12 “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.”
 - (1) He doesn't use the term elder, but I think “who are over you in the Lord” is pretty obvious who he is talking about
 - (2) What are they doing in this verse - admonishing
 - (a) Gently yet earnestly pleading with you to change course
- 3. The Bible goes a step further as well - turn to Galatians 6:1-2 (p. 1171)
 - a) “You who live by the Spirit” - could be a euphemism for elders - or it could just be those walking right with God
 - (1) How do they restore - gently
 - (2) But notice that this was a job for more than one person
 - (a) It is in the plural
 - (b) Spiritual restoration is not a job for one person - because of the possibility to falling into sin as well
 - b) You could look at this as a biblical intervention
- 4. However, there are also personal matters that need to be dealt with, and Jesus gave us how to deal with those things in Matthew 18
 - a) Go and talk one on one
 - b) If that does not work, take a two or three with you
 - c) If that still does not work, turn them over the church
 - (1) Now at the time of Jesus, the word church did not necessarily have the same meaning we think of it today
 - (2) It meant gathering or assembly
 - (3) The word came to be used of the church

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- d) So in context, Jesus may have envisioned the leadership of the church
 - (1) There is no proof positive of that because the elders in their NT form were yet to appear as well
 - (2) However, if Galatians 6 is any indication, spiritual intervention is a job for the “spiritual”
 - (a) Not to mention it is always better to have fewer hands that are spiritual touch a sticky situation than to have many hands that are not
 - (b) The best practice I have seen is after the elders have labored long and hard to try to bring someone out of sin, they eventually bring that person’s name before the church and simply tell the church that this member has a sin in their life they refuse to see as sin or repent of, and they are no longer a member
- 5. It is outside of the scope of this sermon to deal with discipline the way it deserves - We will deal with this issue in much greater detail in the future
- E. The fifth role of an elder is overseeing finances
 - 1. The very first time, chronologically we see the elders mentioned in the Bible it has to do with a financial matter
 - a) Paul and Barnabas were to bring the money collected to help the church in Jerusalem to the elders
 - b) While Scripture is not explicit in this, we can make a reasonable inference that the elders were charged with the task of making sure the donation from the church in Antioch and perhaps elsewhere, were distributed equitably to those in need
 - 2. The other time that finances and elders are mentioned is when an overseer excels at preaching or teaching and they are worthy of “double honor”
 - a) Obviously, this needed to be handled in a fair manner
 - b) Scripture does not supply the details on this, but if the elders are dealing with equitable and fair distribution to the poor, it seems likely that they would handle how financially “double honor” would take for an elder that excels at preaching and teaching
 - c) Paul was a great example of being financially accountable in his practices
 - (1) He gave up his “right” to payment sometimes
 - (2) He had others handle the money from the church in Corinth so no one could accuse him

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- (3) He told the Ephesian elders that he never “coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing”
- F. The last role of an elder is praying for those that are sick
 1. You can see how this fits nicely under the shepherding role
 - a) Shepherds would have to attend to the injured or sick sheep in their flock
 - b) And this is what elders are asked to do - any time someone calls for the elders to come and pray with them, regardless the type of illness, the elders are to respond
 2. We went into a detailed explanation of this early in this series, so I will not review it all here - check out the first sermon in this series for a full explanation
- IV. So, the opening question becomes the closing question - do we have a board or office that functions this way?
 - A. Other than the pastor, we have no single office in the church that does all of these things
 1. The problem with that is it turns the pastor into a king
 2. And while I am the 19th cousin, four times removed from Queen Elizabeth, I don’t want to be king!
 - B. It brings up another concept we have not gone over much which is eldership should be a plurality - there should be more than one elder
 1. It brings different perspectives
 2. It brings accountability
 3. It brings a group instead of a dictator
 - a) And for the cynical among us that think “a group can be just as authoritarian as a an individual”
 - b) I point you back to the character of an elder
 - (1) If the church takes it’s time to seek men of high quality character
 - (2) Not just seeking a warm body, not just seeking popular people
 - (3) The risk is very low of authoritarianism

CONCLUSION: My hope is in this section on the role of an elder, that we begin to see what an elder does. Also, I hope we see that we do not have an office of this type. The centrality of having one office that handles each of these details of the church only helps the church in the long run, because it provides the church with an office that genuinely cares for the church body. The question would be, how does this office fit into our present governmental set up. The answer will be for a different day.