

# In Search of Shepherds - The Groundwork

INTRO: This morning we begin a new series which will have us digging for answers in the Bible about the idea of eldership. Generally speaking, when a discussion of how to govern the church comes up, I can watch as people's eyes glaze over, and they begin to check out mentally.

It really doesn't have to be that way. For two main reasons. First, this is a doctrine that I believe is very solidly set in Scripture, but it is kind of hidden. It takes some work to dig it out. And that makes it exciting, because we get the joy of discovery along the way.

Second, who runs the church is of vital importance to a church. Understanding God's design for the people that will have oversight of your spiritual life (Hebrews 13:17 "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.") If they are working toward your growth and depth in Christ, and because they are charged with this as men that have to give an account (a strong responsibility), it might make sense that we pay attention to who it is that fills these roles in our lives.

In fact, the title of this series comes from 1 Peter 5:1-2. (Please turn there) The elders are charged with being shepherds to God's flock. This is one of the roles of an elder. And so, as we begin this study, keep this in mind that what we are really searching for is leaders that will care for us the way a shepherd cares for the sheep.

TRAN: In order to get us rolling here, we will need to lay a little ground work as to how we will achieve this study. There are several ways that we can attack a study about church government. Having studied this at Moody Bible Institute years ago, read books in intervening years, I have seen a variety of approaches. Most of them, quite frankly were a complete snooze, and offered little in way of definitive answers about a biblical form of government.

The best method I have found, and the one that has convinced me of eldership as the biblical form for the church is by doing a chronological study which looks for supra-cultural principles.

## I. Sociology class 101

- A. I know it has probably been many years for some of you since you have put on your sociological hats, or sat through a sociology class
- B. Supra-cultural principles means principles that are true for all cultures, at all times, everywhere
  1. The principles will translate into every culture in the world - regardless of location, or time

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2. So, for example, Christianity IS (or at least it should be) a supra-cultural religion
  - a) Christianity can translate into every culture across the globe
  - b) The principles at the heart of our faith are true for every person, and people group on earth
  - c) And the beauty of Christianity is that within that supra-cultural framework, there is still latitude for freedom of expression
    - (1) So, for example, even within the United States, we have a variety of ways in which we worship God
      - i) Some places clap their hands, others raise their hands, others are more quiet and introspective, some use classical sounding music, others modern sounding music, some use the arts - visual, film, photography
      - ii) But the supra-cultural principle is still the same - worship goes to the One true God and to Him alone - the expression of worship is left fairly open by Scripture
    - (b) I have been in Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica
      - i) In each of them, dance was used during a church service
      - ii) For some Christians in the US, that is akin to sin in the camp (and it shouldn't be) - it is simply a different cultural expression
- C. So as we talk about eldership, and how the church is run, we will run into similar things
  1. There will be principles of how the church is to be run, especially who is running it
  2. There will also be latitude in how some of those principles are played out
    - a) I'll give you a biblical example early on which we will see quickly in the study - the title given to the leaders of the church
    - b) In one place Paul calls the leaders of the church "elders"
    - c) In another he calls them "overseers"
    - d) These are not two different groups, but two different titles for the same group - there is a reason for the different titles which we will get into in the study
- II. Our methodology will be to look for answers in three ways
  - A. We will look at the biblical perspective
    1. In other words, what do we find in the Bible to answer our questions
    2. That will mean we will look mostly at the book of Acts, and the NT letters

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3. The Bible is, of course, our primary source to shape our theology - all the other perspectives take a back seat to Scripture
  - B. Second, we will look historically - at church history
    1. The greatest contribution history often makes is to help us see mistakes from the past, and how to avoid or correct them
  - C. Finally, we will look culturally
    1. This is where we see more the “on the ground” outworking of the principles
- III. The formation of the church
- A. Turn to Acts 2:36-41 - here we have the beginning of the church
    1. Peter preaches a long sermon, the Holy Spirit convicts the hearts of many who listen to the sermon
    2. And then 3000 people repent and receive the Holy Spirit
  - B. It brings up a question that we often don't explore - that is what is meant by church
    1. The Greek word is *ekklesia* - it simply means gathering or assembly
      - a) We know that is not what the biblical authors had in mind at all times because they would use the term to describe Christians that were gathered together, AND Christians that were scattered about a community (in their homes, working, shopping, etc)
    2. The term church came to be used of this group of Christians specifically
    3. But now, does every time the Bible refers to the church does it mean all Christians? Does it mean Christians in a specific location? Does it mean a group of churches?
      - a) The answer: Yes!
      - b) It can mean all of these
        - (1) In fact, of the 102 times the word church is used in the Bible, 20 of these refer to the church universal (mostly in Ephesians)
        - (2) The other 82 times it refers either to a group of churches or a specific local church
  - C. I bring all of this up about the church, because we need to understand that 80% of the time the Bible talks about the church, it is referring to local churches
    1. And these local churches needed to be led by someone
    2. And that someone as we will see as we continue this journey is elders from among them
- IV. Chronological study of elders in the NT
- A. We just looked at the formation of the church in the Bible
    1. That event took place around 33 AD

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2. How many years do you think it took before we had our first mention of the term “elder” after the church was formed?
  - a) I’ll give you a hint it is in the double digits
  - b) From the day Peter preached the sermon at Pentecost, the 3000 got saved, and the church was born, it took Luke (the author of Acts) about 12 years before the term “elder” ever surfaced in reference to a church leader

## B. Allow me to give you the background

1. After the church was born, we have some famous stories in Acts
  - a) Peter healing a lame beggar, Peter and John in front of the Sanhedrin (Jewish ruling body), and Ananias and Sapphia
2. We pick up the story in Acts 6:1-6
  - a) What just happened is the Hellenistic Jews (those born outside Israel, that had more Greek mannerisms and customs than Jewish - yet were Jews by blood), they were upset because their widows were being overlooked as food was distributed by the Hebraic Jews (full blood, born in Israel, etc.)
  - b) So what was the solution to the problem - tell me - The Hellenistic Jews chose seven men from among themselves to make sure that the Hellenistic Jewish widows would not be overlooked
3. Later in chapter 6 and all through chapter 7 we have the stoning of Stephen - one of the Hellenistic Jews (one of the deacons - that was just put into office)
4. At the beginning of chapter 8 it says something significant - “On that day”
  - a) What day?
  - b) The day Stephen was stoned
5. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.”
  - a) So it becomes “open season” on the Christians
  - b) But the question we face is who is in view when it says “all”
    - (1) Can’t mean all or why would the apostles stay in Jerusalem? Who would they have to teach and lead?
    - (2) It seems the likeliest solution is it was the Hellenistic Jews - which would include the other six deacons (including Philip)
      - (a) The reason I say this is because the Hebraic Jews, while probably facing some level of persecution were probably “safer” than the Hellenistic Jews - so less harm came to them

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- (b) This would explain why the apostles did not feel the need to scatter at this time
  - (c) It would also explain why the next story in chapter 8 is about who? Philip!
6. “That’s all great, Pastor Keith. Why do we care?”
- C. Here is why you care - go back to Acts 6:5
- 1. Who is the last man named? Nicholas
  - 2. Where is he from? Antioch
  - 3. Turn to 11:19 “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.”
    - a) Those who were scattered travelled as far as Antioch
      - (1) Could this be Nicholas?
      - (2) Perhaps - but it is obviously someone scattered after the persecution
    - b) Now, preaching was only to the Jews at first, but eventually some guys broke ranks and preached to the Gentiles as well - and God blessed it
    - c) Let’s read the rest of the story - Acts 11:20-30
      - (1) God blessed this gathering of believers in this mostly Gentile town so much that it eventually reached the church in Jerusalem (notice, a reference to a specific local church)
      - (2) They dispatched Barnabas to check it all out and found all was well - this really was God at work
      - (3) Next he goes to get Paul, and Paul comes for a year and builds into the disciples (notice the term disciples is used for the church) there
        - (a) In fact, the first time the term Christians (little Christs) was ever used was of these believers in Antioch
  - 4. Here is where it all comes together, Agabus the prophet shows up and predicts a famine in the Roman world
    - a) These new disciples of Christ all stand up to help as they were able
    - b) And read verse 30 again - they sent it to the church in Jerusalem - to “the elders”
      - (1) This is the first reference to local church leaders in the book of Acts
      - (2) And these church leaders are called elders
      - (3) It has taken 12 years for the church form, but we now have our first sign of how the church organized itself by having elders

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- (a) The one thing we do not know is when these elders were appointed
  - i) More than likely it happened after the appointing of the seven to help with food distribution
  - ii) I say that because the apostles were still exercising direct control when they were appointed
  - iii) The appointment would have been fairly early in church history - probably on or before 35 AD
- (b) The other thing that Scripture does not tell us is who selected or appointed the elders in Jerusalem
  - i) Again, we can only speculate
  - ii) However, given the manner in which Matthias was chosen at the beginning of Acts to replace Judas, and how the seven were chosen to serve the widows, it seems as if they would have used similar approaches to appointing elders
    - (1) Establish some criteria for selection
    - (2) And have a divine check and balance
  - iii) With that said, it seems as if the apostles would have appointed the first elders for the church in Jerusalem
- (c) What criteria would they have used to select the elders?
  - i) Again, unknown - Paul would not codify the qualifications for elders for another 30 years or so
  - ii) However, given the arrival of the Holy Spirit, and the many lessons learned with Christ, we can surmise that the apostles could establish some solid qualifications - just like they did with the deacons in Acts 6

## V. Enter James - the first elder

- A. We know that James, Jesus brother was a prominent leader in the church in Jerusalem
  - 1. Acts 15:6; 13 - James is not an apostle, so that only leaves elder
- B. James also wrote a very famous and popular letter that we all know and love as the book of James
  - 1. Given the content of the letter it is generally accepted as being written close to the time of this famine that Agabus predicted is coming
  - 2. Think about what James says, "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food...If you wish them well and to be kept warm and do nothing, what good is it."
  - 3. Seems to fit nicely in that timeline
- C. James gives us the first major responsibility of an elder: prayer and healing ministry

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1. James 5:13-16
  - a) James is writing to Jewish people scattered among the nations
  - b) At this time, there were churches already in existence which had elders.
    - (1) We are never told how these churches are founded or the leaders appointed
2. So James directs believers to call for the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil
  - a) So there are a series of questions that crop up with this
  - b) First, what kind of sickness should the elders be called for?
    - (1) Given the words used in the passage, James is not limiting what kind of illnesses the elders should be called for
      - (a) It could be physical, psychological, spiritual, or even psychosomatic (meaning you are ill because of stress, pressure or strain due to life circumstances)
      - (b) Whatever the case may be, believers should feel free to call on the elders for prayer
  - c) Second, how does the sickness relate to sinful attitudes or behavior?
    - (1) James addressed several sinful behaviors and attitudes in the letter
    - (2) Sin can have a negative affect on us physically
    - (3) This is why James says, "If they have sinned...confess"
      - (a) You have heard that confession is good for the soul
      - (b) It is good for the body as well - in some cases
      - (c) And, by the way, that "If" is a very important word because it means not all illness is a result of sin
        - i) Illness CAN BE a result of sin
        - ii) But it is not necessarily true that it is a result of sin
  - d) Third, does James guarantee healing for all illness if the elders pray in faith?
    - (1) NOWHERE in Scripture are we promised healing from all sickness
      - (a) Paul was not healed of his "thorn in the flesh"
      - (b) Paul left Trophimus in Miletus when he was sick
        - i) Do we think Paul forgot to pray for healing?
        - ii) Do we think Paul did not have enough faith in either situation?
    - (2) The best way to understand this is "the prayer offered in faith" is faith in the goodness and sovereignty of God
      - (a) Faith that God is good and desires the best for His people

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- (b) Faith that in His sovereignty, He knows what is best, far better than we do for ourselves
- e) Fourth, the healing ministry James is directing the elders toward is for the benefit of the believer
  - (1) Jesus ministry of healing was for the benefit those He healed, certainly, but it authenticated His message, and His identity
  - (2) Paul and the other apostles - their acts of healing authenticated the Gospel
  - (3) What James is talking about is not authenticating the elders, it is simply for the benefit of the believer
- f) Finally, anointing with oil
  - (1) To be honest, scholars are not certain why this is there
    - (a) They know that oil was used for medicinal purposes
    - (b) They also know that it was used for sacramental purposes
    - (c) Which reason is James calling for it's use? We don't know for sure
  - (2) Can we use it today, even without fully understanding it's purpose?
    - (a) Sure can
    - (b) It's simply a symbol back to our obedience of God's Word
  - (3) Is there anything special about the oil that brings healing?
    - (a) Nope!
    - (b) In fact, in this one section, verses 13-18, prayer is mentioned in every verse
    - (c) It is the prayer, and the faith in the One who heals that holds the power
    - (d) Grammatically, the anointing is actually a particle and subordinate to the prayer
  - (4) Should we anoint with oil when the elders are called for prayer - absolutely, because we are following God's Word
    - (a) Not because the oil makes the experience magical or supernatural in any way
    - (b) It is God that heals, we simply trust in His power

## VI. Review - so what have we learned today about eldership

- A. We have seen that, somewhere between the beginning of the church around 33 AD and the famine that was to take place in Jerusalem
  - 1. Churches had been established in Jerusalem, and throughout Samaria, and even into the Gentile world like in Antioch
  - 2. And somewhere in that time elders were established in the church in Jerusalem - most likely by the apostles



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- B. One of those elders was James, the brother of Jesus - a prominent leader of the church in Jerusalem
  - 1. James wrote a book to those scattered abroad - probably a reference to those scattered after the stoning of Stephen
  - 2. In that book, James gives us the first responsibility of elders - prayer and healing ministry - perhaps it would be better to say prayer for healing ministry
- C. Each week we will continue to march through the timeline and add a little bit more about what the Bible tells us about the leaders of the church known as the “elders”