
The Biblical Model for Leadership

Acts 20:17-38; 1 Peter 5:1-11

Introduction Tonight we continue our series on church governance. Last week Pastor Dale began the series with a look at authority in the church and this week we will be looking at the model of governance we use here at the Chapel.

I would like to make one brief comment before we jump into our study to help put our study in perspective. We place a high value here at the Chapel on what in theological circles is called “church polity” or the way we understand the structure and order of church body life. You’ve heard Pastor Russ talk about the third way. And that more than applies to this issue of church governance. What you are hearing from us in these weeks through March is very unique to the chapel. While we talk about elder rule -- because the word “rule” is used in the scriptures in reference to the elders -- you will not hear us describe our view that way because of the baggage associated with some who believe that to “rule” is to “dictate” and to be “authoritarian”. That is not us. And, you will not hear us describe our understanding of church governance as “elder led” which is a view that in Calvinistic, non-Presbyterian circles is getting a lot of traction. For those of you theologues who like to study these things... and for those of you considering the possibility of desiring the office of a bishop who are researching and studying... “elder led” describes the view being propagated by 9Marks, the ministry of Mark Dever and Capitol Hill Baptist in Washington. “Elder led” is another form of congregationalism in which elders who’ve been appointed or hired by the congregation lead the ministry of the church. Much as we appreciate the 9Marks ministry, we are not that either. That is down the other slope from what has been traditionally called “elder rule”. Our view of church governance is just that, “elder governance”.

I wanted to point this out from the start because you’re hearing a lot of information being downloaded in a very short four-week time span on our view of the structure of ministry and it’s helpful to know where we’re headed. At the end of this series, there will be a Q & A forum on the evening of April 2, which may also prove helpful as we think through and discuss this issue.

Review

In beginning our study of the model of governance, we must begin where we began last week. So for a quick review, here is where we have been. In Ephesians 1 we found that **Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church**. Jesus is Sovereign Lord over the church. He, and He alone rules the church. As the Lord of the church, Christ is both **the Head of the Church** and **the Builder of the Church**. The Scriptures tell us that the Lord will build His church upon the rock of the apostolic affirmation of His deity and sovereignty.

And not only is Christ the Lord of the church, but he is **the Chief Shepherd of the church**. The New Testament texts are clear that Jesus Christ is the great, Chief Shepherd of the church. This is not merely a theoretical statement, but a blessed reality in the church. Christ physically, in real time and real space from the heavenlies, shepherds His people.

It is through **the Scriptures** and the elders to whom the scriptures have been entrusted through **the apostles**, that Christ, the Chief Shepherd, **mediates his authority** over His people. We submit ourselves in obedience to the scriptures as though Christ had spoken the Words Himself because Christ rules His church through the scriptures.

Even though there is a spiritual **equality** that we have before God in **the priesthood of the believer**, there are differing roles and responsibilities among believers. While all of us have direct access to God as a community of priests, we do not all have the same function. While the work of the ministry of the church is to be done by ALL of its members, that work of the ministry has various and differing responsibilities.

Our equality before God does not depend upon function. As we will see in a few moments, Christ has given differing gifts and abilities to the various members of his flock... and it is those gifts and abilities that determine the differing roles within equality.

God has given certain men to the church in order to equip, **lead**, have charge over the church and to speak the Word of God. God has intended the authority structure of the church to be patterned after the subordination within the equality of the Trinity. Authority and subordination, despite what some may claim, do not deny equality.

Further, **the church does not operate by democracy, but by theocracy.** The Bible's model is that of a theocracy, and this theocracy is not merely confined to the Old Testament, where we are traditionally used to relegating that thought. Christ, the Lord of the church, shepherds and governs His people through His Word. As the Chief Shepherd, Christ, through His Word, has assigned the governing of the church to a body of qualified men who are accountable to God and yet are subject to the discipline and censure of the corporate body, Christ's church.

Three primary leadership "words"

Contrary to the claims of many in our evangelicalism, the Bible does not leave us to establish a form of church governance on our own. And also contrary to claims of many in our evangelicalism, there is a clear and particular model of church leadership and governance being articulated and established in the scriptures.

There are three primary words that show up in Scripture, throughout the New Testament especially, that convey Christ's design for church leadership. And we're going to spend the majority of our time this evening looking at these three primary words. And as an aside, we are going to look at just a few texts this evening. There are many more texts than we have time for. I have included some other texts that we will not get to in the manuscript, and those texts will be available with the manuscript online later this week.

There are two texts that I want us to look at this evening. Even though they don't speak to all of what the scriptures say about church governance, they provide much of the model. And interestingly enough, both passages include or allude to all three words, so that there is no mistaking these three words are helping to provide a composite profile of what the church leadership "looks like".

Acts 20: Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian elders

Our first passage is Acts 20:17-35 (ESV):

At this point in the early church, few of the early church plants were as strong as the one at Ephesus. Acts tells us that Paul labored two years at this church in what is now southwestern Turkey, then known as Asia Minor. Paul wasn't alone. Apollos, Aquila, and Priscilla spent time in Ephesus with Paul. This church did not lack for great leadership. Timothy later was a leader in this church. And even later, we find John leading this church and the entire Asia Minor region.

Paul's ministry, along with Apollos and Aquila and Priscilla resulted in this statement in chapter 19, verse 20: the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. So much so, that the gospel's impact reached beyond the church into the community, effectively cutting into the lucrative enterprise that dominated the town, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Diana. Because of the gospel, the Ephesians riot. Paul is now a marked man so he leaves Ephesus, travels through Macedonia and Greece visiting other church plants, and eventually plans to get back to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost. In sailing back to Jerusalem, Paul makes one last stop in Asia Minor... but he doesn't go to Ephesus, where showing his face would probably delay things enough that he would miss Pentecost. He stops in the seaport town of Miletus, about 36 miles to the south of Ephesus, and calls for the church leaders of Ephesus to give them the farewell he apparently had had no time for so soon after the riot.

There is no shortage of drama here. Paul has spent two years of blood, sweat, and tears with these leaders. Paul and these leaders know that he will never see them again. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem, either to be killed or, as Paul hopes, to end up in Rome. Paul, and Luke is chronicling this along the way, is intentionally tracing Christ's footsteps to a cross kind of death. The pattern here is that this gathering of the leaders together for a final charge is Paul's upper room experience. These leaders are hanging on Paul's every word... you could've heard a pin drop as Paul pours out his heart to these men... and here's how Luke describes it:

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called **the elders** of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ **serving the Lord with all humility** and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from **declaring to you** anything that was profitable, and **teaching you** in public and from house to house, ²¹ **testifying** both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit **testifies** to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and **the ministry** that I received from the Lord Jesus, to **testify** to the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about **proclaiming the kingdom** will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I **testify** to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from **de-**

claring to you the whole counsel of God.²⁸ **Pay careful attention** to yourselves and to all **the flock**, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to care for **the church of God**, which he obtained with his own blood.²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing **the flock**;³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away **the disciples** after them.³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to **admonish** everyone with tears.³² And now I **commend you to God and to the word** of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel.³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands **ministered** to my necessities and to those who were with me.³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by **working hard** in this way we must **help the weak** and **remember the words** of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, **'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'**"

In this dramatic farewell to the leaders of the Ephesian church, Paul uses, or alludes to, all three of the primary words describing church leadership in the New Testament. Verse 17: Paul called "the **elders**" of the Ephesian church to come to him at Miletus. In verse 28, Paul refers to these elders as "**overseers**". And, verses 28 and 29 mention "the flock", implying that Paul believes these **elders** and **overseers** to be "**shepherds**". One last time, Paul gathers the elders, who are the overseers and shepherds of the Ephesian church, and reminds them of who he has been for them and to them in their church and his summons is for them to follow his pattern. In Paul's absence, they are to commit themselves to the same ministry. They are **to serve** the Lord with all humility in the ministry of the Word and they are **to guard** the flock (It's interesting to note that "serve" and "guard" were the function of the priests in the ministry of the word in the tabernacle and is part of the commission to Adam to work and keep or guard the garden).

1 Peter 5

Before we look at what that serving and guarding looks like in these primary words, there is another passage I want to consider. Keep your finger in Acts 20, and turn to 1 Peter 5. The similarities are so striking between these passages, especially with the flow and nuance of Peter's thought, I've become convinced that this is a parallel passage to Acts 20. We have no record of Peter actually being in the room at Miletus, but it is clear, I think, given what he says here in chapter 5, that he was familiar with Paul's last charge to the Ephesian elders. In fact, some theologians believe 1 Peter 5 to be Peter's own farewell address to the elders under his watchcare. Like Paul's address, Peter's context is under duress. He bleeds all over this epistle concerning Christ's cross and suffering for Christ's sake. He finishes chapter 4 with this: "Let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good." Immediately, he then says...

¹ So I exhort **the elders** among you, as a fellow **elder** and a **witness** (think of the word testify in Acts 20) of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: ² **shepherd the flock** of God that is among you, exercising **oversight**, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your **charge**, but be-

ing **examples to the flock.** ⁴ And when **the chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to **the elders.** Clothe yourselves, **all of you,** with **humility** toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ⁶ **Humble** yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, ⁷ casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. ⁸ Be sober-minded; **be watchful.** Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking **someone** (the flock) to devour. ⁹ **Resist** him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. ¹⁰ And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Like Acts 20, all three primary words are here in 1 Peter 5... verse 1: I exhort “**the elders.** Verse 2: **shepherd the flock of God.** And also in verse 2: “exercising **oversight**”. Like Paul, Peter addresses elders who are shepherds in oversight over God’s people, Christ’s flock.

There is a lot of speculation as to what was going on in Peter’s life when he wrote this. If church historians are correct, Peter was dead within two years of writing this, crucified upside down by Nero. But, speculation aside, given what Peter writes here in 1 Peter, not only has he been witness to Christ’s sufferings, he fully expects to share in those sufferings... and he summons the elders to follow his example of **service** in humility while **guarding** the flock and ultimately to their own suffering for Christ’s sake.

Unfortunately tonight, we do not have the time to unpack all that we could unpack from these two passages or even these three primary words, but we’re going to give a short synopsis, with some observations about responsibilities.

Elder

Let’s turn back to Acts 20, while we keep 1 Peter 5 in our thoughts. Paul “called the elders of the church to come to him”. This isn’t the first mention of elders in Acts. We are first introduced to elders in Acts 11, where it is, quite remarkably mentioned in passing. They appear out of nowhere. Unlike the calling of the disciples and the setting aside of the deacons in Acts 6, elders are assumed to be part of the woodwork.

You’ll hear me say from time to time that it’s O-K to ask the question “where does this come from” as we study the scriptures. Rarely, if at all, do concepts or ideas in the text drop from the sky. Things in the text don’t happen in an historical vacuum. Usually if we do some digging we will find what seems like a new idea is actually an old idea that has been transformed in the New Covenant because of the cross and resurrection. This is true of this word “elders”. Where did it come from?

The word, and all of the coloration of its meaning, are grounded in redemptive history. Not only do we find the word “elders” being used to describe the leaders of the synagogue system of the Old Testament era in which Christ was born and raised, the concept of elders reaches all the way back to Exodus 3 where Moses is instructed to gather the elders of Israel

together. Just like everything else in the Old Testament, we find elders ministering among the people as a shadow of what was to come in Christ and His church. In fact, a thorough study of elders and their role in the Old Covenant enhances and enriches our understanding of the way elders function here in our New Covenant setting. What we find, then, in the development of the church in the book of Acts, is an assimilation of this redemptive-historical pattern of elders into the church life.

The word elder, at its basic level, **stresses the maturity and dignity of a man**. In the eyes of others, this man should be a man of **spiritual maturity, experience, wisdom, authority, honor, and dignity**. I'll leave the qualifications to Russ and Dale in the coming weeks, but there is some debate as to whether or not there is a chronological age associated with the word elder. Neither the Old nor New Testaments give a specific age requirement, although a study of the entire canon shows that there is an expectation that elders need time to be wise and respected leaders. An elder does not have to be old in chronological age, but should be a man who is mature in character.

The word elder, speaks to a man's character and emphasizes "who" the leader is.

Overseer or Bishop

The second word is "**overseer**". Again, the most immediate use of the word overseer for the developing churches shortly after Christ ascended was an adaptation from their own context. The actual term overseer came from the Greek city-states and the designated civil **administrators** over them. It was a term used to refer to **governors** assigned to oversee a conquered city-state in the absence of the King. Often this term is translated, "**superintendent, governor, observer, guardian, or overseer.**" But again, while the term may have its place in Greek culture, its function is grounded in redemptive history. The concept of overseer is found in the word for tabernacle oversight (Num. 4:16), army officers (Numbers 31:14, 48), those in charge of the work of the house of the LORD (2 Chron. 24:12), temple watchmen (2 Kings 11:18), and city overseers (Neh. 11:9). And as you look at that list, what stands out is **the close proximity between oversight and the tabernacle and temple, the heart of Israel's worship.**

The title Bishop or Overseer emphasizes the elders' duty or function in **administrating** or **governing** the ministries of the church, the house of God.

Shepherd or Pastor

The third primary word used to describe the leaders that Christ has set over his church is **shepherd** or pastor. It's not too hard for those familiar with Jewish culture to understand the nature and origination of shepherd. And of these three primary words, it is probably the most familiar to us.

Originally it meant "one who takes care of sheep or goats_(Matthew 9:36)." And like elder and overseer, shepherd and its use in our New Covenant context is grounded in redemptive history.

Shepherds in Israel and the Ancient Near East were not viewed very highly. In fact, the connotations associated with shepherd would be a parallel in contrast with that associated

with the elders and overseers. Shepherds were a despised lot. Yet again and again, God sets himself as a shepherd of His people (Isaiah. 40:10-11; Ezekiel 34:31; Psalm 80:1). David, the Shepherd-King, epitomized this picture of antithesis in the Old Testament, pointing forward to Christ, the King who is the Shepherd of His people. Applied to those whom He gives to His church as leaders, **shepherds are a biblical composite of authority and leadership on the one hand with self-sacrifice, tenderness, wisdom, hard, menial labor, loving care, constant watchfulness, and lowly servanthood. As a shepherd the emphasis is on the elder's leading, feeding and care of the flock.**

Taken all together, in speaking of the leaders Christ has chosen to govern and care for His people, the elder, as one who has been recognized with wisdom and maturity, speaks to his **character**. Elder is **who he is**. The overseer, as one who superintends and governs with authority, speaks to his **office**. Overseer is **the position he holds**. And shepherd, as one who cares and feeds the flock of God as a humble servant, speaks to his **function**. Shepherd is **what he does**.

Elder governance

So what does this look like?

Christ has given elders to his church in order to mediate His shepherding and rule over His church. Here at the chapel, for the reasons I outlined earlier, we have chosen to avoid calling this oversight of God's flock "elder rule" or "elder leadership". Our preference is "elder governance". Christ mediates his authority through His Word, which he has entrusted to the elders. Elders are not to domineer, but to lead a submissive flock by example through the Word.

Plurality

Notice in this Acts passage the plurality. In verse 17, Paul "called **the elders** of the church to come to him." In verse 28, Paul says "**Pay careful attention** to yourselves and to all **the flock**, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**." This church is **not** the collective, invisible or universal church in Ephesus... which is how I was taught to read this passage when I was younger. It was an eye-opening experience to walk through these passages and understand that these plural words are being used for one singular, local church. All through the New Testament, the eldership is spoken of as a plurality. There was never the pastor (singular) of the church, nor elder (singular) of the church. It was always that there were elders (plural) who oversaw and shepherded the church (singular) together.

Function

Various words in the New Testament are used to describe the function of this oversight, some of which are inherent to the 3 primary words we have already studied. But there are two we should point out. The first is to **lead** or to **rule** (Acts 15:22, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7,17,24). This word can mean *to go before, to be a leader, to rule or command, to have authority over*. In the verb form it means to so influence others as to cause them to follow a recommended course of action or to give direction.

Elders, then, have been given by Christ to the church as ones who have the authority to lead the church. Elders are leaders with God-given authority to give direction to the church. They are never to use their authority to "lord" it over others (I Peter 5:3), but they must exercise authority to insure the church follows a Biblical direction. And I believe the ESV has this verse right... the ESV translates it "domineer". Too often there is an assumption made by some who read that verse as if Peter is saying elders are not to have authority over the flock. That is **not** what Peter is saying. This authority is not self-created... it is God-given. This authority is not exhaustive... it is in relation to the ministry of the Word as it is taught, preached, and practiced in the corporate body.

The other word that describes the function of this oversight is **to superintend** (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:4). This word can mean *to be over, to superintend, to preside over, to be a protector, a guardian, to give aid, to care for or give attention to*. This term refers to someone who stands before or in front of others. The literal meaning is to set or place before. When applied to a leader it refers to one who rules or presides over as a superintendent or guardian.

While it is true that all of us have some kind of relationship to the ministry of the word, taking care of each other, defending the gospel and one-anothering, there is a unique and different level of responsibility when it comes to the elders. It is not the role of the congregation to oversee, direct, and manage the affairs of the church, nor is it the role of the deacons or deaconesses...especially as it relates to the whole counsel of God in the ministry of the Word. It is the role of the elders.

While there is a larger list of responsibilities outlined in the whole of the New Testament, for time's sake I think I'll stick to our passage here in Acts 20 and leave the proof-texting of various passages for another time.

Conclusion

What is it that elders are to be doing? Why has Christ given elders to His church? What does it look like for Christ to entrust to men His Word through which he mediates His Shepherding of His flock? The general responsibilities are found here in Acts 20.

Elders are to:

Lead the flock by taking care of and keeping watch over the flock (Acts 20:28)

Feed the flock by proclaiming and teaching the gospel/whole counsel of God (Acts 20:20,21, 24-27)

Guard the flock by defending the gospel and protecting the flock from wolves (Acts 20:28-30)

Serve the flock in all humility by sacrificially giving our lives to and working hard for the flock (Acts 20:19, 34,35)

What can all of us be doing? While much of what has been stated tonight speaks of what has been relegated to men that Christ has set apart for the ministry of the Word in His church, let us keep in mind that our **equality before God does not depend upon function**. While there are differing functions, we function together as one body.

Response

Pray for us. The ministry of the word is hard work. It is difficult feeding the flock and dispensing the word in the mud and grime of life. The entrustment of the gospel is not a glam-

orous entrustment. We are broken vessels with lives shattered for the gospel. We need much, much prayer.

Serve with us. While the entrustment of the Word has been given to the elders, the ministry of the Word has been given to the entire church. All of us are to be about the task of serving and guarding in this garden we have been given called Clearcreek Chapel. Speaking the gospel as broken people into broken lives is not just the task of the elder, but is the mission of the church.

Grow with us. While Christ has qualified men to serve as his undershepherds, we have not arrived. Pastor Russ reminded us this morning that we are sojourners... and we are sojourners together.

Encourage us. Because the oversight of the ministry of the Word is a hard work, and because the enemy would have us be entangled with discouragement, you would be surprised at the impact of an encouraging word every now and then. “The” Word fitly spoken is like apples of gold on a platter of silver (Proverbs 25:11).

Suffer with us. In this ministry of the word, if the elders are laying down their lives for the sheep, there is suffering. Peter concludes his charge to the elders and their church with this: “¹⁰ ...after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you. ¹¹ To him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.”