

Shepherd the Flock

Implications and Applications of Changes in Eldership

1 Peter 5:1-5

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Introduction

Tonight, we want to pick up where we left off this morning by taking Acts 20 and drawing from it several succinct principles about biblical eldership. Then we will briefly consider 1 Peter 5:1-5 and move onto discussing upcoming changes in the eldership at the Chapel. We can move our minds back to this morning's work by reconsidering Acts 20:28 and a short comment on this passage from Richard Baxter, a puritan pastor of pastors. Acts 20:28 *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.* Baxter states this:

*Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for them, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labor? Did I come down from heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost; and wilt thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is thy labour and condescension as to mine? I debased myself to this, but it is thy honour to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and I was willing to make thee a co-worker with me, and wilt thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?'*¹

With this biblical motivation in mind, let's consider several principles from the text this morning:

1. **The work of the elder is always first and foremost word and gospel centered.** Anything that displaces his attention from this must be biblically dealt with.
2. **The work of the elder is courageous, even unto death.** Eldership is high stakes work. Risk of all types is involved, including physical, emotional, and spiritual. The work will require guts – but not the kind of guts we find in the world. Guts that are based on a trust in God and held together by faithful coworkers.
3. **An elder is not biblically fulfilling his role if his ministry duties prevent him from remaining qualified for eldership.** God's commands to his children are never in conflict with each other. An elder must remain qualified to continue his work. Pastoral duties are never an excuse for neglect of one's own household or relationships.
4. **The elder is accountable before God for his work.** Elders are placed into position by the Holy Spirit and they are overseeing that which the Son of God's blood was spilled for.

¹ Baxter, R. (1646). *The Reformed Pastor*. pp.121-122. (see reprint by Epworth Press, 1939).

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5. **The people are dependent upon their elders for their spiritual nourishment and protection.** The elder's responsibility to his people is serious. There will be false teachers who attempt to draw sheep away – which is perilous. And it is the word of grace that elders faithfully preach and admonish with that secures believers' inheritance among those who are sanctified.
6. **The elder's work is ceaseless, intense, and full of vigilance.** We don't keep banker's hours. There is no clocking in and clocking out. And there is no checking in and checking out. An elder must be available to this people in a manner that promotes their own growth. And he must watch over his people as carefully as possible, understanding that the Satan, false teachers, and the world are continually vying for the believer's attention.
7. **The elder may not ignore his own spiritual good in the name of tending to his people's spiritual good, lest he bring harm to himself and those he serves.** An elder who thinks he has matured beyond his need for preaching and body life has "matured" beyond his time as an elder. He is puffed up or ignorant and represents a huge liability to the body he serves.
8. **The elder must counter unsound doctrine and those who would teach it in the church.** The Ephesian church eventually had a major problem with false teachers and the presence of unsound doctrine. Elders must be willing to risk peace, relationships, and reputation to maintain the purity of the teaching in a church. Nothing is more important than the teaching and preaching of sound doctrine to the body. To not watch over this doggedly is to assume that there is some other primary means by which God intends to accomplish his work in his people. Which there is not.
9. **The elder must guard himself against becoming corrupt by seeing his position as a means for gain of any sort.** When it comes to financial gain, our staff elders are at greater risk than our non-staff elders. There is a certain safety for the non-staff elder in that you are never doing it for the money. However, for all elders, there is a type of secondary gain that can become quite attractive. You are at the center – questions flow through you, decisions flow through you, authority flows through you. You are respected, you are sought out, you are up in front, you are congratulated and encouraged. An elder must be ever so careful that his position is never about gain, whether it be financial or about ego. And his brothers would do well to let him know if things seem to be drifting that direction.
10. **The elder must work hard in order that he might be able to give selflessly to his people.** An elder must arrange his life and his responsibilities in a manner that allows him to serve his people, especially the weak. This can play out in many ways, but the result must always be the same. One sees all life decisions in view of service to the church... that Christ shed his blood for and over which the Holy Spirit appointed me overseer. This is not a matter of duty, but of delight.
11. **The elder must do all of this not in arrogance or through domineering, but in humility.** We'll discuss this further in a moment – but be clear that there are many temptations for an elder to be everything but humble. Such great care must be giv-

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en that arrogance and impatience do not creep into an elder's dealings with his people.

There are eleven principles from Acts 20. Much more can be said and can be said in many different ways. I encourage all of you, but particularly those of you who are elders or aspire to eldership, to reflect further and frequently on this passage. It is unique for its comprehensiveness and its immediacy.

Peter on Eldership (1 Peter 5:1-4)

So this morning we considered Paul's example of eldership. Let's now consider Peter's comments in 1 Peter 5:1-4. In the midst of suffering for their faith, Paul calls his hearers to trust their faithful Creator and do good. Trust and obey. Trust and rest. Trust and work. With a confidence and certainty that is built upon the bookends of the entire church age, from Christ's death and resurrection to his return, Peter calls the elders to shepherd his flock. He does this with one command, three notes, and a promise. Let's read this passage together [1 Peter 5:1-4, pray]

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1 Command Tied Up in 3 Notes

Peter tells the elders he is writing to shepherd the flock exercising oversight. These are not complicated concepts. It involves the tending to, the watching over, the nourishing, the feeding, and providing for. Shepherds are responsible for the welfare of their sheep. So simply, elders must do whatever is biblically necessary to maintain and restore the spiritual health of their people. The word provides all we need to know in this undertaking. We do not walk into the work blindly. However, Peter, wise to men's tendencies, carefully fences this responsibility with further description. It comes to us as three notes.

Not under compulsion

An elder should never be one who is dragged into his position, nor should he be one who begrudgingly remains in his position. Desirousness is a qualification unto eldership. If you don't want to do it, you shouldn't be doing it.

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Not for shameful gain

We have already covered this from several angles, so I won't belabor it farther, but suffice it to say that a lack of eagerness in an elder may be a sign that he is in the position for the wrong reasons. Perhaps he is pursuing some kind of worldly gain and he is not experiencing it, so he is discouraged and remorse. An elder who serves from the desires of a pure heart and understands the purpose of his role, will be less likely to be discouraged when he is poorly compensated in either monies or attention.

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Not domineering over those in your charge

In general, how is an elder to exercise oversight? By ordering, demanding, commanding, and forcing issues? No. This is not the normative pattern of an elder. An elder should lead, firstly, by example, and then only when necessary, through exer-

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cise of his authority – which there is a clear place for (e.g. Hebrews 13:17, 1 Corinthians 5:2). Your flock should never feel bullied by you, but challenged by you because of the purity (not perfection) of your life. As an elder, you should be able to call your sheep to live as you do. And while you may never do this with words, it should happen all the time through your example. Note then, to be an example, your life must be visible to your sheep. The private practice of your faith is not a luxury you or your people can afford. If you find you must resort to domineering to move your people, it may be an indication that your example is failing to challenge them.

And a Promise

There is reward for elders who faithfully discharge their duty and it will occur when the great overshepherd, the Chief Shepherd, appears. Whatever the “crown of glory” is, we can be sure that it will last a very long time and that we will receive it before our King. Oh what a glorious thing that will be. If we pursue eldership for gain, it should be this type of gain – a crown, given by our King, earned for the purity of our practice as elders.

Changes in Eldership at the Chapel

So I want to shift gears now and wrap this evening up by sharing with you a number of the changes that have been made/are being made in the eldership. Some of these changes will seem merely conceptual to you and other, perhaps, more substantive. In any case, we want you to be aware of the changes and clarifications. I also want you to see shepherds before you who are committed to never stopping the change process. We are all well aware that in our eldering there remains much to be improved, and shaped, and rethought. As the Lord brings these things to light, we want very much to be those who are responsive and ready to let previous patterns and habits go with ease, in order that we might better serve God and his people.

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Re-expressing & Clarifying the Qualities Required in Elders

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Precipitating Circumstances

Part of what the original impetus was for planning this last retreat was to discuss the elder role as it currently functioned at the Chapel. I had made some observations that concerned me. I say “I” not to highlight my role, but because I don’t remember who else was having these thoughts or how exactly they were expressing them and I want to be sure not to misrepresent. The thought was along the lines of “elder burnout.” Elders were struggling to fulfill their roles. And we’ll talk more about that in a moment. As we started this discussion, however, it became clear that we needed to return to our basic biblical understanding of what an elder is and with that foundation laid, discuss what an elder should do. As a result, we have rewritten our core documentation about what the characteristics of an elder are.

Resulting Changes

We describe these characteristics as being Irreducible Qualities. To serve on the eldership of Clearcreek Chapel, the following must be demonstrated in a man:

A Teacher - Being *apt to teach* will be demonstrated in the man's ability to handle the Word with accuracy (get it right) and to deliver the Word with clarity (get it across). Such ability may be demonstrated in the pulpit through preaching, or in formal education such as ABE, the Antioch School, Children's Ministry, and Counseling Courses through teaching, or in crisis discipleship through the 1:1 ministry of the Word. Though the informal discipleship ministries that occur among the body for the encouragement and edification of individuals are important, they are not viewed as being qualifiers for aptness to teach.

A Shepherd - Having *an inclination and ability to shepherd* will be demonstrated in the man's desire and ability to engage people in Word-based ministry. Such activity will be seen in the caring and compassionate attitude demonstrated in texts such as 1 Thessalonians 1-2. A shepherd should be willing and able to become involved in the mess of other people's lives, bringing the Word to bear in a manner that extends beyond the academic to the engagement of people's hearts... an effectual and expressive affection and care for people. He must be ready to shepherd the flock, watch over souls, and be an example in all things (Hebrews 13, 1 Peter 5, John 10.)

A Godly Man - *A character qualified for leadership* will be demonstrated in the man's conduct, reputation and self-examination within the context of his home, vocation and ministry. The specific criteria can be found in passages like 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

A Unifier - He must prize the Chapel's distinctives in a way that *strengthens the unity among the elders* as demonstrated by the man's overt agreement and support of our positions on issues such as biblical counseling, plurality in eldership, a redemptive historical view of the Scriptures, church discipline, etc... Open and aggressive opposition to a position of the elders, a lack of submissiveness, or a divisive spirit are not commensurate with the spirit of one who works toward unity.

Desired Outcomes

We hope that by continually clarifying what we believe to be the biblical qualifications for eldership, the development and appointing of new elders at the Chapel will increasingly reflect what God has intended. In addition, it will serve as a standard that those aspiring to eldership can use to evaluate themselves for readiness and those that are serving as elders can use to evaluate themselves for eligibility for continued service.

Revising Requirements of Elder Role

Precipitating Circumstances

I mentioned earlier about the phenomena of “elder burnout.” To understand what I mean by that, let me remind you of how we generally think about the wise implementation of Scriptures at the Chapel. In many different areas of body life we recognize that God has explicitly stated his will. For example, we have already cited this evening 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 where qualifications of elders are clearly designated. Elders leading in the church should meet these qualifications or we can say that we are clearly outside the will of God.

There are however other instances in scripture which are less prescriptive. Take for instance, the issue of how elders are assigned duties in the church. The Bible gives us much information about this, but it stops short of putting in place a specific model for implementing at the local body level. So for example we know that an elder must be able to give instruction in sound doctrine. Does this mean he must preach? Or only teach? If he teaches but does not preach, where might the teaching take place? With children? With adults? With unbelievers? etc. We believe that in these areas, we have principles that we work within, but that there is freedom, governed by wisdom, in implementing various models. That is why many churches may recognize that the Bible calls for the presence of a plurality of biblically qualified elders, but then actually are organized somewhat differently. This is an area of wisdom.

All of this to say that our current *model* of eldership, though well within the scope of being biblical, seemed to creating a scenario in which the duties required of elders were exceeding their resources. Let me explain. Under our previous model, all elders were required to where three hats: a preaching/teaching hat, a flock leadership hat, and a ministry oversight hat. Therefore, I was responsible to oversee the youth ministry, administrate the elder team, shepherd SW flock, and regularly teach in Chapel ministries and fill the pulpit on occasion. This model has served the Chapel very well for many years. In fact, I believe it is one of the reasons that the Chapel enjoys a body which has always been characterized by maturing believers. But as the Chapel has changed and the eldership has changed, this model has begun to create a significant strain. Recognizing this, we endeavored to rethink our model while remaining committed to staying within biblical parameters and principles. Therefore, we are implementing the following changes.

Resulting Changes

Reduction in Required Areas of Activity – Each elder is no longer required to wear all three “hats” as we have previously done. While all elders will continue to do that which they are called by God to do, to oversee and to shepherd, they may only formally function under one of the three hats. So for example, an elder now has the freedom to preach or not. These decisions, of course, will always be made with the body’s best interests in mind – there is no need to worry about the pulpit being

empty one morning. Some men have gifts that enable them to excel in the pulpit and they will use those gifts to serve the church as God has called them to. This freedom will allow individual elders to focus on those areas in which they are gifted. Which brings us to our next point.

Elders Areas of Service will be Aligned with Giftedness – As the Bible clearly teaches, gifts are given for the service of the church. So, as gifts are recognized in individuals by the body, those gifts will be put to use for the church's good. This is how the body is best served. Among the elders, there should be no exception. Some thought has been given to this as we have assigned ministries and delegated responsibilities, but not enough thought. Going forward, we will intentionally and carefully consider a man's giftedness as consideration is given to how he will serve the church.

Proactively Developing and Nominating Men to Eldership – Our past practice in this area has been to leave this primarily to Russ. Because Russ is an ogre and dictated that things would be this way? No, not at all. We were primarily doing it that way because that's how it was done... if that makes any sense. It also is probably part of our growth trajectory as elders as we all strive to fully understand and implement plurality. I myself am quite blessed to be a product of Russ' discipleship and preparation for eldership. The result of this default practice, however, has been a limited pipeline. That is, only a few men in the developmental process at a time. In addition, we have not been terribly systematic at the Chapel in overtly calling men to and training men for eldership. Fortunately, much of this has already changed. First, all elders are fully aware of their freedom to identify, develop, and nominate men to the eldership. I have been regularly encouraging them to exercise this freedom since this past spring and it is already producing fruit. Secondly, the Antioch School, or BILD, is very much contributing to the building up of men for ministry and in the course of that work, men who are biblically qualified, are apt to teach, have a heart for shepherding, and who affirm the Chapel's doctrinal and ministry distinctive, are being developed and identified. We could only be so blessed as a church to have an eldership that is poised to grow.

Recognizing the Differing Needs and Resources of Staff and Non-Staff Elders – All elders, staff or non-staff work very hard in their ministry. This is part of who they are and what they do. We do need to recognize, however, that their differing levels of freedom for the work will require different types of support and considerations. Non-staff elders, like staff elders, now have an expense account that they can use to be reimbursed for certain activities, such as buying a book or going to a conference that is related to their role as an elder. In addition, future consideration will be given to a non-staff elders work load as "stage of life" issues arise or as unique circumstances come about. We have actually been moving toward this in practice for some time. We are at the point now, however, that we want to put it down in writing. So, for example, I am a new father. I have told the elders, and they have supported me, when I explained that this may represent a season during which I am not able to carry my usual load.

Desired Outcomes

It is our hope in making these changes that we will be creating a ministry model that further enables men to be all that God calls them to be in ministry for the Chapel. As I preached this morning, Paul sets an example that challenges elders to love the ministry of the gospel more than their very own lives. If we interpret that challenge as a certain volume of work or a certain breadth of work, we are totally missing the point and risk of becoming legalists. Running six ministries and working 80 hours a week does not a Paul-like elder make. Paul is calling shepherds to a certain condition of the heart, not of the calendar. Paul is calling overseers to a passion which so grips their hearts, that there is no limit to their sacrifice, a devotion that is measured in its depth, not in its breadth.

Without doubt, certain seasons in ministry will require every last fiber of strength and resolve in a man's being, but this should always be for the "testifying to the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24) and not for other reasons. And no season, whether light or heavy, should ever cause an elder to flirt with life patterns or practices that lead to disqualification. If it does, he is no longer engaged in gospel ministry, he is engaged in sin or foolishness, though he may need help seeing this. The significance of an elders work is measured by his faithfulness to his calling, not by the volume of things accomplished. We must not forget this.

As a church, I call you as the author of Hebrews does, to obey your leaders and to submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of not advantage to you (Hebrews 13:17). I believe the better you understand the biblical role of elders, the better you will be able to fulfill this command.

Elders, I call you to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2), laying down your life for your sheep (John 10:11), paying attention to yourself and the flock, while proclaiming and defending the gospel (Acts 20) in a way that brings God glory through your personal purity and your faithfulness in ministry.

Let's Pray.

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Conclusion

