

Completely Revised

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

Restoring the Eldership
to Its Rightful Place
in the Local Church

ALEXANDER STRAUCH



BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP
RESOURCES

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Preface

According to wise King Solomon: “Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh” (Ecc. 12:12). I would add, the making of revisions is truly wearying to the flesh. This volume is the fourth edition of this book, but the second major revision (1995, 2023). But why a new revision?

Biblical Eldership is used by thousands of churches worldwide as a textbook for training elders. As with any textbook, over time it needs to be updated.

Another reason for this new revision is that, since the 1995 edition of *Biblical Eldership*, many excellent commentaries have been published. It was important to interact with these for the expositional section, which is this book’s special contribution to the subject of church government and eldership. Every New Testament passage on elders is addressed, carefully interpreted, and expounded upon. My goal is to let the New Testament inform and shape our practice. *Biblical Eldership* is based on the conviction that God-breathed Scripture is sufficient for directing the polity and leadership of our churches.

Furthermore, as a result of interacting with hundreds of church leaders since 1995, I am better acquainted with their major questions and issues. In this revision I am able to address many of these questions with greater clarity.

The original qualities that made *Biblical Eldership* unique remain the same. There is no change in the theology—only improved exposition of the relevant biblical texts and more practical suggestions for pastoral elders.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Biblical Eldership is an in-depth book designed to be studied and used as a reference tool to answer questions regarding the texts of Scripture on eldership. Let the Scriptures teach you and shape your minds as to what God says about this subject.

To aid you in your study, I have prepared a study guide with questions for each chapter. The study guide breaks down the chapters into manageable units. The guide can be utilized individually or in a group.

There is also a teacher’s guide providing answers for all the questions included in the study guide for anyone leading a study. I highly recommend that group leaders consult this guide to ensure that the questions are answered accurately.

For those who find reading difficult (and many do), there is an audio version of *Biblical Eldership*.

There is an entire website dedicated to teaching biblical eldership, called Biblical Eldership Resources (www.biblicaleldership.com). There are podcasts available on the website to accompany each chapter of this book. These podcasts will assist you as you work through each chapter, clarifying and expanding on the content or any unfamiliar concepts, as well as giving more practical suggestions for being effective as a shepherd elder. Among the many resources on this site is “The School of the Shepherds,” an online training course for current and future elders. This course is a companion to the book *Biblical Eldership*. We have also provided a full bibliography on this topic for those who may be interested. May these resources not be a “weariness to the flesh,” but food and joy to the spirit.

Introduction

Appoint elders in every town as I directed you.

Titus 1:5

While attending a music concert, I received an insightful lesson in ecclesiology. In the foyer of the church, I noticed a prominent display with the portraits and names of the senior pastor and his staff. The pictures were arranged in a pyramid with the senior pastor at the apex. His three associate pastors filled the second row, and below them the rest of the church staff completed the base of the pyramid. Further into the building and down a side hall, I saw another glass encasement with the pictures and names of the church elders. I thought, *What a superb illustration of how the elders have been pushed aside to a scarcely visible position in the church!* The leadership structure displayed by this church does not represent the New Testament vision for pastoral leadership.

RESTORATION AND CLARIFICATION

Thousands of churches worldwide are led by some form of church eldership because they believe it to be a biblical teaching. In this, they are correct. Unfortunately, many of these churches have a mistaken or inadequate view of the Bible's teaching on elders. They have leaders they call elders, but they do not operate as *biblical* elders, according to the biblical texts.

Board Elders vs. Shepherd Elders

When many Christians hear of church elders, they think of an official board of directors, lay officials, or influential people within the local church. They think of elders as policymakers, fundraisers, decision-makers, or advisors to the pastor. I call them "board elders." Many Christians don't expect church elders to teach the Scriptures or be involved pastorally in the lives of their people, although their own Bibles teach exactly that.

A person does not need to read Greek or be professionally trained in theology to understand that the church-board concept of eldership is irreconcilable with the New Testament teaching on eldership.

Biblical Elders: According to the New Testament, elders jointly pastor the church, teach the word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish believers in sound doctrine, pray with the sick, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, manage, and care for

the local church. I call them *shepherd elders*, or *pastoral elders*, or *pastor elders*.

Biblical eldership is too important to the local church to be muddled in confusion and unscriptural church traditions. *The purpose of this book is to help restore and accurately articulate the biblical doctrine of eldership as shared pastoral leadership by a team of scripturally qualified, Spirit-placed elders.*

In the chapters that follow, be prepared to discover teachings and principles that may be unfamiliar to you and that you might consider to be radical. You may learn new terminology and at the same time find familiar church vocabulary and common church traditions missing. This is intentional because my goal is, by God's grace, *to accurately represent the words and teaching of Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, and Luke as recorded in the New Testament.* We want to capture the spirit and practice of New Testament eldership—this is why the book is titled *Biblical Eldership*.

As we research the Scriptures together, listen to the voice of the Spirit speaking in the text. If we believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21), then Scripture must be our final authority for how our churches function and are led.

A THOROUGHLY BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

Pastoral leadership by a plurality of scripturally qualified elders is a thoroughly biblical doctrine. This will become abundantly evident as we proceed through the exposition section of this book (chapters 6–28). I trust you will find the careful exposition of the Scriptures most enlightening and instructive. A serious-minded Bible student should always enjoy reading a faithful exposition of Scripture.

Since pastoral leadership by qualified elders is a thoroughly biblical doctrine, it should not be neglected or eradicated through clever reinterpretation. Eldership is not, as some protest, “a new and subversive concept that threatens the very life of the church,”¹ or a heresy to be avoided. Those who say such things have never seriously studied eldership in the Bible (elders are mentioned over a hundred times in the Old Testament), or they are blinded by their denominational traditions (which far too often take precedence over Scripture).

Plainly Revealed in Scripture

The major features of eldership are plainly set forth by the New Testament writers. J. Alec Motyer, former principal of Trinity College in Bristol, England, captures the true spirit of the New Testament when he writes,

From the very earliest apostolic times it was customary to appoint elders in every church. . . . [I]t is not as much as hinted in the New Testament that the church would ever need—or indeed should ever want or tolerate—any other local leadership than that of the eldership group.²

From Scripture, we learn that the New Testament (1) documents the existence of elders in numerous churches, (2) gives instruction *about* elders, and (3) provides instruction *to* elders directly. In fact, the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than other important church subjects such as the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Day, baptism, or spiritual gifts.

A Pattern of Plural Elders among the First Churches

A brief aerial view of the New Testament material on the subject will help. The New Testament records evidence of pastoral oversight by a council of elders in nearly all the first churches. These local churches were spread over a wide geographic and culturally diverse area. Consider the consistent pattern of plural leadership by elders over individual churches as it is recorded in the New Testament.

- Elders are found in the churches of Judea and the surrounding area (Acts 11:30; James 5:14–15).
- Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–29; 21:17–26).
- Among the Pauline churches, leadership by the plurality of elders was established in the churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:23); in the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17–25); in the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1); and in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).
- According to the well-traveled letter of 1 Peter, elders existed in churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1–5).
- There are strong indications that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12) and Rome (Heb. 13:17).

Instruction about Elders Given to the Churches

Not only does the New Testament provide examples of elder-led churches, it includes explicit instructions to churches about how to care for, protect, discipline, select, restore, obey, and call the elders. The apostles intended these instructions to be taken seriously and obeyed.

- James instructs those who are sick to call for the elders of the church (James 5:14).
- Paul instructs the Ephesian church to financially support elders who labor “at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17–18).
- Paul instructs the local church about protecting elders from false accusation, disciplining elders who sin, and restoring fallen elders (1 Tim. 5:19–22).
- Paul instructs the church as to the proper qualifications for eldership (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9).

- To the church in Ephesus, Paul states that anyone who desires to be an elder desires a noble work (1 Tim. 3:1).
- Paul instructs the church to examine prospective elders as to their qualifications (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:22–25).
- Peter instructs the young men of the church to submit to the church elders (1 Pet. 5:5).
- The writer of Hebrews instructs his readers to obey and submit to the leaders/elders (Heb. 13:17).
- Paul teaches that elders are the stewards, leaders, instructors, and teachers of the local church (Titus 1:7; 1 Thess. 5:12; Titus 1:9).
- Paul instructs the church to acknowledge, love, and live at peace with its elders (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

Instruction and Exhortation Given Directly to Elders

Paul, Peter, and James also give instructions directly to the elders.

- James tells elders to pray for and anoint the sick with oil (James 5:14).
- Peter directly charges elders to pastor and oversee the local congregation (1 Pet. 5:1–2).
- Peter warns elders against being too dominating (1 Pet. 5:3).
- Peter promises elders that when the Lord Jesus returns, they will receive “the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4).
- Peter exhorts elders to be clothed in humility (1 Pet. 5:5).
- Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit placed them in the church as overseers to pastor the church of God (Acts 20:28).
- Paul exhorts elders to guard the church from false teachers (Acts 20:28) and to be alert to the constant threat of false doctrine (Acts 20:31).
- Paul reminds elders to work hard, help the needy, and be generous like the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:35).
- Paul exhorts elders to live at peace with the congregation (1 Thess. 5:13).

When you consider the New Testament’s characteristic avoidance of detailed regulation and church procedures (when compared to the Old Testament), the attention given to elders is striking. “This is why,” writes theologian Jon Zens, “we need to seriously consider the doctrine of eldership; it jumps out at us from the pages of the New Testament, yet it has fallen into disrepute and is not being practiced as a whole in local churches.”³

THREE KEY FEATURES OF A BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

As we begin our study, what jump out from the pages of the New Testament in bold letters are three distinguishing features of a biblically defined eldership: (1) pastoral leadership, (2) shared leadership (plurality), and (3) qualified leadership. I will only briefly comment here on these points. Chapters 2 to 5 expand on each of these three topics.

Pastoral Leadership by Elders

A major tenet of biblical eldership is that it is *pastoral* in nature. In a final, face-to-face meeting between Paul and the Ephesian elders, Paul reminded the elders that the Holy Spirit had placed them as “overseers” for the express purpose to shepherd/pastor the church of God:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. (Acts 20:28; Christian Standard Bible [CSB])

In his letter, Peter charged the elders of the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia to “shepherd the flock of God”:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder . . . shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight. (1 Pet. 5:1–2)

Since the two most prominent apostles charged the elders—and no other person or group—to shepherd God’s flock, we can conclude that, in biblical terms, the elders are responsible for the pastoral oversight of the individual flock God has assigned to them (1 Pet. 5:3).

In addition, the elders are to be assisted in their work by a group of qualified deacons, that is, “qualified assistants” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8–13; see chapter 11).

Shepherd Leadership: The nature of leadership envisioned by the apostles is shepherd leadership. Unlike the corporate-business leadership model, shepherd leadership entails teaching the Scriptures, protecting from false teachers, evangelizing, counseling, caring for the many practical needs of the flock, and being with the people as examples of Christlike living.

Shepherd leadership beautifully blends the concepts of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, tender loving care, and intimate relationships. But even more, shepherd leadership patterns itself after the life of the “Good Shepherd” who willingly laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11).

Timothy Witmer, author of *The Shepherd Leader*, is right on target when he states: “you will see that ‘shepherding’ is at the very heart of the biblical picture of leadership.”⁴

Shared Leadership by Elders

Shared leadership, also called plurality leadership, should not be a new concept to a Bible-reading Christian. It was a fundamental governing structure of the nation of Israel throughout its Old Testament history.

Jesus Gave Us Shared Leadership: But even more noteworthy, our Lord himself appointed the first leadership body. A fact that is immensely significant and often overlooked is that our Lord did not train and appoint one man to be head of his church. Jesus gave us plurality leadership in the twelve apostles—not one senior apostle accompanied by eleven assistants, but twelve apostles, all equally apostles, working together in unity to lead and teach the first Christian community. *Jesus Christ gave the church shared leadership.*

The Apostles Gave Us Shared Leadership: The New Testament reveals that the pastoral oversight of the first churches was committed to a council of elders. Like the twelve apostles, the elders comprised a collective leadership body.

At both the beginning and end of Paul's ministry, he appointed (or instructed others to appoint) a body of qualified elders to shepherd the churches he established (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). On the local church level, the New Testament clearly demonstrates a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore, leadership by a team of elders is a sound biblical practice.

In the memorable words of John Murray, one of the founding professors of Westminster Theological Seminary and distinguished theologian and Bible commentator, "Plurality is written in the boldest letters in the pages of the New Testament, and singularity bears the hallmark of despite to Christ's institution."⁵ In other words, one-man rule ("singularity") of the church shows contempt for Christ's institution of government by a council of elders, i.e., multiple shepherds.

Equality and Functional Diversity within the Eldership: Although all elders share equally the same office, title, and pastoral charge, there is at the same time diversity in Spirit-giftedness, life experience, and the Lord's leading of each individual elder. Not all elders on an elder council are equally available or possess the same verbal skills, leadership ability, biblical knowledge, or competency to teach.

Scripture reveals a distinction among the elders without creating a formal hierarchy or third office:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle the ox when it treads out the grain," and "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Tim. 5:17–18)

Elders who lead well, and especially those who labor in preaching and teaching, are deserving of "double honor," which includes financial compensation. *Scripture allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the eldership without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders.*

Thus, there is both equality of office (parity) and functional diversity of giftedness among the elders. This allows for some elders to serve the congregation and the eldership part-time and others full-time. Equality in office and functional diversity of giftedness are displayed most clearly among the twelve apostles (Peter, James, and John stand out as leaders among their fellow apostles, and especially Peter). In chapter 3 equality and functional diversity within the eldership and apostolate will be explained in more detail.

Qualified Leadership by Elders

A biblical eldership requires biblically qualified elders. The New Testament is unequivocally emphatic on this point. In fact, the New Testament provides more instruction on the *qualifications* for eldership than on any other aspect of eldership.

The Qualification Lists

1 Timothy 3:1-7

1. Above reproach
2. Husband of one wife
3. Sober-minded
4. Self-controlled
5. Respectable
6. Hospitable
7. Able to teach
8. Not a drunkard
9. Not violent
10. Gentle
11. Not quarrelsome
12. Not a lover of money
13. Manages his own household well . . . children submissive
14. Not a recent convert
15. Well thought of by outsiders

Titus 1:6-9

1. Above reproach
2. Husband of one wife
3. Children are believers [faithful]
4. Not arrogant
5. Not quick-tempered
6. Not a drunkard
7. Not violent
8. Not greedy for gain
9. Hospitable
10. A lover of good
11. Self-controlled
12. Upright
13. Holy
14. Disciplined
15. Holds firm to the trustworthy word as taught
 - Able to give instruction in sound doctrine
 - Able to rebuke those who contradict sound doctrine

1 Peter 5:1-5

1. Not under compulsion
2. Willingly
3. Not for shameful gain
4. Eagerly
5. Not domineering
6. Example to the flock

The offices of God's church are not honorary positions bestowed on individuals who have attended church faithfully or who are senior in years. Nor are they board positions to be filled by good friends, wealthy donors, or charismatic personalities. Nor are they positions that only seminary graduates can fill. The church office of eldership is open to all men who meet the biblical requirements. In chapter 5 we will address the biblical teaching on male leadership in the home and church.

One common mistake made by churches that are eager to implement elder-ship is to appoint biblically unqualified men. Because there is often a crying need for more shepherd leaders, it is tempting to allow unqualified, unprepared men to assume leadership in the church. But this is a time-proven formula for failure and long-term problems.

PUTTING THINGS IN PERSPECTIVE

To see where pastoral leadership by a plurality of elders fits in the larger Christian community and among other views on how a church is to be led, I will briefly list five well-known views on church government (also referred to as church polity, church structure, or church order). To do this, I will use the excellent outline from the book *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity*, edited by Chad O. Brand and R. Stanton Norman.⁶ The five views are:

1. “The Single-Elder-Led Church: The Bible’s Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity”
2. “The Presbytery-Led Church: Presbyterian Church Government”
3. “The Congregation-Led Church: Congregational Polity”
4. “The Bishop-Led Church: The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed, Weighed, and Defended”
5. “The Plural-Elder-Led Church: Sufficient as Established—The Plurality of Elders as Christ’s Ordained Means of Church Governance”

As is clear from its title, *Biblical Eldership* explains and defends the plural-elder-led view. Of the above five positions, the least known or practiced is the plural-elder-led view of church leadership. Although it is unfamiliar to many and outright rejected by some as too radical, *this view, more than any other view, is deeply embedded in the words and theology of Scripture*. This will become abundantly clear as we move through the exposition section of this book (chapters 6–28).

No other view has as many direct statements from Scripture to support its claims as does the plural-elder-led view. In fact there are eight core passages that directly address the position, duties, and authority of the church elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17–38; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; 5:17–25; Titus 1:5–9; James 5:14–15; 1 Pet. 5:1–5). The starting point for understanding the biblical doctrine of church government should be these eight central didactic passages.

I have always found it curious how the plain, straightforward statements of Scripture on elders are so easily brushed aside as irrelevant for today or cleverly interpreted to mean something different from the plain meaning of the texts of Scripture.

While I was attending seminary, my growing interest in this subject was vigorously challenged. In a course on church polity, the idea of an elder-led church was

stubbornly resisted, even scorned. During one class, I asked the professor, “But what do you do with all the Scripture texts on plural elders?”

To my astonishment, his quick response was this: “Having numerous texts on eldership means nothing!” I thought to myself (but didn’t have the nerve to say), “Well, if having numerous Scripture texts on elders means nothing, what *does* count for something? Your nonexistent texts on the ordained clergy?”

It soon became apparent that throughout the school the idea of shared pastoral leadership by a council of qualified elders was outright rejected as false doctrine and too radical and impractical to practice.

Although this was a theological seminary, teachers and students alike had abandoned the fundamental principles of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics): *the clear, central, didactic passages take precedence over secondary, unclear, obscure passages.*⁷ The eight core didactic passages on pastoral oversight by qualified elders were brushed aside as irrelevant. The obscure, unclear, secondary passages were given precedence over the core didactic passages. That is bad hermeneutics.

This and other similar experiences, however, served only to stir my increasing conviction that eldership was a biblically sound doctrine that most churches either ignored or reinterpreted to fit their own familiar denominational traditions.

I trust this book will help us accurately understand the biblical teaching of pastoral leadership as a body of scripturally qualified, Spirit-appointed elders. Or, as concisely stated by Albert N. Martin, “The normal biblical framework of oversight is a plurality of scripturally qualified overseers laboring together with genuine parity and realistic, harmonious, functional diversity.”⁸

God is greatly honored by the efforts of his people to recover and renew biblical teaching long disparaged or disregarded, and by their commitment to live in obedience to his divinely inspired word.

The Unique Teachings of Jesus Christ on Leadership

Before we proceed to examine what the Spirit of God says about pastoral eldership, we need to first examine the distinctive new principles of leadership taught by Jesus Christ: humility, servanthood, brotherly equality, and Christlike love. We commonly refer to this style of leadership as “servant leadership.” To understand Christian leadership and how elders are to work together as a pastoral team, we will need to examine Jesus’s countercultural teaching on “servant leadership.” We now turn to these amazing and timeless principles.

New Principles for Leadership

If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

John 13:14–15

Imagine a prize-winning novelist writing a novel about the life of a perfect person. This perfect person has no faults, no imperfections, no besetting sins, no flaws of character, no annoying eccentricities, and no selfish desires. Every word he speaks is perfect, every decision is perfect, every response to other people is perfect. Such a novel would be comical. No one would take seriously the existence of a perfect person.

Yet, that is precisely what the writers of the four Gospels present to the world, a perfectly perfect person—the incomparable Lord Jesus Christ. He alone is without sin, fault, or blemish of character. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God and the law of God.

As the perfect Son of God, he is the only perfect teacher ever to grace this earth. Think of that! All other teachers are imperfect and teach some degree of error. Jesus never spoke a false word, or gave inaccurate information, or engaged in error of any kind. Thus he is called “Faithful and True” and “The Word of God” (Rev. 19:11, 13).

This is why Jesus said to his disciples, “You have *one* teacher, and you are all brothers . . . you have one instructor, the Christ” (Matt. 23:8, 10). All faithful Christian teachers teach only what their teacher, Jesus, taught (Matt. 28:19–20), and what he taught is now revealed in the New Testament.

For the people who actually saw and heard Jesus Christ teach, what amazed them most was that his teaching was “new” and spoken with “authority.” Mark states that the people “were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, ‘What is this? A new teaching with authority!’” (Mark 1:27). The content of his new teaching could be likened to “new wine” poured into “fresh wineskins” (Matt. 9:17).

One of the most interesting and revolutionary of all of Christ’s *new* teachings was how he inverted the traditional leadership pyramid, with the people at the base of the pyramid serving the leader at the apex. In Christ’s kingdom, leadership positions and the exercise of authority entail humility, servanthood, brotherhood,

and Christlike love. This new, countercultural teaching provides the foundational principles for our study of New Testament elders and Christian leadership in general.

Not only did Jesus teach a new set of virtues and principles for governing the leader-follower relationship, he also boldly denounced the religious teachers of his day for their abuse of authority and making a public show of their religiosity. Jesus forbade his followers from acting like the “rulers of the Gentiles” who abused their authority and power over the people for their own selfish ends. To his disciples he said: “not so with you” (Luke 22:26).

Finally, in addition to Jesus giving us new principles for the leader-follower relationship and prohibiting us from acting like worldly rulers, he also gave us plurality leadership in the twelve apostles. To this we now turn.

THE TRAINING OF THE TWELVE

From the beginning of Jesus’s public ministry, he chose a team of twelve men to train. He did this in order for them to carry on his ministry and teaching after his departure. Commenting on the “supreme importance . . . [of] training the twelve,” A. B. Bruce, in his classic work *The Training of the Twelve*, writes:

The great Founder of the faith desires not only to have disciples, but to have about Him men whom He might train to make disciples of others. Both from His words and from His actions we can see that He attached supreme importance to that part of His work, which consisted in training the twelve. In the intercessory prayer [John 17:6], e.g., He speaks of the training He had given these men as if it had been the principal part of His own earthly ministry. And such, in one sense, it really was. The careful, painstaking education of the disciples secured that the Teacher’s influence on the world should be permanent.¹

Do not miss this obvious but profound point: Jesus Christ did not choose and train one man to take his place, or to be king or ruler over his people. Instead, Jesus chose and painstakingly trained a team of twelve men to *jointly* lead and teach his newly established family of brothers and sisters.

Jesus Christ gave us the plurality structure of leadership.^{*} But not only did Jesus establish the first Christian leadership body, he also taught them the principles necessary to work together effectively as Christian brothers.

Transforming the Hearts and Minds of the Disciples

As we read the four Gospels it becomes apparent that the twelve disciples were in no way ready for Jesus’s departure. They had a completely wrong set of values and an incorrect understanding of the kingdom of God. They acted no differently from the self-serving Roman and Jewish rulers of their day. They were continually arguing among themselves over who should be regarded as the “greatest” or “first” in their

^{*} Chapter 3 explains the plurality principle in detail.

group. Who will occupy the chief thrones next to King Jesus in his glorious kingdom? Who qualifies for the closest seat to Jesus at the table? Who is the boss? They were competing among themselves for first place and the highest honors.

There was no way that they could work together as a team of brothers with their present ways of thinking. Without Jesus's new principles of conduct and the power of the Holy Spirit, the twelve disciples were doomed to fight and divide.

To transform their self-centered attitudes and to prepare them to work together in harmony as an effective leadership body, Jesus redefined their ideas of greatness and leadership in a way that was completely contrary to anything that they had ever experienced.

To prepare for our study of elders, we first need to survey the unparalleled teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ on humility, humble servanthood, brotherly equality, and Christlike love. We have to get this right. It is foundational to everything else we will discuss in this book.

1. HUMILITY

The greatest leader and teacher ever to have graced this earth described himself as gentle² and humble:³

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matt. 11:28–30)

What Jesus reveals about himself is set in direct contrast to the prideful, abusive religious leaders of his day and their oppressive man-made rules. Here in the most extraordinary way, Jesus disclosed his heart as gentle and lowly (humble). His gentleness and humility were evidenced by the fact that people from every segment of society were drawn to him—men and women, young and old, wealthy and poor, powerful and oppressed. To them he said, “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden.”

Women and children felt comfortable coming to him. Mothers wanted him to touch and bless their children. Jesus was approachable, compassionate, and humble, never arrogant or self-important. He ate and drank with the untouchables of society, people with whom the religious leaders would never associate. *A loveliness of spirit and a tenderness of heart radiated from the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.* And so should his character radiate from us as well.

Like Jesus, whom we are to imitate, we ought to be gentle and humble when leading and in all our relationships with our brothers and sisters. Do not, however, confuse gentleness and lowliness with weakness, passive leadership, or fearfulness. No person upon this earth was stronger in moral character, courage, self-control, and intellectual power than the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet at the same time he was gentle

and humble. Such a refined balance of character is the sign of true greatness. As the gentle and humble master, he taught his followers to be humble servants to all.

Who Is First and Greatest? Mark 9:33–37

The first example of the disciples squabbling over who among them was to be considered “greatest” occurred immediately after Jesus’s Passion prediction of his humiliating death at the hands of wicked men (Mark 9:30–32). Jesus speaks of his crucifixion, but they can only think of themselves and their individual status within the group. How little they understood of their Lord’s ways:

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” And he took a child and put him in the midst of them and, taking him in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me. (Mark 9:33–37; cf. Matt. 18:1–4; Luke 9:46–48)

The disciples were preoccupied with the question of who was the “greatest” or “first” among them. They wanted to know their status within the group, how people viewed them individually, and who would have first place among them.

The Paradox: Jesus answered this age-old question by means of this now-famous paradoxical statement: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

Here Jesus begins to transform his disciples’ thinking about greatness, leadership, discipleship, and life together in the community of Christ’s followers. As the master teacher, Jesus used a figure of speech called *paradox*. A paradox is a statement that appears contrary to common experience, or even absurd, but conveys a deeper truth.⁴

These last-first sayings appear contrary to the prevailing opinion, but in Christ’s kingdom they are profoundly true. “Mark used the paradox to jolt and challenge his readers to depart from the accepted opinion that servanthood is incompatible with authority.”⁵

Jesus asserts that true greatness is not achieved by striving for prominence over other people or by grasping for power, but by exhibiting a humble, self-effacing attitude of service toward “all”—even the lowliest person, one without status or power, such as a small, socially insignificant, dependent child. Thus, in Christ’s kingdom, being great or first is a reward for humility in this world, selfless service to all, and generous giving of oneself.

Fighting for First Place: Mark 10:32–45

The Bible doesn’t hide the fact that among the twelve apostles, self-centered attitudes and power struggles existed. Thinking exclusively of themselves, James and John

asked Jesus for the two most powerful positions in the kingdom: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (Mark 10:37).

In his timeless volume *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott captures the irony of this account: “James and John want to sit on thrones in power and glory; Jesus knows that he must hang on a cross in weakness and shame. The antithesis is total.”⁶

Their request immediately sparked conflict among the other disciples, as selfish ambition always does. Mark records that “when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John” (v. 41). They were outraged because they wanted purple robes, ivory thrones, and golden crowns for themselves. They were all “card-carrying members of the ‘self-seekers’ club.”⁷

The Promise of Suffering and Death

Jesus responded to the brothers’ request for thrones by saying: “You do not know what you are asking.” He could not promise them the highest thrones, but he could promise them suffering and persecution: “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized” (v. 39).

By the use of the metaphors of the cup and baptism, Jesus referred to his suffering and death. By accepting the cup, they were to share in Jesus’s suffering and rejection from this Christ-hating world. *They did not understand that according to God’s plan, suffering precedes glory, the cross comes before the crown, loss before rewards, and serving before reigning.*

The supreme example of the paradox of absolute authority and humble “slave of all” status is our Lord Jesus Christ: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (v. 45). Jesus’s death on the cross is the greatest expression of humility, servanthood, and love—and thus true greatness.

2. HUMBLE SERVANTHOOD

At the Passover table, hours before his crucifixion, Jesus did something unthinkable. Like a menial, common slave, Jesus stooped down and washed the dirty feet of his disciples:

Jesus . . . rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. . . .

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.” (John 13:3–5, 12–15)

In the most unforgettable way, Jesus dramatically illustrated everything he had been teaching his disciples about humility, love, sacrificial service, and greatness by washing the feet of his disciples.

The logic of the passage is crystal clear: if the one who is lauded “Teacher and Lord” humbly stoops to wash the feet of his disciples, then the disciples “ought” also to wash one another’s feet—that is, humbly care for one another’s interests and advancement, not fight with one another for power and prominence.

What Jesus did was a complete reversal of all that was culturally acceptable; it utterly shocked the disciples. *How could they possibly argue anymore over who should be regarded as the greatest, when the one who was truly the greatest stooped down to wash the dirty feet of his students?*

It is here we see that the symbol of our Lord is the servant’s towel, not the cleric’s robe. In the words of John Stott,

The symbol of an authentic Christian leadership is not the purple robe of an emperor, but the coarse apron of a slave; not a throne of ivory and gold, but a basin of water for the washing of feet.⁸

Only by following the role model of our servant-Lord do we have any hope of living and working together in unity. “If you know these things,” declared Jesus, “blessed are you if you do them” (John 13:17).

Do Not Be Like Worldly Rulers: Luke 22:24–27

After our Lord instituted the Lord’s Supper, and in the very presence of Christ, the disciples started to argue again over who was “to be regarded as the greatest.” If it wasn’t for knowing the sinfulness of the human heart, I might be shocked. But I am not. Luke masterfully records the account this way:

A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. *But not so with you.* Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and *the leader as one who serves.* For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.” (Luke 22:24–27)

In response to the disciples’ dispute, Jesus charged them not to act like the “kings of the Gentiles” who “exercise lordship over” the people, or like those in authority who boast about being “benefactors.” Emphatically Jesus protested, “But not so with you.”

Jesus stipulates that in his kingdom the one who is the “greatest” become as “the youngest” of the group (one with no status or power). The one who is the “leader” is to be like one who “serves” tables, that is, a waiter, a lowly table attendant.

Jesus the Table Servant: Jesus makes this astonishing declaration concerning himself: “For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke

22:27). Jesus is the greatest example of voluntary subordination. He, the supreme Teacher and Lord, voluntarily serves the diners at table (see Luke 12:37). The disciples are to emulate the servant-waiter Jesus, not “the kings of the Gentiles” or the rich “benefactors” of this world.

3. BROTHERLY EQUALITY

Jesus’s most severe denunciations were directed at the religious elite of his day. No one has ever exposed the true heart of religious hypocrisy and the ugliness of religious pride like our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 23:1–33). Using the strongest language conceivable, Jesus publicly censured the priests and scribes of his time for their greed, pride, and abuse of power (Matt. 23:13–33). They made the temple in Jerusalem into a money-making machine to enrich themselves (Mark 11:15–19). They devoured widows’ houses (Luke 20:47). They “were lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). They used people to enhance their own prideful status. They imposed heavy rules upon the people, thereby keeping them in spiritual bondage.

Do Not Be Like Them: Matthew 23:1–12

Jesus was nothing like these religious leaders, and he sternly warned his followers not to imitate them:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat. . . . They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and *you are all brothers*. . . . The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matt. 23:1–12)

The scribes and Pharisees sanctimoniously separated and elevated themselves above the people. They were image managers. They craved honorific titles, sacred clothes, the places of honor at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues. They loved the praises of people (Matt. 6:1–2, 5, 16). In short, they were religious hypocrites who used and abused the people (John 7:49; 9:34).

You Are All Brothers: In contrast, Jesus forbids his disciples from calling one another “rabbi” and from elevating themselves in any way that would diminish their close brotherly relationships or usurp the unique places that Christ and the Father have over all believers. As Jesus said: “You are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and *you are all brothers*.” This important passage helps explain why the New Testament writers avoided lofty sacred titles or hierarchical structures for the body of Christ and household of God.

4. CHRISTLIKE LOVE

In the upper room, after Jesus washed the disciples' feet, he gave them a new commandment:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34, 35; cf. 15:12)

You simply cannot understand Christian living, evangelism, church life, or Christian leadership without thinking deeply about the “new commandment.”

Jesus did not simply say “love one another.” They already knew that. He said something far more profound: Love one another “just as I have loved you.” Jesus sets his own example of selfless, self-sacrificing love upon the cross as the new standard of love. Benjamin B. Warfield succinctly expresses this new love principle when he writes, “Self-sacrificing love is thus made the essence of the Christian life.”⁹

The disciples were now to love one another with the same selfless, self-sacrificing love Jesus displayed for them. They were to be willing to die for one another (1 John 3:16). Without this kind of love, they would inevitably split into denominations—the Peter denomination, the James denomination, the Philip denomination, etc.

Without divine love they would not act in humility, wash one another's feet, or serve tables. They would fight among themselves for “first” place, for thrones and purple robes, and for lofty titles, just as worldly leaders did then and still do today.

There is no way that a Christian leadership team can work together effectively without God's love flowing through each of its members toward the others. Love is the secret ingredient in all successful team efforts. The reason is obvious. Love “is not arrogant. . . . It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable . . . bears all things . . . endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4–7).[†] Thus the Scripture says, “Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor. 16:14).

THE STRONGMAN MODEL OF LEADERSHIP VS. THE CHRISTLIKE SERVANT MODEL

Wherever you travel in the world, you will encounter the strongman style of leadership. The strongman model is the self-oriented style of leadership that concentrates power in one person and rejects genuine transparency and accountability.

This style of leadership is concerned with wielding power, gaining wealth, and promoting oneself. It seeks to control, dominate, and manipulate. It is dictatorial and authoritarian. It outright rejects any concept of shared leadership. Strong men want loyal subordinates, not colleagues. They may claim to serve people, but their claims are empty and self-serving.

[†] See Alexander Strauch, *The 15 Descriptions of Love: Applied to All Christian Leaders and Teachers (1 Corinthians 13)* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2019).

The Diotrephes Syndrome

The New Testament example of the church strongman is Diotrephes. Diotrephes is the classic, autocratic church leader, the narcissistic pastor who builds the church around himself. He represents all those who abuse their pastoral authority. The aged apostle John described him this way:

I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, *who likes to put himself first*, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. (3 John 9–10)

Diotrephes thought so highly of himself that he even criticized and refused to listen to the apostle John. Diotrephes did not agree that “the leader” is to be “as one who serves,” nor could he assert with Paul that he was “serving the Lord with all humility” (Acts 20:19; cf. Luke 22:26). Diotrephes was a contradiction to the gentle and humble leadership style that Jesus taught and lived.

What the People Want

Unfortunately, we have to admit that a strong, autocratic style of leadership is often outwardly successful and popular. Many people want to follow a strongman leader, a Diotrephes-like figure, a man they deem anointed by God with power to rule. They want the tough-minded, singular leadership style of the world.

This was certainly true of the Corinthian believers. Paul didn’t fit their Greco-Roman concept of the strongman leader, thus the Corinthians became easy prey for the so-called “super apostles” who misled and abused them (2 Cor. 11:19–21). To some of the Corinthians, Paul seemed weak and unimpressive, certainly not great or first in status. They may have thought, as some do today, that *the concept of “servant-leader” is a contradiction of terms and not really a practical, workable leadership concept.*

Summary of the Servant-Leadership Model

To be clear, servant leadership does not eliminate strong, competent leadership or formal church offices. To those who have the spiritual gift of leading, Paul says lead “with zeal” (Rom. 12:8).

Jesus did not deny the need for positions of leadership, the exercise of human authority, the pursuit of greatness, or excellence in pastoral leadership. It was Jesus who equipped and trained his disciples for future leadership, teaching, and evangelism.

In preparing his disciples for leadership, Jesus taught them a new set of principles for evaluating leadership, relationships, greatness, and life together in the believing community. This new teaching is what we today call “servant leadership.”

The Jesus leadership style means leading others, not lording it over them (2 Cor. 1:24). It is an *others-oriented* style of leadership, where the leader humbly serves the

people—even the most insignificant ones—expecting nothing in return. It is marked by a willingness to suffer for the good of others, even to the point of being willing to die for them. It is denying self and sacrificing self for others; it is leading by example; it is washing the feet of others; it is loving as Christ loved; it is promoting and advancing the gifting of others. It is treating one another equally as brothers and sisters, not as lords treat servants.

Servant leadership ultimately means imitating Jesus and directing people to him and not to oneself. Paul eloquently states this principle: “For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants [lit. slaves] for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

Looking Ahead

As we proceed through the chapters ahead, keep in mind what we have learned from Jesus about Christian leadership and relationships in the church. *Jesus’s teachings explain many of the unique features of New Testament ecclesiology and the leadership structure established by the apostles.* Biblical eldership is based on the rock-solid foundation of Jesus’s teaching on humility, servanthood, brotherly equality, and Christlike love.

Supplemental Podcasts

Working with my friend David Anderson, I have prepared a podcast for each chapter of this book. These resources will give practical suggestions for being an effective elder, as well as clarify and expand on certain concepts from each chapter. Please visit www.biblicaleldership.com/BEpodcasts to learn more.

Pastoral Leadership

*The Holy Spirit has appointed you [elders] as overseers,
to shepherd the church of God.*

Acts 20:28 (CSB)

Here is an honest question we need to answer: According to the New Testament, who is responsible to pastor the local church? In unequivocal language, both Paul and Peter answer this question. They charge the elders to “shepherd the church of God.”

The apostles do not give this charge to anyone else—not the deacons, not church staff. The responsibility to oversee and shepherd the local assembly was given to the church elders—all the elders, not just one hired head elder. The pastoral leadership of the local church is the responsibility of a council of Spirit-appointed, scripturally qualified elders, also called overseers. This is an extraordinary fact that seems to be completely ignored or rejected outright by many churches.

When we combine the tasks given to the elders by the apostles (chapter 2) with the biblical qualifications required of the elders (chapter 4), we can be sure that we have an accurate picture of a biblical eldership. If we honestly allow the Scriptures to guide us, there should be no confusion over who the elders are and what they are to do. *The confusion comes when we try to superimpose our church traditions upon the Scriptures.* To these God-breathed writings we now turn for teaching (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

SHEPHERD IMAGERY

One of the most beautiful and significant images in the Bible is the image of the sheep and the shepherd. “The Lord is my Shepherd,” cried David (Ps. 23:1). Jesus declared himself to be “the good shepherd,” and we are his beloved sheep (John 10:11). When directing the elders to lead the church, both Paul and Peter employed shepherd-flock imagery. The image of the Near Eastern shepherd is characterized by intimacy, tenderness, concern, skill, hard work, suffering, and love. It is, as Derek Tidball remarks in his book *Skillful Shepherds*, “a subtle blend of authority and care,” and “as much toughness as tenderness, as much courage as comfort.”¹

Shepherding Work

Like actual shepherds in the field, shepherd elders need to be fully invested in the comprehensive work of shepherding God's people. Shepherd leaders are not "a board of directors," sitting in a meeting once a month making decisions and letting others do the work of shepherding. They are to be shepherds who are out among the people feeding, guiding, and lovingly caring for the people's needs. This is shepherd leadership. This is what the apostles called the elders to do.

The sheep-shepherd image is appropriate today because people are still like sheep. And the work of spiritual leadership is still the same as tending sheep—feeding, leading, and protecting "the flock of God." Furthermore, shepherd-sheep terminology is the terminology of the Bible, and we do best to stay with biblical concepts and metaphors as much as possible.

In brief, the imagery of shepherding a flock communicates the following concepts.

The Shepherd's Presence: A most intriguing feature of shepherding is the shepherd's personal presence among the sheep. *The shepherd-flock motif is a highly relational one, showing personalized care.* The shepherd and his flock form a close bond. The sheep know the shepherd's voice, and the shepherd knows his sheep by name (John 10:5, 27). In fact, he is with them so much that, "as a result," says Jeramie Rinne, "he even smells like sheep."² *The sheep always know if the shepherd is present. When the shepherd is present, the sheep can rest comfortably and feed peacefully.*

You cannot be an absent or invisible elder and be a good shepherd. Your consistent presence with the sheep is necessary to your work of shepherding. Indeed, you need to "smell like" the people you shepherd. *Don't be an invisible elder.* Be out among the people; don't hide from them or act as if you are afraid of them or too important to be with them. Stand at or near the door of the church, greet the people with a friendly smile, and work hard at remembering names. Reach out by introducing yourself in a friendly way to new people. Greet widows, widowers, and the elderly. Be attentive to the young people and children. Know their names and use them. Display the joy of the Lord.

As a church leader, you have more influence over people than you realize. You need to think more about how your example can shape the lives of others for Christ. You influence people spiritually. Your personal life example is central to your leadership. You are to be, in the words of Scripture, "examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3).

Love: Ultimately, the shepherd must love the sheep if he is to succeed in caring for them. In Spain, I once sat in a field with a shepherd asking him many questions about caring for sheep. At the end of our long conversation, I asked him, "What's the most important thing about being a shepherd?" He responded, "You must love sheep." As an elder, you must love the Lord's people!

Nothing ministers to people's deepest needs more than genuine Christlike love and warmth from a brother or sister in Christ. If a body of elders lacks certain gifts or dynamic personalities, *the elders' Christlike love for the people can compensate for such deficiencies. But there is no substitute for a lack of personal love or warmth on the part of the elders for the people.* Without a loving, caring relationship with the people, the elders are an empty shell. Love is indispensable to all that you say and do as a shepherd leader (1 Cor. 13:1–3). Love is our Lord's "new commandment" (John 13:34).

If you love the people, you will find deep joy in the work of shepherding them. You will also find that shepherding people is profoundly meaningful and rewarding work.

Authority: The shepherd has authority over the sheep, to lead them and to correct them. As one writer explains: "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."³ *Shepherd imagery beautifully blends the concepts of authority and leadership with self-sacrifice, loving care, and intimate relationships.*

It is the Holy Spirit who sovereignly places an elder as an overseer to shepherd the church of God (Acts 20:28). With this appointment comes the rightful authority and Spirit empowerment to do the God-given work of leading God's flock of people.

Hard Work: Shepherding is hard work (Gen. 31:40). Those who are "allergic" to work will not be effective shepherds. Because a good shepherd works hard, a selfish shepherd is, according to the biblical authors, a bad shepherd (Ezek. 34:2–8). An idle, lazy shepherd is a danger to the flock.

When church eldership is viewed as a status or board position, there will be plenty of volunteers. But when it is viewed as pastoral work, few will rush to join.

Sacrifice: Shepherding requires self-sacrifice on the part of the shepherd, as he must put the needs of the flock before his own. Being an elder also requires personal sacrifice. One of the biggest sacrifices a shepherd leader makes is carrying in his heart daily the many problems and concerns of the flock. The well-being of the flock is continually on the shepherd's mind.

Dangerous Work: The shepherd must be alert to danger. Sheep need to be protected from wild beasts or thieves. This means that the shepherd needs to have courage like David, who rescued sheep from the mouths of the lion and bear (1 Sam. 17:34–37). In some countries of the world, being a church leader can be a dangerous occupation.

Skill and Knowledge: Shepherding is not for dummies. It requires a great deal of knowledge and many different skills: the management of land and water resources; proper feeding of sheep; healing of deadly diseases; delivering and caring for newborn lambs and their mothers; shearing sheep; and comforting old and dying ones.

In his book *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, Timothy Laniak points out that “Fundamentally, however, the task of shepherds is determined daily by the changing needs of the flock under their care. Pastors are generalists.”⁴

Leading a local church requires a variety of skills in teaching and governing a community of God’s people in God’s appointed way.

Submit to and Obey: In turn, the flock is to obey and submit to their God-appointed shepherd leaders:

Obey your leaders and 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 no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)*

To protect the flock from abusive pastoral authority, the Scripture charges the elders not to lord their authority over the people, but to be godly examples to the flock so that the people will want to follow willingly (1 Pet. 5:3). The ones the elders lead are their brothers and sisters in Christ, not servants or employees.

THE FOUR-FOLD RESPONSIBILITY OF SHEPHERD ELDERS

The word *shepherd* is both a verb and a noun (“The shepherds shepherd the sheep”). Paul and Peter use the verb to describe the elders’ work (ποιμαίνω [*poimainō*]). The Greek noun for *shepherd* (ποιμήν [*poimēn*]), however, is not used directly of the elders. But since the elders shepherd God’s flock, it is appropriate to refer to them as shepherds, undershepherds, or even pastors, as long as it is understood that the term *pastor* is not used in a clerical sense or as one person (senior pastor) separate from and over the elders. “Pastor” is the Latin word for “shepherd” (more about this in the next chapter). *Biblical elders pastor the local church and can be called pastors—all of them, not just one.*

Shepherd the Flock of God/the Church of God

The work of the elders is to shepherd “the flock of God,” also called, “the church of God” (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28). These two phrases refer to the local Christian congregation/flock. The church of God is no ordinary group of people, like a social club, business partnership, or sports team. The church of God is a worshiping community; it sings the praises of God and prays for one another and for all people; it gathers together to remember the death of our Lord Jesus by sharing together the bread and the cup of remembrance. In this community the people bear one another’s burdens and love one another as Christ loved them. They exercise their spiritual gifts in order to build one another up. They come together to be taught the Scriptures and to learn more of God and his glorious salvation plan; they gather in holy fellowship to encourage one another to resist false teaching, to abstain from worldly

* For more information on the congregation’s proper response to the elders, see chapters 26–28.

temptations, and to stand strong in the face of persecution. The community of the redeemed is a living witness to the power of the gospel of the grace of God.

This holy community of saints looks to those among them whom the Holy Spirit has placed as shepherds to feed, protect, lead, and care for their many practical needs. And so they should! Using these four broad, pastoral categories, consider what a church should expect from its shepherd elders.

1. Teaching-Feeding

The first duty of a shepherd is to feed the sheep. No food, no flock! The importance of feeding sheep is evidenced by the fact that sheep are nearly incapable of feeding and watering themselves sufficiently. Without a shepherd, sheep would quickly be without pasture and water and would soon waste away. From his book, *The Minister as Shepherd*, Charles E. Jefferson aptly reminds us,

Everything depends on the proper feeding of the sheep. Unless wisely fed they become emaciated and sick, and the wealth invested in them is squandered. When Ezekiel presents a picture of the bad shepherd, the first stroke of his brush is—“he does not feed the flock.”⁵ (Ezek. 34:2–3)

God requires that every shepherd elder “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). This is a biblical requirement for *all* elders, not just one elder.

So important is the teaching ministry of the elders that some elders gifted by the Spirit dedicate themselves fully to teaching the word:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.” (1 Tim. 5:17–18)

Although all elders must to be “able to teach” and do teach (1 Tim. 3:2), some elders “labor in preaching and teaching” and are “worthy of double honor.” What is the difference between these two types of elders? Part of the answer is found in the phrase “those who labor.”[†]

The reason the elders who rule well “labor” in preaching and teaching is because they are Spirit-gifted and Spirit-driven to work hard at long hours of concentrated study, reading, sermon preparation, and demanding teaching situations. Crafting good sermons takes significant mental labor; it is time-consuming work that requires a great deal of self-discipline. Not all elders can or want to labor arduously at study and teaching. Constant study, relentless preparation for messages, and demanding teaching schedules make for truly laborious work. These elders are also especially skilled at communicating divine truth, and there is a marked effectiveness and fruitfulness to their teaching and gospel outreach.

[†] Consult chapter 17 for greater details on this all-important text.

Because the Bible can be a difficult book to understand and some doctrines of the faith are deeply profound, people need learned teachers to explain and defend the doctrines of Scripture. Thus, certain elders, based on their giftedness, “labor in preaching and teaching” the Scriptures, and for their labor in the word they are worthy of the church’s financial support and respect.

Teaching Strategy: *Biblical elders are in the education business.* Every local congregation needs continuous biblical and theological education. Thus, the elders, as the shepherding team, need to regularly discuss their plans for teaching the Bible and for equipping “the saints for the work of ministry [service], for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12).

Like Jesus, Paul was a consummate teacher. He himself is his own best example for the Ephesian elders to imitate:

You yourselves know . . . how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house . . . for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. (Acts 20:18, 20, 27)

Do not miss the significance of Paul’s claim: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable.” There was no aspect of Christian doctrine that Paul neglected to teach. He did not omit some of the finer details of the faith, nor adapt the truth to the spirit of the age. All that Christ taught him, he taught the Ephesian elders. As a result, these elders lacked nothing in their theological education for teaching the gospel or living lives pleasing to God.

Paul described his teaching as “the whole counsel of God” (v. 27). To strengthen both the elders and the congregation they needed to know “the whole counsel of God.” This Paul faithfully declared to them. His teaching ministry was thorough and in-depth.[‡]

What Paul reveals about his way of teaching *needs to become our strategy of education*: Teach the whole counsel of God! Teach the whole of Scripture. Teach all the doctrines of the Bible. *Do not hold back anything that is profitable for the church to grow in Christlikeness.* Do not fear or steer clear of those aspects of Christian doctrine that are offensive to Western secular society.

May it never be that the Lord must say to you, as he said to the Old Testament priests in Hosea’s day, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos. 4:6). Instead, may you be the kind of shepherd the Lord promised to give his people: “I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jer. 3:15).

Good Resources: There are many excellent resources available today to help Christians grow in their faith. Audio sermons are available by outstanding preachers; daily podcasts by our best Christian leaders and thinkers are easily accessible. As

[‡] See chapter 9 for greater details.

Christian educators, make these resources readily available for the people in your church. Encourage your people to use these resources to grow in the knowledge of God and his word. But more importantly, challenge the people to be persistent and consistent Bible readers and students. The Bible is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

A sad fact, however, is that many Christians are being dumbed down by endless hours of distracting entertainment—movies, TV, streaming services, and social media. As educators, *continually encourage your people to actively read and not just passively consume movies or sports*. We should say with the psalmist, “Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things, and give me life in your ways” (Ps. 119:37).

Be sure that you are doing everything possible to fulfill the solemn responsibility that God has entrusted to you to teach the Lord’s people “the whole counsel of God.”

Know this—true believers love good teaching! They want to be taught; they crave to hear the word of the Lord. Don’t fail them!

2. Protecting-Guarding-Watching Over

Guarding the flock is another major responsibility of the shepherd. The reason for this is that sheep are defenseless animals. They are utterly helpless in the face of wolves, lions, or robbers.

Since the fall of man, false teachers and lying prophets have tried to deceive God’s people. The Old Testament warned about false prophets, corrupt priests, idolatrous kings, and failed elders. We should never be surprised by the presence of false teachers, who in reality are *agents of Satan* and the archenemies of the church of Jesus Christ (Eph. 6:12; 2 Tim 2:26).

In Paul’s farewell address to the Ephesian elders, he warned them that “fierce wolves” were coming and that, even from within the church itself, false teachers would arise to divide the church. Paul, therefore, charged the elders to be vigilant and guard the flock from the inevitable attacks of sheep-eating wolves:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock. . . . I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert. (Acts 20:28–31)

Elders are to guard and protect the church from false Christs and pseudo gospels, as well as from the philosophy of radical secularism.

Protecting the flock also involves properly receiving new people into the church (knowing who they are), disciplining sin, admonishing improper behavior and attitudes, and stopping destructive infighting within the flock. An actual shepherd has to manage the bully rams and bucks so that they do not hurt the weaker ones of the flock (Ezek. 34:17–22).

Although the guarding ministry is the negative side of shepherding, it is indispensable to the flock's survival. Elders, then, are to be protectors, watchmen, defenders, and guardians of God's people. As the writer of Hebrews so eloquently puts it, "they are keeping watch over your souls" (Heb. 13:17). Keeping watch over the souls of God's people demands shepherd leaders who are spiritually alert and courageous.

Spiritually Alert: Paul knew the human tendency to be oblivious to the enemy, to be preoccupied with the wrong priorities, to be passive, to be minimalists, to be lazy, and to want the title of elder but not the work. Thus, Paul exhorted the elders to "be alert," that is, be spiritually alert, wide awake, fully alive, and fully engaged in the work of guarding God's people from false teachers (Acts 20:31). David Gooding is spot-on when he states, "Unceasing vigilance is the essential requirement in shepherds."⁶

To "be alert" means to stay up to date on cultural shifts in society and fashionable new ideas challenging Christians. To do this you can utilize and recommend the many audio and printed resources available to help busy people stay informed of important changes in society and in the larger Christian community. These resources will help you and your flock *to be more knowledgeable, discerning, and awake to the many cultural lies and theological errors that face people in your local church.*

3. Leading-Managing-Governing

A third responsibility of the shepherd is leading the sheep to fresh pasture, clean water, and rest. Included in this task is managing the resources needed for sustaining a flock of sheep. As Charles Jefferson remarks, sheep are born followers:

Sheep are not independent travelers. They must have a human conductor. They cannot go to predetermined places by themselves. They cannot start out in the morning in search of pasture and then come home at evening time. They have, apparently, no sense of direction. The greenest pasture may be only a few miles away, but the sheep left to themselves cannot find it. What animal is more incapable than a sheep? He realizes his impotence, for no animal is more docile. Where the shepherd leads, the sheep will go. He knows that the shepherd is a guide and that it is safe to follow him.⁷

A healthy, growing flock of sheep doesn't just happen accidentally. *It is the result of good leadership and skillful management of the entire flock.* The same leading and managing principles involved in shepherding a flock of sheep also apply to shepherding a congregation of people.

Knowing the need people have for leadership, the Holy Spirit of God places the elders in the church to *oversee, shepherd, and lead* God's flock (Acts 20:28). These are all terms of leadership, management, or governance. Furthermore, elders are God's stewards of God's household of faith (Titus 1:7). Stewards manage the household or estate of another. They need to be trustworthy and competent to manage people and finances. Take special note that the elders/overseers are "God's" stewards over

God's household. The emphasis is on God. As God's stewards they have the authority to manage and care for the local church family. The term and concept of *steward* significantly helps to define who the elders are, what they do, and what authority they have.[§]

Leadership/Management/Administrative Skill: Shepherding means that the elders need to be out in front of the congregation leading, not watching from the sidelines. They need to be able to articulate and enforce the distinctive beliefs and values of the church; face hard decisions and not procrastinate; identify and correct problems; effect change and motivate people to action; and provide vision for the church. Elders need to be able to evaluate themselves as leaders, evaluate the different ministries of the church, and plan for improvements, future teachers, and emerging leaders.

Maintaining good governance requires much thought, biblical wisdom, significant effort, and prayer. Such work is a form of selfless service to God's people, but without it churches become dysfunctional and ineffective. That is why the Scripture says those "who rule well" should "be considered worthy of double honor" (1 Tim. 5:17).

The Need for Good Leadership: In my experience, *one of the most common complaints I hear about church elders is that they are not leading the church.* They are maintenance workers. This is tragic because people want to be led; they love good leadership.

4. Practical Care

In addition to the broad categories of feeding, protecting, and leading the flock, elders also bear responsibility for the practical care of the sheep. James instructed the sick to call for the elders of the church: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James 5:14). Praying for the sick displays the tender, compassionate side of shepherd care.

Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to care for "the weak" and needy members of the congregation: "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'" (Acts 20:35). Generosity and compassion should characterize all Christlike shepherd leaders.

An elder's oversight of God's church is more like the oversight of a caring shepherd or a loving father than an executive over a large corporation or a military officer over those under his command. The kind of leadership/management required of a father and a church elder is highly personal; it is loving and caring leadership.

[§] See chapter 22 for the term "steward."

Included in shepherd care is working to know people's names, visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, praying for individuals and families, and making regular phone calls to check on people. Loving shepherd care means being a consummate encourager, letting people know you appreciate their work, providing wise counsel to help and guide troubled people, and caring financially for the needy.

In all this labor the elders are to be assisted by a group of qualified deacons, that is, "qualified assistants" (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8–13; see chapter 11).

The flock needs you to do the job that the Holy Spirit has called you to—shepherding God's people. Do not fail them. Give your life, your time, your energy, and your best efforts for God's sheep. The Good Shepherd Jesus did that for you! It is the least you can do for him.

WORKING A JOB AND PASTORING A CONGREGATION

Some people say, "You can't expect a man to work all day, raise a family, and help shepherd a local church too." But that is not true. Many people raise families, work jobs, and give substantial hours to community service, athletic activities, home building projects, or other endeavors.

It is amazing how much people can accomplish when they are motivated by something they love. I have seen people remodel entire houses in their spare time, or spend many hours on hobbies like rebuilding cars, playing sports, or serving voluntarily on a local city council. I have seen men discipline themselves to gain a remarkable knowledge of Scripture. I have seen church planters work a full-time job to support their family and, in addition, devote themselves wholeheartedly to establishing a new church (1 Cor. 16:15–16). To be a bi-vocational preacher or evangelist takes a great deal of self-sacrifice and devotion to the gospel and the people of God.

Spiritual Laziness and Neglect

The real problem lies not in our limited time but in false ideas about work, Christian living, and life's priorities. One reason there are so few shepherd elders, or good church elderships, is that generally speaking, men are spiritually lazy. *Spiritual laziness and lack of self-discipline are major reasons most churches never establish a biblical eldership.* Too many men are more than willing to let someone else fulfill their own spiritual responsibilities, whether it be their wives or the "trained" professionals. Regarding the absence of men in churches, one author laments that "women go to church; men go to football games."⁸ Sadly, there is a lot of truth to that statement.

Spiritual Dedication

A biblical eldership cannot exist in an atmosphere of nominal Christianity or a one-hour-a-week commitment to the faith. Without biblical Christianity, there can be no biblical eldership. If a New Testament eldership is to function effectively, it must comprise mature men who are firmly committed to our Lord's principles of discipleship. Christian eldership depends on men who seek first the kingdom of

God and have presented themselves as living sacrifices to God and slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 6:33; Rom. 6:13, 19; 12:1–2). From his book *Liberating the Laity*, R. Paul Stevens gives sound biblical advice to tentmaking elders:

For tentmakers to survive three full-time jobs (work, family and ministry), they must also adopt a sacrificial lifestyle. Tentmakers must live a pruned life and literally find leisure and rest in the rhythm of serving Christ (Matt. 11:28). They must be willing to forego a measure of career achievement and private leisure for the privilege of gaining the prize (Phil. 3:14). Many would like to be tentmakers if they could be wealthy and live a leisurely and cultured lifestyle. But the truth is that a significant ministry in the church and the community can only come by sacrifice.⁹

Tentmaking elders are elders who support themselves financially and serve the local church as pastor elders. The term *tentmakers* comes from Acts 18:3. Paul, along with a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, supported themselves financially by tentmaking and simultaneously sharing the gospel in the city of Corinth: “And [Paul] went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade” (Acts 18:2, 3; cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8).

A team of tentmaking elders can make a significant contribution to the shepherding ministry of a local church. Although tentmaking elders cannot contribute as much time as an elder who serves the church full-time, they contribute something equally important: their godly examples of love for God’s people, sacrificial Christian living, love for God, their personal life experiences, and practical wisdom.

Working as a Team

After learning the responsibilities of shepherding the church of God, one can feel overwhelmed. But we need to remember that *no elder is expected to do all the work of shepherding a church. Each elder is part of a team of qualified elders sharing the pastoral oversight of a local church.* Furthermore, some among the elders may serve full-time, part-time, or quarter-time at the church’s expense. Elders can and should protect one another from overwork and burnout.

Deacons: Assistants to the Overseers

Because church elders are busy people and bear weighty responsibilities, God provides them with “assistants” (also called deacons) to assist them in the “care for God’s church” (1 Tim. 3:5, 8–13). The help of qualified, approved assistants relieves the elders of other demanding tasks and helps keep their focus on their primary responsibilities of teaching and leading God’s flock.

The specific tasks of the deacons are to be determined by the elders in accordance with the church’s particular needs, size, and the giftedness of its members. Deacons can offer the elders assistance with hospital visits and phone calls, checking on absentees, managing charitable gifts, distributing aid to the needy, assisting families in distress, visiting and protecting the elderly and shut-ins, helping with

finances, overseeing church property, and carrying out administrative tasks.

A successful deacon ministry is largely dependent on effective supervision by the elders. The elders need to creatively and strategically utilize the ministry of the deacons in an effective manner. If not, the deacons will flounder and become frustrated with the elders.⁹

Every-Member Ministry

Although the elders are officially responsible for the spiritual oversight of the *whole* church, they are not the total ministry of the church. Ministry is not the work of one person or even one group of people. *Ministry is the work of the whole church.*

The entire congregation is to be a living, functioning body, with each member gifted by God and responsible for the life and work of the local church body. The elders are dependent upon the gifts and skills of others for the overall care of the local church. Indeed, the elders are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). As one prominent scholar succinctly puts it: “The functioning of the body requires, and is *equally* dependent on, those who are not leaders.”¹⁰ Elders should learn to delegate and thereby save themselves from pastoral burnout (Acts 6:1–7).

Qualified Shepherd Elders

Shepherding God’s flock is truly “a noble task,” and “a noble task” requires a noble person, someone with godly character and certain abilities (1 Tim. 3:1). In chapter 4, we will examine the biblical qualifications for all pastoral elders. Not just anyone can be a shepherd elder; a biblical shepherd elder must meet God’s standards for the task.

⁹ This material is taken from Alexander Strauch, *Paul’s Vision for the Deacons: Assisting the Elders with the Care of God’s Church* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2017), 74–76.