

# Leadership for the Local Church

## Introduction

In our last session we saw that early in the history of the church there were indications of organization and structure in the local gatherings of members of the body of Christ. We saw that they evaluated the behavior of their members and exercised church discipline. They kept a registry of the elderly widows under the church's care and organized methods for meeting the needs of their members. They raised money for the Lord's work in other areas of the known world at that time. They cooperated with other local churches across the region, and sent letters of recommendation to other churches on behalf of traveling Christian workers. They regularly met together on the first day of the week for the purpose of edification, equipping, and building up the local body through activities such as teaching the Word of God, having meaningful fellowship, celebrating the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and having corporate prayer and worship. Each local gathering of believers also had designated local leaders, and the subject of church leadership is what we are going to focus on in this session.

## The orderly operation of the Church

While all believers are ministers with varied gifts, abilities, and tasks, the Holy Spirit has distributed the different ministries in such a way that the body would function in an orderly way (1 Cor 14:40). The gifts of the Holy Spirit include some that were designed to provide leadership and structure to the church. Churches that do not recognize these leadership roles become places where everyone does what is right in his own eyes -- where the rule becomes "every man for himself" -- and the result is complete chaos and confusion.

The fact that all of the members of the body of Christ have spiritual gifts to use for the edification of the church (and that these are all equally legitimate ministries), does not mean that there are no distinctions among the ministries. For the orderly operation of the church, it became necessary that certain individuals be recognized as having regular, on-going leadership ministries. These gifted believers provide a certain order or structure, and their on-going role as leaders may be termed "offices" or official functions.

## General Ministries

General ministries serve the church at large, such as the Christ-given ministries of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor/teacher which we discussed in our study of Eph 4:11. These ministries can be viewed more as "gifts" which benefit the body than as "offices" which provide order and structure to a local church. One Bible scholar commented that, "Each of these ministries involves in some way the ministry of the Word. Some appear to be foundational in nature (Eph 2:20; 3:5), passing from the scene when the canon of revelation was complete, while others continue permanently in the church, being associated with local offices." [Saucy, 137] Let's briefly review these four ministries so that we will have a solid basis for discussing leadership within the local church.

**Apostles** provided a special ministry to the early church. As eye-witnesses of the original revelation being given in the NT period, the apostles' function and ministry was limited to the foundations of the church (Eph 2:20; 3:5; 2 Pet 3:2; Jude 1:17). As one Bible scholar has said, "The apostles belong to the church's infancy and are given to bear a special witness. They do not represent a permanent

element in the life of the church other than the witness they left behind, which is enshrined for us in the Scriptures.” [Saucy, 138 -- quoting Leon Morris]

**Prophets** were individuals directly gifted and guided by the Holy Spirit to speak forth a message from God. Their revelations included what we might call forth-telling as well as foretelling, with the emphasis on the former. There are only two times in the NT where a prophet is described as predicting future events (Acts 11:28; 21:10-11). The primary function of the prophets was to bring God's new revelation to the early church for the purpose of edification (1 Cor 14:3-4). The Holy Spirit guided the early church through the prophets during the time when revelation was incomplete. However, the ministry of the prophet of speaking inspired revelation from God gradually decreased and ultimately ended with the completion of the New Testament. Their ministry of edification and giving insight into the truth of God's revelation was taken over by the regular local ministry of the pastor-teacher.

**Evangelists** are gifted believers who have special insight into proclaiming the good news of the gospel. The word evangelist is related to the Greek word for gospel. Many people believe the evangelist is like the traveling missionary of today, but the function of the evangelist is to exercise that spiritual gift for the benefit of the church. This means that the primary ministry of the evangelist is to train and equip believers with the skills to be able to share their faith with their unsaved friends and neighbors.

**Pastor-Teachers** are gifted believers who build up other believers by means of their God-given insight into the truths of the faith. Their function became increasingly important as the foundational apostles and prophets passed from the scene. Perhaps it is because of their historical sequence, as well as their relative importance in the early church, that the ministries of evangelist and pastor-teacher come after those of apostle and prophet.

## Specific Local Church Offices

We have looked at the general ministries provided by gifted believers for the edification of the body of Christ. Now we will turn our attention to the official roles or “offices” within the local churches.

The New Testament describes only two local church offices. The first is that of Elder, which is also referred to using other terms such as bishop, overseer, shepherd, and pastor. This office is primarily tasked with watching over the church. The second office mentioned in the NT is that of Deacon, which is primarily concerned with providing services to meet the needs of the church.

The NT records that each individual local church had its own elders and deacons (Acts 20:17; Phil 1:1), and their sphere of authority and activity did not extend beyond the local assembly of which they were members. In this session we will focus on the office of elder, because that was the primary leadership role within the local body of believers.

### Terms for the Office

It is important to understand that the terms elder or presbyter, bishop or overseer, and pastor or shepherd all refer to the same office in a local church (Acts 20:17 with 20:28; Titus 1:5 with 1:7; 1 Tim 3:4 with 5:17; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:1-2). The term elder, which literally meant a senior or elderly man, described the dignity and wisdom which were associated with mature spiritual leadership. The word bishop refers to one of the functions of an elder, and it literally means “an overseer” or “one who

watches over something.” It speaks of the responsibility of a leader to watch over and protect the members of the church. The term pastor literally means to act as a shepherd by feeding and caring for the needs of the flock of God. It too refers to one of the functions of an elder, to feed and care for the church.

From these three terms we can conclude that a local church elder is to watch over the souls of the members of the local assembly as one who will someday give an account to God (Heb 13:17). “The guidance and protection are accomplished primarily through the ministry of the Word of God. Paul discharged his pastoral duties with the Ephesians by declaring to them all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27).” [Saucy, 144] The pastoral duties of the elder require that he comfort and encourage those who are weak and correct those who are going astray. The shepherd must discipline the sheep who are straying, but with an attitude of tenderness, seeking their restoration and not their harm.

### **Gift vs. Office**

Sometimes it may seem confusing that God gave the gift of pastor-teacher (Eph 4:11) but also ordained the separate office of pastor or elder. It may be helpful to make a distinction between the spiritual gifts and the official roles within the local church. Since teaching is mentioned separately in another listing of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:28), it seems clear that there were gifted teachers who did not hold the office of pastor. And, on the other hand, in the list of qualifications for the office of elder we see that they must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2) even if they do not have the spiritual gift of teaching. We have seen that the teaching function is one of the primary duties of the office of elder. It is recorded in the NT that all elders were to work diligently in watching over the flock, but some elders are described as working to the point of fatigue at the task of studying and teaching the Word of God (1 Tim 5:17). Every elder, however, is required to know the Scriptures and to hold fast to the truths of the faith, “so that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

### **Qualifications for the Office**

The qualifications for holding the office of elder are given in several places in the NT, but the primary listings are in 1 Tim 3:1-16 and Titus 1:5-7. The fact that these two detailed lists of qualifications are given shows that God is very concerned with the leadership of the local church, and He desires that we exercise great care in the appointment of elders. An elder must meet qualifications in several categories, including personal character qualities, interpersonal relationship skills, family leadership qualities, and maturity in the faith, in the Word, and in spiritual wisdom.

### **The Number of Elders**

The NT points to a plurality of elders in each local church -- there was not just a single elder, but several elders who functioned as a counsel of equals (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 5:17; Jam 5:14). This provided some needed checks and balances in the decision making and operation of the local churches. The term of office is not stated in the Scriptures, so it would appear that as long as the elder continued to meet the qualifications for the office, the length of his term was up to the discretion of each local assembly.

### **The Authority of the Office**

The authority which these leaders exercise does not reside in the position or in the person, but in God who gave this function to benefit the church. In recognizing such a ministry, the church (as the

Spirit-controlled body) is recognizing the ministry of leadership provided by the Head for the building up of the whole body (Eph 4:15; Col 1:18; 2:10).

Two dangerous attitudes are always present in the issue of church leadership. On the one hand, those appointed to leadership may abuse their position and lord it over the flock rather than serve as an under-shepherd of Christ who is also a member of the flock. On the other hand, the people refuse to recognize those appointed to serve among them as leaders.

## A Detailed Study of 1 Peter 5:1-4

With all of this in mind, let's now study a specific passage that contains instructions for church leadership to see the actions and (most importantly) the attitudes which should characterize local church leadership.

- <sup>1</sup> Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you,
1. as *your* fellow elder
  2. and witness of the sufferings of Christ,
  3. and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,
- <sup>2</sup> **shepherd** the flock of God among you,  
**exercising oversight**
1. not under compulsion,  
but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*;
  2. and not for sordid gain,  
but with eagerness;
  3. <sup>3</sup> nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge,  
but proving to be examples to the flock.
- <sup>4</sup> And when the Chief Shepherd appears,  
you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

### Exhorting the leadership of the church

In this letter, Peter had been addressing the believers as a group, but here in this section he focused on the elders among them. He singled out the elders for a special message.

“**I exhort**” = this is the Greek word *parakaleo*, which means “to call alongside” or “to call to one's side” for the purpose of speaking to, admonishing, instructing, or encouraging.

“**The elders among you**” = Peter addressed the elders, and as we mentioned a few minutes ago, this term describes the dignity, wisdom, and maturity of this office of church leadership. Notice that Peter said, “the elders among you.” He did NOT say, “the elders over you” -- and this is a reminder to the elders that they are merely sheep too! They are among the flock, while also having been given some delegated duties for the benefit of others within the flock.

### The authority for this message

Here Peter gave three reasons why he had the right to speak authoritatively to the leaders of the local churches to whom he is writing.

1. "As your fellow-elder" = as a fellow-elder Peter was speaking from personal experience in that office. He was identifying closely with his intended audience by saying, "I am one of you!" Notice that he did not say, "I am the supreme pontiff, the Pope of the whole church, so listen to me!" Peter nowhere calls himself the first pope -- he begins by describing himself as a fellow-elder just like them.
2. "As a witness of the sufferings of Christ" = The phrases "witness of the sufferings" and "partaker of the glory" remind us of something Peter wrote in 1 Pet 4:13 = "But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation." There Peter said he was a partaker in the sufferings of Christ, but here he said he was a witness of the sufferings of Christ. In that passage Peter was referring to the suffering that comes from being a Christian in a non-Christian world, while here Peter referred to his role as an apostle who was an eyewitness of Christ's suffering on the cross. Peter was gently invoking his apostolic authority in his exhortation to the elders.
3. "As a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed" = the elders should keep in mind that their time is short in this world, and soon they will be entering into a glorious future that God has prepared for us. So the present work of the elder should be motivated by the expectation of that glorious future, including the evaluation of their ministry at the "Reward Seat" of Christ (1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 5:10). One commentator said, "Looking forward, as they did also, to the blessed world before him and them, he had a right to exhort them to the faithful performance of duty." [Barnes]

## The command

**"Shepherd the flock"** = This verb (in the imperative) means to tend the flock as a shepherd; to do the work of a shepherd. This includes all aspects of the care and feeding of the members: providing nourishment, leading to safe pasture, keeping the sheep healthy and well-groomed, and guarding or protecting them from danger at all times. Jesus used this very word to Peter (John 21:16), and Peter probably had this incident firmly in mind as he passed on this exhortation to the leaders of local churches. The analogy of the shepherd and the sheep in John 10 clearly shows the loving and self-sacrificing attitude that should characterize a good shepherd.

**"Of God among you"** = what makes this flock special is that it is God's flock. He owns the sheep, which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). Again, Peter used the phrase "among you" to remind the elders that they are also part of the flock.

**"Exercising oversight"** = here Peter used the Greek participle *episkopountes* which corresponds to the noun *episkopos*, translated as "overseer" or "bishop". The terms overseer and shepherd are closely associated because one of the main tasks of a shepherd is (literally) to "watch over" the flock. So here in this passage so far we have seen all three of the terms (elder, pastor, overseer) used as synonyms for the primary office of church leadership.

**Essential attitudes for these actions**

NOT (negatively)	BUT (positively)
<p><b>The Motive of External Pressure</b>                      "Not under compulsion" = Not as if you have been forced to carry a heavy burden that you would rather not carry. This phrase might be understood in an active sense of pastors compelling or forcing their flock, driving them, or ruling them with force and cruelty -- but it is usually understood in a passive sense of pastors being pressured by outside forces to feed and tend the flock.</p>	<p><b>The Motive of Willing Submission to God</b>                      "But voluntarily, according to the will of God" = The contrast to serving under compulsion is serving of one's own choice, as he is led by God. The Holy Spirit will provide the burden or call to service, as well as the ability, and the elder is to willingly respond to God's call (see 1 Tim 3:1)</p>
<p><b>The Motive of Greed</b>                      "Not for sordid gain" = Elders were often paid for their services, just as Jesus commanded (Matt 10:10) and as the New Testament instructed (1 Cor 9:3-14; 1 Tim 5:17-18). In addition to these instructions to support elders, however, there are also warnings that some elders may try to turn their office into a business (1 Tim 6:3-5; Titus 1:10-11). This was a common practice among the traveling Greek philosophers of that day, and Peter instructs the elders of the local church to avoid this kind of attitude.</p>	<p><b>The Motive of Eagerness</b>                      "But with eagerness" = The contrast to a mercenary spirit or the attitude of a hireling is that the elder should be eager to serve without thought of financial gain (2 Cor 11:7-21). Such enthusiasm is the opposite of the calculating spirit that is concerned mainly with how to make money.</p>
<p><b>The Motive of Power</b>                      "Not as lording it over" = the term for "lording it over" means to bring under one's power, to subdue, to hold in subjection, to be the master as a strong person would over one viewed as being weaker. We might call this being a dictator, or acting in an authoritarian way. The New Testament describes such church leaders (for example, 3 John 1:9-10), but this type of autocratic leadership is condemned in the Scriptures.</p>	<p><b>The Motive of Modeling</b>                      "But proving to be examples to the flock" = the contrast to lording it over the flock is to become an example of how a good member of the flock should behave. Leadership by example is the universal teaching of the entire New Testament (Mark 10:42-45; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6-7; 2 Thess 3:9; 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7).</p>

**The reward**

**“And when the Chief Shepherd appears”** = the Lord Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, and He is coming in the clouds to take Church-age saints out of this world before the Great Tribulation. We are told in the Scriptures that we will be with Him where He is (John 14:3), and that our earthly ministries

will be evaluated and rewarded at that time (2 Cor 5:10). We might say it this way: "Reward Day is Coming!"

This phrase also tells us that Christ is the Chief Shepherd of the flock, so elders are functioning merely as "under-shepherds" who are part of the flock themselves too. Elders are under the authority of the Chief Shepherd, and so they are not free to lead the flock in any direction that they choose. Everything the elders do should be based on the Word of God and the will of God revealed there.

**"You will receive the unfading crown of glory"** = there is an implied condition for this phrase. IF you perform the duties of an elder in the proper way and with the proper attitude, THEN you will receive the unfading crown of glory. This is motivation indeed for avoiding the errors of church leadership that Peter has outlined. One theologian wrote, "Hard-working, selfless shepherds may not have many earthly goods to show for a lifetime of toil, but some day the Chief Shepherd will come and fully reward His under-shepherds. Their work will no longer go unnoticed or unappreciated, for He will reward them publicly before the host of heaven." [Strauch, 250]

## Conclusion

In this session we have seen that God not only provided spiritually gifted individuals for the equipping of the church, but He also ordained regular or official ministries to provide order and structure for the church. We should not confuse the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher with the official function of the elder, overseer, or shepherd. In his official capacity, the elder is to watch over the flock of God, to lovingly care for other believers, to teach them the truths of the Word of God, and to be a shining example of how a believer is to live in this world.

In our brief study of 1 Peter 5:1-4 we saw that there are several wrong motives for entering into the official role of an elder, including succumbing to external pressure, giving in to material greed, and seeking to build a position of power over others. By contrast, the true motivations for an elder should be a willingness to do what you know God wants you to do, an eagerness to serve without thought of financial gain, and a desire to become a positive example to others in living the Christian life.

Let us all remember that the Chief Shepherd is coming soon to take us to be with Him, and that we will experience the rewards for faithful service as well as the glory of His presence forever.