

The Long Farewell

Blueprints of a Healthy Church – Part V

Acts 20:28

Introduction

Some years ago, John Stott was the speaker at Dallas Seminary's Griffith Thomas Lectures. He began one of his messages on the role of the pastor, by quoting from a conversation between Huckleberry Finn and the red-headed Mary Jane.

Huck was telling Mary Jane that in the church of the Reverend Harvey Wilks (her uncle), there were "no less than seventeen clergy." "But," he added, "they don't all of 'em preach the same day – only one of 'em."

"Well then," asked Mary Jane, "what does the rest of 'em do?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Huck, "they loll around, pass the plate, and one thing or another . . . but mainly, they don't do nothin'."

"Well then," asked Mary Jane in astonishment, "what are they for?"

Huckleberry Finn replied with a sense of confidence, "Why, Mary Jane, they are for style, don't you know anything . . . they are for style."

Just what are pastors for? What is the role of the church leader today? Are pastors social workers? Psychologists? Administrators? Corporate gurus? Are they the self-help experts? Are they motivational speakers that everyone comes to hear once a week? Are they therapists designed to make everybody feel better about life.

Now every one of the descriptions that I just rattled off were not made up. They are all the actual descriptions of thousands of ministers in pulpits and churches today. Never before has the role of the

pastor/elder been mired in so much confusion and unbiblical jargon.

So today, I want to begin swimming upstream against the current of popular opinion, and perhaps even some of your opinions, regarding the role and responsibility of the pastorate.

Church Leaders

I invite your attention back to Acts, chapter 20, where we left off in our previous discussion. By way of introduction, let me make two statements.

Church leaders are identified by three terms

1. First, church leaders are identified in the New Testament by three primary terms or titles.

All three terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament for the same man, the same office. Let me give them to you.

Elder

- The first term is "presbuteroi," in the Greek, which is translated "elders".

Notice in verse 17 of chapter 20, that Paul,

. . . *sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.*

The "presbuteroi," is a word that gives us our transliterated word, "presbyter," or "Presbyterian". This word relates to the responsibility of the pastorate. It is a term that was more than likely borrowed from the Jewish synagogue that referred to the wise, elderly men who led the synagogue.

Bishop

- The second term is “episkopos,” in the Greek, which is translated “bishops”.

Look at verse 28 and notice this second term.

. . . among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [bishops] . . .

Your translation may read “bishops”. It is the Greek word “episkopos,” which gives us our word “Episcopal”. The last part of “episkopos,” or “skopos,” is a Greek word that gives us our English word “scope”. We have attached this word to several words; such as, telescope and microscope. They accurately convey the meaning of the word, which is, “to look carefully into, to intently watch over”. This word relates to the rule of the pastorate. We will look closer at this later.

Pastor

- The third term is “poimenos,” in the Greek, which is translated “pastor/shepherd”.

This term is found in verb form in the very next words of verse 28,

. . . to shepherd the church of God . . .

The noun form of this word is used by Paul in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 11, as the categorical term for the entire office. It is the word “poimenos,” or pastor/shepherd; literally, “feeder”.

This word summarizes the role of the office, the passion of the office of church leader appointed by God to lead the flock. In fact, the same Greek word has been transliterated “pasture,” which is a term that relates directly to the nourishment, care, and health of the sheep.

Jesus Christ reinstated Peter after Peter’s denial. You may remember that three times, the Lord asked Peter, in John, chapter 21, verses 15 through 17, “Do you love Me?” And Peter said, “Yes, Lord I do love You.” Jesus answered Peter, “Feed My sheep,” then, “Shepherd My sheep,” and then, “Feed My sheep.”

In other words, “Peter, the church is about to be born; and I never want you to forget that the greatest way you can prove that you love Me, as a leader in the church, is by feeding the sheep.”

That is the most neglected role today. And yet, the Bible considers it the passion of the pastorate. Did you know that the primary role of the shepherd/pastor/elder/bishop is not to visit people in their homes; not to counsel people in their office; not

to evangelize people in the streets; not to administrate an office; not to raise funds; not to preside at weddings and funerals; not even to kiss babies and shake hands? It is to feed the flock.

Now everything that I have just mentioned is an activity of the church, is it not? So, the second point is equally important, and it answers the question you may have, “Well, Stephen, if you’re not doing that as the pastor/elder/bishop, who will?”

Church leadership is identified as a plurality

2. Secondly, church leadership is identified as a plurality of men.

In other words, the office of elder in a singular church is an office occupied by more than one man. Earlier, in Acts, chapter 14, verse 23, we saw that they established elders (plural) in every church (singular).

There is nothing in the New Testament that indicates one pastor is to play all the instruments in the orchestra. But let me add this, the New Testament example of church polity or organization clearly reveals a leader among the leaders. There is a leading elder among elders, typified by the pastor/teacher.

One example of this is James in the church of Jerusalem. James, by the way, was not even an apostle, and yet he summarized and settled the debate in the Jerusalem church. Timothy, as well, was the pastor/teacher in the Ephesian church. Titus, the pastor/teacher, was the leading elder in Crete.

The point is, while there is a need for a leader among leaders, the common mistake is to assume that the leading elder or pastor/teacher should attempt to dabble in everything. And, worse yet, that he alone is to decide everything.

One of the strengths of our church has been the combined efforts of godly men who serve as staff elders (our pastoral staff) and lay elders (our elected elders from within our church family). Since the beginning of our church, I have surrounded myself with a group of men who have combined their strengths, ministry gifts, and wisdom to direct this church toward biblical goals and priorities. And, since the beginning, we have chosen to operate on the principle of unanimity. That is, if we do not reach agreement on an issue, we take more time to discuss it and pray about the issue. We lead by virtue of unity.

You might say, “You mean to tell me that a dozen men can get in a board room and actually agree, and call themselves Baptists, no less?”

Yes! And it is the unified combination of wisdom and gifts of these men that make us a church that equips people to evangelize, disciple, facilitate, care for, and much more, for the glory of God.

Stand Guard . . . Over Yourselves!

Now, let us look at our text in the book of “action,” chapter 20. We will begin by refreshing our memories by looking at verses 17 through 27.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.

And when they had come to him, he said to them, “You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time,

“serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews;

“how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,

“solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there,

“except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me.

“But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

“And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face.

“Therefore, I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men.

“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.”

At this point, having said all of that in regards to his own ministry, Paul will now directly address the Ephesian elders. In so doing, he provides for us the biblical job description – the responsibility, the rule,

and the role – of the New Testament office of pastor/elder/bishop.

First, Paul warns the elders to stand guard over themselves. Notice verse 28a.

Be on guard for yourselves . . .

It is interesting that Paul begins by warning the leaders about their own spiritual vulnerability before he warns them about the church.

“Be on guard,” or “prosecho” in the Greek. In other words, take heed to yourselves; pay close attention to yourselves. You could paraphrase Paul as saying, “Listen elders, watch out!”

Why begin with the elders? If the elders fail in their spiritual walk, the church will suffer. If the elders fall into sin, the church at large suffers.

Recently, a leading official in the Episcopal Church was indicted for embezzling more than a million dollars. She later cited as her defense, a form of insanity that made her do it. I guess in a way, she was right, for certainly no sin is ever reasonable; it never makes sense.

The president of a large Southern Baptist institution was also revealed recently as being involved not only in embezzling more than a million in school funds, but also being deeply involved in pornography and prostitution.

Warren Wiersbe wrote several years ago, “For centuries the church told the world to repent; now, in this generation, the world is telling the church to repent.”

So I find it interesting that the apostle Paul, gravely concerned over the future of the church in Ephesus, begins by first warning the leaders of the church.

That warning can also be applied to Sunday school teachers and to Christian servants in any ministry. The truth is, it is sometimes easiest to walk away from fellowship with God while you are in the process of serving God. Why? Because your focus is on the lives of others; the needs of others; the sins of others; the cares of others, so that you forget to do what Paul, in this verse, exhorted the elders to do first of all – “Watch out for yourselves! Take a hard look at your own lives.”

If the leaders are weak in their faith, the church will not be led to take steps of faith. If the leaders are immature in their behavior, the church will be given to strife and discord. If the leaders are timid in their stand for doctrinal truth, the church will vacillate from one evangelical fad to the next. If the leaders are not pure men with sensitive consciences to sin,

the church will not be led toward holiness and purity. If the leaders are not committed to the study of the word of God, the church will be fed on the dribble of interesting topics and issues, rather than the whole counsel of God's holy word.

Lenski wrote,

Be taught yourself before you try to teach others. Be light yourself before you try to give light to others. Be near to God yourself before you attempt to bring others near [to God].ⁱ

In other words, the elders are to be the standard in the flock for purity, faith, and sound doctrine.

The writer of Hebrews declared, in chapter 13, verse 7,

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

The conduct and character of the elder gives him the right to lead!

By the way, long before an admitted adulterer and fornicator ever occupied the White House, as in the recent past, admitted adulterers and fornicators were allowed to occupy the pulpits of our churches. And why should an immoral man not be allowed to lead our country, if immoral men are allowed to lead the church?

According to Paul's priority, he would say, "As the elder goes, so goes the church . . . as the church goes, so goes the home . . . as the home goes, so goes the nation."

The church today is crying for a revival to occur in Washington. I say, let a revival begin in the pulpits of our land which will affect the church, which will influence the home, whose inhabitants will then, not allow immorality in their own lives, much less in the lives of their leaders.

The nation is a reflection of the home; the home is a reflection of the church; the church is a reflection of its leadership.

"Watch out, leaders! You are influencing more than you ever imagined."

So the elders were the first that received Paul's severe warning.

Stand Guard . . . Over the Flock!

Paul then tells the elders to carefully watch over the flock! Look at the next phrase in verse 28.

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, . . .

The "flock" is the local assembly; the local "ekklesia"; the local church in Ephesus.

Job description for church leaders (or elders)

Now Paul begins the job description for the elders.

Ordination

1. First, Paul clarifies their ordination.

Continue to the next phrase in verse 28.

. . . among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, . . .

Who is ultimately responsible for a man attaining the office of elder? A history of fathers and grandfathers serving as elders? No. The nomination by some well-meaning friend? No. A congregational vote? No. They all might be a wonderful part of the process, but ultimately, it has been the sovereign Holy Spirit who has first chosen him and made him an overseer.

Only the Holy Spirit can equip a man for the work. Only the Holy Spirit can gift him for the necessary task. Only the Holy Spirit can energize him for the all consuming task. A man does not force or manipulate his way into the position of an elder. He is not qualified because of wealth, social position, business knowledge, worldly success, or natural talent. Only the Holy Spirit can qualify and call a man to the responsibility, rule, and role. Only the Spirit of God can impassion a man with a desire to give his life to lead, to instruct, to care for, to feed the flock.

Oversight

2. Secondly, Paul not only clarifies their ordination, but reveals their oversight of the flock.

Notice the same phrase in verse 28 again.

. . . the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, . . .

The term "overseers," in the Greek is "episkopos". It relates to the ruling nature of the office of pastor/elder/bishop.

In other words, the flock is not led to pasture by the flock, it is led by the shepherds. The flock does not decide what is good for the flock, that is the responsibility of the elders.

Now we also observe in the book of Acts the affirmation of the congregation in relation to the decisions of the elders. It is a wonderful thing for the entire family to be on the same page. It is a powerful thing for the entire body to move along in unity toward accomplishing its biblical objectives.

However, the ultimate responsibility of direction rests squarely on the shoulders of this office of church leaders. They will give an account to God for the flock one day.

Listen as the writer of Hebrews states, in chapter 13, verse 17,

Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Paul wrote in I Thessalonians, chapter 5, verses 12 and 13a,

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work . . .

The elder oversight also includes, as Paul wrote to Titus, in chapter 1, verses 9 through 11a,

[the overseer] holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers . . . who must be silenced . . .

By the way, while the flock is to submit and follow the church leaders, the flock is never spoken of in scripture as belonging to the pastors/elders. That is one of the reasons that you never hear me refer to you as, “My people.” You do not belong to me or any other elder, you belong to God. Elders are merely stewards, caretakers over what Peter called in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 2, “the flock of God.”

Objective

3. Thirdly, the elders are to accomplish the next aspect in their job description; that is, their objective.

Notice again verse 28b.

. . . to shepherd the church of God . . .

What an incredible objective – to shepherd. In other words, the elders are to nurture, to feed, to guard, to lead the church of God.

Stand Guard . . . Over the Truth!

How important is the church to God? Notice the last part of verse 28.

. . . the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

This not only tells us about the preciousness of the church; it also declares for us the deity of Christ. This last phrase has been debated for centuries, yet the most reliable manuscripts have it in just this way, “. . . the church of God purchased with His own blood.”

Early copyists thought that Paul needed correcting, so they inserted the words to say, “the church of God which *the Lord* purchased with His own blood.” Others read, “the church of God which He purchased with His own *Son’s* blood.”

Surely those statements are correct, but Paul is addressing not only the value of the church, but the nature of Christ. Jesus Christ is God. And since all the fullness of deity dwelt in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:19), you could actually say, as Paul did, that when Jesus shed His blood, it was the blood of God.

This phrase could literally be translated, “The church of God which He purchased with blood that was His own.”

Paul will continue in this passage to warn the elders of the wolves who will come to destroy the church. And the wolves did come – from without and within. And the issue they attacked more than any other issue, was the deity of Jesus Christ. Was He truly God in the flesh?

Application

Marks of a healthy church

What are the marks of a healthy/biblical local church?

- A faithful leadership by godly men.
- A flock of submissive, well fed believers.

(By the way, as a member of the flock, the greatest revelation of your character may not be in your willingness to lead, but in your willingness to follow.)

- A firm faith in the living Lord of the church.

The living Lord – the One who was called the Bishop or Overseer of your souls in I Peter, chapter

2, verse 25; the One who died so that the church could be bought out of slavery and brought out of darkness; the one referred to in Hebrews, chapter 13, verse 20, as, “the great Shepherd of the sheep” – that man was fully God, the Redeemer, and living Head of the church.

At the University of Chicago Divinity School each year, they have what is called “Baptist Day”. It is a day when all the Baptists in the area are invited to the school because the school needs the Baptist dollars to keep coming in.

On this day, each one is to bring a lunch to be eaten outdoors in a grassy picnic area. After lunch they convene in the Theological Education Center where a speaker addresses them. The University of Chicago invites the “greatest minds” to lecture.

Recently, the University invited Dr. Paul Tillich. He came and, if you can imagine, spoke for two and a half hours in an attempt to prove that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was false. He quoted scholar after scholar and book after book. He concluded that, since there was no such thing as the historical literal resurrection of Christ, the religion of the church was groundless, emotional mumbo-jumbo because it was based on a relationship with a risen Christ; who, in fact, never rose from the dead in any literal sense.

Dr. Tillich then asked if there were any questions. After about thirty seconds of stunned

silence, an old preacher with a head of woolly white hair stood up near the back of the auditorium. “Doctor Tillich, I have just one question,” he said, as all eyes turned toward him. He reached into his crumpled sack lunch and pulled out an apple and took a bite. “Dr. Tillich,” crunch, crunch, “my question is a simple question.” Munch, munch, “Now, I haven’t read the books you quoted, and I can’t recite the scripture as you have in the Greek language,” and he took another bite of his apple, “I don’t know anything about Niebuhr and Heidegger,” munch, munch, and he finished his apple, “all I want to know is this, was the apple I just ate bitter or sweet?”

Dr. Tillich paused for a moment and answered in scholarly fashion, “I cannot possibly answer that question, for I haven’t tasted your apple.”

The white-haired preacher dropped the core of his apple into his paper bag, looked up at Dr. Tillich, and calmly said, “Neither have you tasted my Jesus.”

David wrote, in Psalm, chapter 34, verse 8,

O taste and see that the Lord is good . . .

The desire of this church and its leadership is to know that One who is our Chief Shepherd, the Bishop of our souls, the Lamb slain to redeem the church to Himself, the risen Lord who will return again.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 5/31/1998 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Lenski, Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles (Augsburg Publishing House, 1934), p. 846.