

The Ministry of Elders

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. Heb 13:7

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Heb 13:17

The service that elders perform in the body of Christ is extremely important, and yet it is a ministry that is universally corrupted. The chief reason for this corruption is that the overriding mentality driving most church leaders is derived from the world instead of God. The motivating principle behind worldly leadership is formal, institutional authority which drives underlings to perform tasks to maintain a mission statement; the principle behind Biblical leadership is sacrificial service to build people up. The goal of worldly leadership is a measurable material object; the goal of spiritual leadership is a mature people.

Illustration of leadership

The dominant illustration of Biblical leadership is that of the shepherd who was a rather lowly figure in Biblical times. The prevailing work of shepherds was to lead the flock (not drive them) into good pastures and to protect them from wolves and bears; i.e. nurturing and defending. The most notable difference between eastern and western shepherds is that eastern shepherds lead their sheep from the front; the sheep follow the shepherd. Western shepherds drive their sheep from behind, usually with the aid of dogs. The Biblical illustration of leadership is that of an eastern shepherd.

The Lord's people need shepherding; indeed the true leader of God's people is the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. All local church leaders only have a delegated responsibility and authority derived from the chief shepherd. They guide and guard the sheep under the aegis of Christ with no individual, autonomous ruling authority of their own. The sheep belong to Christ and woe betides any man who mistreats these sheep. Elders are thus like hireling shepherds who do not own the sheep but care for them on behalf of another.

The prerequisite of leaders

Thus an important aspect of leadership is to know the mind of Christ. The Lord knows how to support and develop the flock and has declared his purpose for them; thus under-shepherds must make it a priority to know Christ's will for the church. This does not come from some mystical impression gained by meditation, nor from the supposed prophecies arising from leadership meetings, but from Scripture. We know the mind of Christ because Scripture reveals it; the words of the apostles form the truth, revealed from heaven by the Spirit, that shows us how to interpret the Old Testament revelation and gives us Christ's final words. This shows us how to get in line with Christ's thinking. If our decisions take us in a direction away from apostolic doctrine, then we are being diverted from the mind of Christ.

It cannot be stressed enough that the policy and decisions of elders must arise from knowing the word of God and not from some pre-conceived philosophy or the latest fad. Any strategy which is, in essence, in opposition to the Bible is not the work of Christ and

must be the work of the enemy. This alone nullifies most of the leadership policies in many modern churches.

The purpose of leadership

The principle purpose of elders is to nurture the flock. The whole point of leadership in the church is to equip and mature the saints and this principle should drive them in all their decisions. No strategy should ever be considered that in any way inhibits the growth of the congregation; no policy should be developed that gives another mission more importance than the spiritual education of the people.

The wickedness of modern leaders is that many policies are introduced that actively militate against the spiritual health of church members. It beggars belief that impositions and demands are made of the congregation to further some leadership mission, which cut across their physical health, their spare time and their growth in grace.

Biblical leadership

The nurturing of the saints involves several aspects which are encompassed within the illustration of shepherding, but most of which can be subsumed under two chief occupations. These two key functions are to provide good pasture and defend against predators. Both these features need to be fully implemented; failure to provide one will damage the sheep. It is rare today that good pasture is provided for the sheep, but it is almost unheard of that both good spiritual food is provided and proper warnings and admonitions are given regarding false teaching. Everywhere toleration is the watchword and many are fearful of naming heretics.

Leading into good pasture

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Leading sheep into good pasture is the symbol for feeding the saints with spiritual food. The food of the saints is Christ in his fulness, the fountain of grace; thus elders will seek to impart a thorough knowledge of Christ to their flock and how to feed on him. Abiding in Christ is the means to bearing spiritual fruit so good leaders will always focus everything they do on a revelation of Christ. Leaders who focus attention on strategies, missions, organisation and methods are untrustworthy and will divert the saints from their true heavenly goal.

In practical terms leaders teach people about Christ's person and work and the fulfilment of God's will by instruction from the word, Scripture, which is the written revelation and expression of Christ as the living Word of God.

Speaking the word of God

Leaders speak the word of God in several ways; in fact any leader who thinks that he can fulfil the education of the saints merely by a weekly sermon is deluded. Leaders must speak the word of God in a variety of situations, which include:

- Formal didactic teaching and instruction, such as in a weekly Bible study that includes questions, answers and debate.

- Exhortative and instructive teaching in the main Sunday meeting, which will also include questions and answers.
- Prophesying, or powerful spiritual exhortation based on the word of God which is applied as spiritual encouragement and received as the oracles of God.
- Counselling in private, including comforting, admonishing, warning, exhorting and encouraging.
- Catechising young believers to ensure that they have a thorough grounding in Biblical doctrine.
- Discipling people unto Christ so that believers know how to walk and conduct spiritual exercises.
- Counselling and comforting.
- Admonishing and disciplining.
- Contending against errors.

The objective of speaking God's word is to educate and equip the saints to know God through Christ, to be mature in spirit and to discern between good and evil (Heb 5:14). Well-taught people will be discerning and able to judge what is true and what is false. When people are confused by diverse teachings surrounding them, when saints do not understand essential principles of God's word, when folk do not know how to live and respond to the world and temptation, then they have not been taught properly or effectively.

True Biblical teaching and spiritual education is the essential ministerial component of godly leadership.

Modelling faith and ethics

... whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct. Heb 13:7

The most important aspect of an elder's ministry is not his teaching but his character; it is for this reason that Paul insists on so many serious qualifications in his pastoral letters. It is noteworthy that graduation from a theological seminary is not one of them. The emphasis in Biblical leadership success is not upon head-knowledge, upon mere facts, but on the knowledge that comes from suffering, which changes character.

We are told to follow the faith of good leaders and to consider the outcome of their conduct. The faith of leaders is the summation of doctrinal knowledge that they have gleaned coupled with their life experience. The knocks of life test whether what one believes stands the test or not. The truth always sets people free, brings liberation; the truth does not bind people up and put them in bondage. The vicissitudes of life, the sufferings we all undergo, test whether what we believe is the truth. After a period of testing what remains that has been tested becomes the root of our faith, the truth that we rest upon, the doctrines that build us up. True doctrine builds character and leads us to righteousness; there is no ethical development without a foundation of doctrine. True doctrine is not dead and dusty or mere intellectual discipline; real doctrine establishes character and feeds faith. Thus the faith of elders is the knowledge that has stood the test

of life and grounded ethical character development; it is the truth they believe in which forms the foundation of their character.

As well as following the faith of elders we must consider not only their conduct but the outcome of their conduct. The way of a good elder will say more than the words of a bad elder. Paul was so confident in his walk with God that he could tell earnest young leaders to imitate him; how many leaders could dare say that today? Elders are on view all the time and there is no day off from being an example to the flock.

An example of learning by considering the conduct of an elder is prayer. One can teach till the cows come home about prayer, what it is, how it works, what sorts there are and so on, but all this is intellectual and limited. We can better learn how to pray by following the example of a real man of God. We can learn so much by praying with a godly man who has the ear of God and knows exactly how to pray and what to pray in each circumstance. But then there is the outcome of his praying; the results of his prayers and the humble way that he handles the successful answer of prayers give us a real insight into the ways of God with men.

Another example is to be with a good elder in a counselling session with a needy person. In life one will meet with many questions and needs from saints which no seminary can prepare you for. Questions will arise that you never ever considered and have no immediate answer for; this is part of the test of counselling. Watching a good elder deal with this and help needy people is a terrific lesson for the growing young leader.

Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. 1 Tim 4:12

Defending against predators

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Watching over souls

Shepherds have to watch out carefully for the sheep. A good shepherd knows his sheep intimately, is aware of their individual weaknesses and eccentricities, and ensures that they always have good pasture. He will be most attentive to any sheep that wanders from this pasture and gets lost in some deception. Elders are accountable for the souls of those under their care and must ensure that everyone is saved from deceit. Anyone who is deceived into following some false teaching is a failure for the eldership.

It is not enough to give up to date warnings about heresies and heretics that are currently deceiving the flock (and how few do even this) but the leaders must know the spiritual state of individuals and do everything possible to protect them. Different people need different sorts of care and protection; some simply need information and can be trusted with dealing with error on their own. Others need a great deal of patience, training and care while others will require admonishment and warning. Occasionally one will need rescuing from being ensnared; the devil prowls around seeking to ensnare unwitting people into some form of deception because when they are deceived they are doing his will. Deception (i.e. holding any doctrine that is not Biblical) is a failure to do God's will and doing the will of the enemy.

That they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will. 2 Tim 2:26

Jesus is the example of a good shepherd and that means going to great lengths to rescue lost sheep. Any leader who has no care about those who leave the church under some deception or disgruntlement is a shockingly poor shepherd. If there are 20 people under your care and one is in a spiritual mess then that one should be your highest priority. Jesus taught that there is great rejoicing over rescuing a lost sheep rather than having many that are content (Lk 15:4-7).

Watching over souls is an incredibly important task for elders and involves a lot of heartache; but it will be worth it at the Last Day to see those you helped to finish their course blameless.

Giving an account

This is onerous indeed, and much ignored. All Christians should fear God and be prepared to give an account of their lives since at the Last Day all that we thought, said and did will be evaluated and taken account of for heaven; but leaders, will be judged under even stricter rules:

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment. Jm 3:1

Those who teach, which is every elder, are judged much more severely than anyone else and so the responsibility of teaching what is right must be taken very seriously. It is astonishing to me that men teach error so casually today with no care or consideration of the judgment that will follow. It is a fool who provokes the anger of God.

The judgment of Christians on the Last Day is not a matter of salvation and condemnation, but of rewards for doing God's will and losing rewards for disobeying God. Those who obey God and do good works will receive a full inheritance; those who disobey him will lose even what they had gained (Col 3:23-24; 1 Pt 3:8; 1 Cor 3:8, 14; 2 Jn 1:8; Rev 3:11).

Every elder will give an account for every single person that he had responsibility for in this life; note this well – an elder is accountable for everyone he shepherded, even if they subsequently left the church, for the period they were under his ministry. How many modern leaders are prepared for this judgment?

Mistakes

Amongst the denominations there is a great variety in the calibre and functions of elders. One mistake is to separate the ministries of pastoring and teaching, through some imaginary fiction, and then make the teaching elder senior in rank to other non-teaching elders. This is establishing an unbiblical hierarchy that has no warrant whatsoever. You will not find any mention in Scripture of a senior pastor, preaching elder or any such thing. All elders teach and all elders pastor. Any elder who cannot teach in some form is anathema; the very heart of eldership is teaching. Three times Paul states that an elder must be 'able to teach' (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:2, 24).

Another bad mistake is delegating shepherding to someone else. Many modern elders claim to be so busy that they have no time for pastoring and so create a layer of unbiblical shepherds called 'house-group leaders' or suchlike. These become a first line manager in the church with only the most serious problems going to an elder. This is utterly unbiblical. The only person qualified by God's word to pastor is the elder; he is the shepherd called to

guard and guide those under his care. Those leaders who abrogated their responsibility by passing the buck on to other humanly created leaders will receive a severe judgment.

It is, however, a normal part of church life that all individuals try to meet the needs of their brethren; we are to care for one another and bear one another's burdens. The shepherding ministry of elders does not rule out the normal day-to-day care of the membership. However, it still remains true that formal responsibility lies with the elders. Thus elders need to be aware of the ministry of other individuals and bring correction where necessary. Sometimes people mean well but do harm.

Worldly models of leadership

Instead of obeying the Biblical principles, instead of being focused upon developing people, most modern churches follow the principles of commercial executive management. The focus of these is diametrically opposed to the principles of Biblical leadership. Commercial executives are entirely motivated by the mission strategy of the company, which is usually based upon making money. Employees are a means to that end; the dominating factor is the mission. Jobs are centred upon whatever aspect of the mission they are responsible for and managers have only a moderate concern (usually the minimum required by legislation) for the welfare of the employees in their control. What motivates the directors of these various departments is pleasing the managing director since their salary depends upon achieving the tasks set by him. Thus commercial management sets its sights hierarchically upwards, to achieving the mission goal and pleasing the MD, rather than looking downwards and being motivated by the welfare of employees. Sadly, this is how many modern churches are structured and motivated.

Most modern churches, especially those in the Charismatic Movement, are centred on a mission strategy. These have a variety of names and purposes, such as the apostolic mission or whatever, but the dominating factor in church life is the mission strategy of the chief leaders. The implementation of this strategy requires the establishment of a number of jobs, usually built up in hierarchical layers, which carry various levels of responsibility and authority. The bulk of the congregation become merely fodder, the nuts and bolts, of the organisation which is geared up to achieving whatever the current strategy of the main leader is.

Not only is there no focus upon the spiritual education and development of the people, not only is there no concern with preparing them against error and defending them from heretics, but the stress of fulfilling the leadership requirements very often actively works against the discipleship of the people. They get worn out by performing dead works and do themselves no good. Neither do they set a good example for the young to imitate. The very worst model of leadership is commercial management, and this is the one most churches follow. Indeed, some actually teach management templates that have been taken from secular firms, or use secular terms for church responsibilities (such as 'director', 'manager', 'general manager').

Judgment

What should worry these leaders is that every decision they make, every action copied, every strategy planned, will be sifted and judged by the standard of the leadership of Christ, who is motivated to develop his people. Thus any action and decision which damaged Christ's people will receive a severe judgment. All the damaging choices made by leaders, and all the failures to do the right thing, will be condemned on the Day of

Judgment and the leader will lose his rewards. Indeed, many modern leaders have had their reward already by enjoying worldly authority and its commensurate pleasures.

What about ruling?

Does not the use of the word 'rule' imply that there is a ministry of governing in elders that is just like the world?

There are many reasons why this is not the case. The first is that the local church is a family, not an organisation. It operates in a home under the loving, intimate principles of family life. Men are brothers, women are sisters, older men are to be treated like fathers, and older women like mothers (1 Tim 5:1-2). In this situation leaders who plant churches are like fathers and pastoral leaders are like nursing mothers (1 Cor 4:14-15; 1 Thess 2:7). The analogy of worldly management or kingly rule is never applied to elders.

Secondly, Paul and Peter command that everyone in the local church is to be submissive to everyone else and that all believers are equal in status (1 Pt 5:5; Eph 5:21; Rm 12:10; Phil 2:3). There is to be no concept of rank in the church. There are different functions and responsibilities, and some people have responsibility for the welfare of others, but there is no sense of ranking authority implied in this. When leaders are said to be 'first' (*proistemi*) it is in the sense of taking the lead like a shepherd leading the flock to pasture, not the sense of driving by authoritarian dictat. The word 'to rule' (*proistemi*) in 1 Thess 5:12 can mean 'to lead' or 'to stand before', but also to attend, be concerned about, give aid or care e.g: Rm 12:8; Titus 3:8,14. Phoebe is nominated by this term, which is translated 'helper'. Like other leadership terms it is best seen as a scout who goes ahead to direct people where to tread safely and is best summarised as 'guardian' or 'protector'.

The word usually translated as 'rule' or 'govern' is *hegeomai* and this is found in our opening passages (Heb 13:7, 17). Whilst this can mean 'to lead' in the sense of a chief or commander of an army, its focus is upon 'going before' rather than domination. It also means to make a decision after weighing the facts; a considered opinion. Thus its chief meaning is to be a guide as a result of having a considered opinion; to influence others to follow a considered course of action. Again this is leading by shepherding rather than leading by imperial dictat.

The best illustration of eldership rule is that of the father in a household. In God's terms the buck stops with him; he is the head of the household and the wife and children are to be subject to him (Eph 5:22). But this does not mean domination, in fact the husband is to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church. Furthermore, the wife is also stated to be a 'despot' within the home, she is the 'mistress of the house' (*oikodespoteo* in 1 Tim 5:14). This is a very powerful word and it is used of the mother at home. Yes, the husband is Lord in the family but the wife is mistress in the home; they work together in partnership to nurture the children.

The final word on this is given by Jesus himself in Lk 22:26 which is beyond all contradiction,

And He said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called "benefactors." But not so *among* you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who *is* greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? *Is* it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves.' Lk 22:25-27

Here the Lord makes a distinction between worldly leadership models and his leadership example. Kings and executives exercise authoritarian lordship but leadership in the church

is the exercise of ministry, that is, servant-hood. Jesus summarised his attitude to leading by washing the disciples' feet. If he as Lord and God could lead this way then ordinary men leading the local church must very carefully ensure that their leadership is by serving as shepherds and guides, not as dominating princes.

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. 1 Pt 5:2-4

Conclusion

We cannot evaluate the way that elders minister through earthly eyes; we must consider what God says about church leadership and establish leadership patterns that are entirely Scriptural. Building up layers of hierarchical worldly leaders is anathema to God and will certainly earn his displeasure at the Last Day. The key matter is the nurturing of the sheep on behalf of Christ. Leaders who fail to do this effectively, by following various mission statements, will be severely judged on the Last Day and will lose their rewards.

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