

Part One

**BIBLICAL
ELDERSHIP**

CHAPTER 1

Pastoral Leadership

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you...shepherd [pastor] the flock of God.”

1 Peter 5:1a,2a

While attending a music concert, I received an insightful lesson in ecclesiology. As I walked into the main foyer of the church where the concert was held, I immediately noticed the pictures and names of the senior pastor and his staff. The pictures were arranged in a pyramid with the senior pastor at the top, his three associate pastors below, and the rest of the church staff completing the base of the pyramid. As I walked further into the building and down a side hall, I saw another glass encasement with the pictures and names of the church elders. I immediately thought, *What a superb illustration of how the church elders have been pushed aside to a scarcely visible position in the church!* This is quite different from the New Testament model of eldership.

When most Christians hear of church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisers to the pastor. They think of elders as policymakers, financial officers, fund raisers, or administrators. They don't expect church elders to teach the Word or be involved pastorally in the lives of people. Victor A. Constien, a Lutheran official and author of *The Caring Elder*, explains this common view of the elders' role: “Members of a congregation's board of elders are not assistant pastors. They *assist* their pastor.... Through the senior pastor, elders establish a caring link with each person on the professional staff, whether assistant pastor; director of Christian education, evangelism.... But, even more important, elders help facilitate and strengthen the working relationship of the church staff.”ⁱ

Such a view, however, not only lacks scriptural support but flatly contradicts the New Testament Scriptures. One doesn't need to read Greek or be professionally trained in theology to understand that the contemporary, church-board concept of eldership is irreconcilably at odds with the New Testament definition of eldership. According to the New Testament concept of eldership, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church. Let us now consider the New Testament model for pastoral care by shepherd elders.

Shepherd Elders

The biblical image of a shepherd caring for his flock--standing long hours ensuring its safety, leading it to fresh pasture and clear water, carrying the weak, seeking the lost, healing the wounded and sick--is precious. The whole image of the Palestinian shepherd is characterized by intimacy, tenderness, concern, skill, hard work, suffering, and love. It is, as former London Bible College professor Derek J. Timball remarks in his book, *Skillful Shepherds*, “a subtle blend of authority and care,” and “as much toughness as tenderness, as much courage as comfort.”ⁱⁱ

The shepherd-sheep relationship is so incredibly rich that the Bible uses it repeatedly to describe God and His loving care for His people. In one of the most beloved of all the Psalms, David, the shepherd turned king, wrote: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures:

He leads me beside quiet waters” (Ps. 23:1,2). The Bible also uses shepherd imagery to describe the work of those who lead God’s people (Ezek. 34).

Thus when Paul and Peter directly exhorted the elders to do their duty, they both employed shepherding imagery. It should be observed that these two giant apostles assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders. Paul reminds the Asian elders that God the Holy Spirit placed them in the flock as overseers for the purpose of shepherding the church of God (Acts 20:28). Peter exhorts the elders to be all that shepherds should be to the flock (1 Peter 5:2). We, then, must also view apostolic, Christianized elders to be primarily pastors of a flock, not corporate executives, CEOs, or advisers to the pastor.

If we want to understand Christian elders and their work, we must understand the biblical imagery of shepherding. As keepers of sheep, biblical elders are to protect, feed, lead, and care for the flock’s many practical needs. Using these four, broad, pastoral categories, let us consider the examples, exhortations, and teachings of the New Testament regarding shepherd elders.

Protecting the Flock

A major part of the New Testament elders’ work is to protect the local church from false teachers. As Paul was leaving Asia Minor, he summoned the elders of the church in Ephesus for a farewell exhortation. The essence of Paul’s charge is this: *guard the flock--wolves are coming*:

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.... “*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock*, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure *savage wolves will come in among you*, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. *Therefore be on the alert....*” (Acts 20:17,28-31a; italics added).

According to Paul’s required qualifications for eldership, a prospective elder must have enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to refute false teachers:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, *that he may be able...to refute those who contradict* [sound doctrine] (Tit. 1:5,6,9; italics added).

The Jerusalem elders, for example, met with the apostles to judge doctrinal error: “And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this [doctrinal] matter” (Acts 15:6ff). Like the apostles, the Jerusalem elders had to be knowledgeable in the Word so that they could protect the flock from false teachers.

Protecting the flock also includes seeking lost, straying sheep--a critical aspect of shepherding that many church shepherds totally neglect. Moreover, protecting the flock involves disciplining sin, admonishing improper behavior and attitudes (1 Thess. 5:12), and stopping bitter infighting. Although the New Testament emphasizes the elders’ role in protecting against doctrinal error, the elders cannot neglect seeking the lost and correcting sinful behavior.

Protecting the flock is vitally important because sheep are defenseless animals. They are utterly helpless in the face of wolves, bears, lions, jackals, or robbers. Phillip Keller, writing from his wealth of experience as a shepherd and agricultural researcher in East Africa and Canada, explains how unaware and vulnerable sheep are to danger, even inevitable death:

It reminds me of the behavior of a band of sheep under attack from dogs, cougars, bears, or even wolves. Often in blind fear or stupid unawareness they will stand rooted to the spot watching their companions being cut to shreds. The predator will pounce upon one then another of the flock raking and tearing them with tooth and claw. Meanwhile, the other sheep may act as if they did not even hear or recognize the carnage going on around them. It is as though they were totally oblivious to the peril of their own precarious position.ⁱⁱⁱ

Guarding sheep from danger is clearly a significant aspect of the shepherding task. The same is true for church shepherds. They must continually guard the congregation from false teachers. Although the guarding ministry is a negative aspect of shepherding, it is indispensable to the flock's survival. Charles E. Jefferson (1860-1937), pastor and author of *The Minister as Shepherd*, underscores this vital point: "The journey from the cradle to the grave is hazardous....if every man is surrounded by perils, if the universe is alive with forces hostile to the soul, then watchfulness becomes one of the most critical of all the pastor's responsibilities."^{iv} Elders, then, are to be protectors, watchmen, defenders, and guardians of God's people. In order to accomplish this, shepherd elders need to be spiritually alert and must be men of courage.

Spiritually Alert

A good shepherd is always on the alert to danger. He knows the predator well and understands the importance of acting wisely and quickly. So too, shepherd elders must be spiritually awake and highly sensitive to the subtle dangers of Satan's attacks. It's hard, however, to be alert and ready to act at all times. That is why Paul exhorts the Asian elders "be on the alert" (Acts 20:31). He knows the natural tendency of shepherds to become spiritually lazy, undisciplined, prayerless, and weary. The Old Testament proves that. The Old Testament prophets cried out against Israel's shepherds because they failed to keep watch and be alert to protect the people from savage wolves. Israel's leaders are vividly depicted by Isaiah as blind city watchmen and dumb dogs:

All you beasts of the field,
All you beasts in the forest,
Come to eat.
His watchmen are blind,
All of them know nothing.
All of them are dumb dogs unable to bark,
Dreamers lying down, who love to slumber;
And the dogs are greedy, they are not satisfied,
And they are shepherds who have no understanding;
They have all turned to their own way,
Each one to his unjust gain, to the last one.
"Come," they say, "let us get wine, and let us drink
heavily of strong drink;
And tomorrow will be like today, only more so"
(Isa. 56:9-12).

Shepherd elders must be watchful and prayerful. They must be aware of changing issues both in society and the church. They must continuously educate themselves, especially in Holy Scripture, diligently guard their own spiritual walk with the Lord, and always pray for the flock and its individual members.

Who can calculate the damage done during the past two thousand years to the churches of Jesus Christ because of inattentive, naive, and prayerless shepherds? Many churches and denominations that once stood for sound, orthodox doctrine and life now reject every major tenet of the Christian faith and condone the most deplorable moral practices conceivable. How did this happen? The local church leaders were naive, untaught, and prayerless and became inattentive to Satan's deceptive strategies. They were blind watchmen and dumb dogs, preoccupied with their own self-interests and comforts. When their seminaries jettisoned the truths of the gospel and the divine inspiration of the Bible, they were asleep. They naively invited young wolves in sheep's clothing into their flocks to be their spiritual shepherds. Hence they and their flocks have been devoured by wolves.

Courageous

Shepherds must also have courage to fight fierce predators. King David was a model shepherd of outstanding courage. First Samuel records David's experiences as a shepherd protecting his flock from the lion and the bear:

Then Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth while he has been a warrior from his youth.”

But David said to Saul, “Your servant was tending his father’s sheep. When a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock,

I went out after him and attacked him, and rescued it from his mouth; and when he rose up against me, I seized him by his beard and struck him and killed him.

Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, since he has taunted the armies of the living God.”

And David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and may the Lord be with you” (1 Sam. 17:33-37).

Courage such as David possessed is an essential leadership quality. An internationally known statesman was once asked by reporters, “What is the most important quality for a national leader to possess?” His answer: “Courage.” This is true not only for political leaders, but for church elders as well. To discipline sin in the church (especially the sin of prominent members or leaders), to confront internal strife, and to stand up to powerful teachers and theological luminaries who expound high-sounding false doctrines requires courage. Without courage to fight for the truth and the lives of God’s people, the local church would be washed away by every new doctrinal storm or internal conflict.

There are many weak, immature, and unstable believers, so the elders must act as a wall of safety around the people, protecting them from the fearsome danger of savage wolves and other destructive influences. The hireling, on the other hand, “` beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep’ ” (John 10:12b). A good shepherd elder, like the “Chief Shepherd,” however, is ready to lay down his life for the local flock. He will die before he allows wolves to devour the flock.

Feeding the Flock

Throughout the New Testament, extraordinary emphasis is placed on the centrality of teaching God’s Word. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was preeminently a teacher, and He commissioned others to teach all that He had taught (Matt. 28:20). To Peter He said “`Feed [teach] my sheep’ ” (John 21:17, NIV). The apostles were teachers, and the early Christians steadfastly devoted themselves to teaching (Acts 2:42). Barnabas sought Paul to come to Antioch to help teach (Acts 11:25,26). Paul exhorted Timothy to give attention to “the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). In the order of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28, the teaching gift is listed third, after apostle and prophet. So, teaching is one of the greater gifts a congregation should desire (1 Cor. 12:31).

James Orr (1844-1913), a Scottish theologian and apologist, is best known as general editor of the enduring, multi-volume Bible encyclopedia, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. He readily observed the preeminence of teaching in the early Christian Church. He wrote, “If there is a religion in the world which exalts the office of teaching, it is safe to say that it is the religion of Jesus Christ.”^v

Unlike modern board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). In the list of elder qualifications in his letter to Titus, Paul states, “[the elder must hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, *that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine* and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9; italics added). In an extremely significant passage on elders, Paul speaks of some elders who labor at preaching and teaching and who thus deserve financial support from the local church:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially *those who work hard at preaching and teaching*. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Tim. 5:17,18; italics added).

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had taught them and the church the full plan and purpose of God: “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Now it was

time for the elders to do the same. Since elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), part of their shepherding task is to see that the flock is fed God's Word.

The importance of feeding sheep is evidenced by the fact that sheep are nearly incapable of feeding and watering themselves properly. Without a shepherd, sheep would quickly be without pasture and water, and would soon waste away. So, as author and pastor Charles 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.'"^{vi}

The Christian community is created by the Spirit's use of God's Word (1 Peter 1:23; James 1:18). The community also matures, grows, and is protected by the Word. Therefore, it is a scriptural requirement that an elder "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). The elders protect, guide, lead, nourish, comfort, educate, and heal the flock by teaching and preaching the Word. Indeed, many pastoral needs of the people are met through teaching of the Word. The failure of church elders to know and teach the Bible is one of the chief reasons doctrinal error floods churches today and drowns the power and life of the church.

Commenting on the biblical requirement for elders to know the Bible and to be able to teach and defend the Word, Neil Summerton, church elder and author of *A Noble Task: Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church*, remarks:

Hence to both Timothy and Titus, Paul is crystal clear that the indispensable quality, which incidentally distinguishes the elder from the deacon, is the ability to master Christian doctrine, to evaluate it in others, to teach it, and to debate it with those who teach falsehood (*1 Timothy* 3:2; *Titus* 1:9-16).

The pastor-teacher ministry is also one of the principle means by which the elders' leadership and vision is communicated to the congregation, and the ability to communicate is one of the key requirements of effective leadership.

There may well be those who are inclined to rebel against this emphasis and to argue that elders need more practical gifts in order to ensure that their administration is smooth and efficient. In answer, it may be said, first, that this mistakes the emphasis which both Old and New Testaments place on the need for the flock of God to be led by shepherds who will ensure that it is fed spiritually. For this purpose soundness of character needs to be brought together with the reception and transmission of the word of the Lord as the means of feeding, protecting and restoring individual members of the flock. This ministry does not necessarily have to be exercised from the platform and the centre of gravity of the gifts of one elder may be towards teaching while that of another may be towards pastoring. But all need a sound grasp of the Faith and the ability to teach and instruct in small groups and one-to-one in the pastoral situation.

Secondly, if elders lack practical skill in such administration as is necessary in the flock, let them appoint a person or persons (perhaps as deacons if they have the high spiritual qualities also demanded for that office) to assist them. Moreover, in an eldership of any size one or more of the body may be able to discharge these tasks so long as they do not prevent them from giving priority to the overseeing tasks. But at all costs the error of appointing those who lack either the character and spiritual qualities, or eldership gifts, or both, should be avoided.^{vii}

The critical importance of elders who teach the Word is persuasively demonstrated both by Paul's instruction to render double honor to elders who labor at preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17,18) and by the apostles' own statement in Acts 6:4 concerning their ministry priorities: " 'But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.' " The same priorities of prayer and the Word should characterize local church elders today.

Leading the Flock

In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or any group of people means to lead or to govern (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:71,72). According to Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, elders shepherd the church of God. So to shepherd a local church means, among other things, to lead the church. To the church in Ephesus Paul states: "Let the

elders who rule [*lead, direct, manage*] well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17a). Elders, then, lead, direct, govern, manage, and care for the flock of God.

In Titus 1:7, Paul insists that a prospective elder be morally and spiritually above reproach because he is “God’s steward.” A steward is a “household manager,” someone with official responsibility over the master’s servants, property, and even finances. Elders are stewards of God’s household, the local church.

Elders are also called “overseers,” which signifies that they supervise and manage the church. Peter uses the verb form of *overseer* when he exhorts the elders: “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight” (1 Peter 5:1a,2a). In this instance, Peter combines the concepts of shepherding and overseeing when he exhorts the elders to do their duty. Hence we can speak of the elders’ overall function as the pastoral oversight of the local church.

Leading and managing a flock is important because, as 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.^{viii}

Sheep must be led to fresh water, new pasture, and relief from dangerous summer heat. This often means traveling rugged roads and narrow paths through dangerous ravines. The sheep must also be made to rest. At evening, they must be brought into the fold. Thus shepherds must know how and where to lead their flock. They must use land and water supplies wisely, constantly planning for future needs and anticipating problems.

Management Skill

The same leading and managing principles involved in shepherding sheep also apply to shepherding the local church. A congregation needs leadership, management, governance, guidance, counsel, and vision. Hence all elders must be, to some measure, leaders and managers.^{ix} The eldership must clarify direction and beliefs for the flock. It must set goals, make decisions, give direction, correct failures, affect change, and motivate people. It must evaluate, plan, and govern. Elders, then, must be problem solvers, managers of people, planners, and thinkers.

A healthy, growing flock of sheep doesn’t just appear; it is the result of the shepherd’s skillful management of sheep and resources. He knows sheep and is skillful in caring for them. A good shepherd elder knows people. He knows how sensitive they are. He knows their needs, troubles, weaknesses, and sins. He knows how they can hurt one another. He knows how stubborn they can be. He knows how to deal with people. He knows that they must be slowly and patiently led. He knows when to be tough and when to be gentle. He knows peoples’ needs and what must be done to meet those needs. He knows how to accurately assess the health and direction of the congregation. And when he doesn’t know these things, he is quick to find answers. He loves to learn better skills and methods for managing the flock.

Since shepherd elders must lead and manage a congregation of people, the New Testament requires that all elder candidates evidence management ability by the proper management of their own households: “He [the prospective elder] must be one who manages his own household well...but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?” (1 Tim. 3:4,5). The Scripture also says that “the elders who rule [*manage, lead, direct*] well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17). So elders who manage the church well desire to be recognized for their leadership and management ability and service.

Hard Work

Not only does leading and managing a flock demand skill and knowledge, it requires lots of hard work. Shepherding is hard and often uncomfortable work. Sheep don’t take vacations from eating and drinking, nor do their predators vanish. Observe Jacob’s description of his life as a shepherd: “Thus I was: by day the heat consumed me, and the frost by night, and my sleep fled from my eyes” (Gen. 31: 40). Because a

good shepherd must work hard, a self-seeking shepherd is, according to the biblical writers, a bad shepherd (Ezek. 34: 2, 8). An idle, lazy shepherd is a disgrace and danger to the flock (Nah. 3:18; Zech. 11:17).

Pastoring God's flock requires a life of devoted work. That is why Paul exhorts believers to highly honor and love those who work hard at caring for the flock (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17). What J. Hudson Taylor (1832-1905), founder of the China Inland Mission, said of missionary service can also be said of shepherding a flock of God's people: "The work of a true missionary is *work* indeed, often very monotonous, apparently not very successful, and carried on through great and varied but unceasing difficulties."^x When the church eldership is viewed as a status or board position in the church there will be plenty of volunteers, but when it is viewed as a demanding, pastoral work, few will rush to volunteer.

One reason there are so few shepherd elders or good church elderships is that, generally speaking, men are spiritually lazy. Spiritual laziness is an enormous problem in the Christian community. Spiritual laziness is a major reason why most churches never establish a biblical eldership. Men are more than willing to let someone else fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, whether it be their wives, the clergy, or church professionals.

Biblical eldership, however, cannot exist in an atmosphere of nominal Christianity. There can be no biblical eldership in a church where there is no biblical Christianity. If a biblical eldership is to function effectively, it requires men who are firmly committed to our Lord's principles of discipleship. Biblical eldership is dependent on men who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), men who have presented themselves as living sacrifices to God and slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1,2), men who love Jesus Christ above all else and willingly sacrifice self for the sake of others, men who love as Christ loved, men who are self-disciplined and self-sacrificing, and men who have taken up the cross and are willing to suffer for Christ.

Some people say, "You can't expect laymen to raise their families, work all day, and shepherd a local church." But that is simply not true. Many people raise families, work, and give substantial hours of time to community service, clubs, athletic activities, and/or religious institutions. The cults have built up large lay movements that survive primarily because of the volunteer time of their members. We Bible-believing Christians are becoming a lazy, soft, pay-for-it-to-be-done group of Christians. It is positively amazing how much people can accomplish when they are motivated to work for something they love. I've seen people build and remodel houses in their spare time. I've also seen men discipline themselves to gain a phenomenal knowledge of the Scriptures.

The real problem, then, lies not in men's limited time and energy but in false ideas about work, Christian living, life's priorities, and--especially--Christian ministry. To the Ephesian elders Paul said, "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' " (Acts 20:34,35). How do working men shepherd the church yet maintain family life and employment? They do it by self-sacrifice, self-discipline, faith, perseverance, hard work, and the power of the Holy Spirit. R. Paul Stevens, author and instructor at Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, sets us on the right track when he writes:

And 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.^{xi}

Caring For Practical Needs

In addition to the familiar, broad categories of protecting, feeding, and leading the flock, elders also bear responsibility for the practical care of the flock's many diverse needs. For example, James instructs sick members of the flock 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). Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to care for the weak and needy of the flock: "In everything I

showed you that by working hard in this manner *you must help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35; italics added).

As shepherds of the flock, the elders must be available to meet whatever needs the sheep have. This means visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved; strengthening the weak; praying for *all* the sheep, even those who are difficult; visiting new members; providing counsel for couples who are engaged, married, or divorcing; and managing the many day-to-day details of the inner life of the congregation.

We must, however, balance what we have been saying about the elders’ ministry with the parallel truth of every-member ministry. Although the elders lead and are officially responsible for the spiritual oversight of the *whole* church, they are not the total ministry of the church. They are not *the* ministers. Ministry is the work of the whole church. Ministry is not the work of one person or even one group of people.

The local church is not only a flock; it is also a body of Spirit-gifted, royal priests who minister to the Lord and His people. Thus, the care of the local body is not the sole responsibility of the elders, but of all the members. Each member of Christ’s body is equipped by the Spirit to minister to the needs of others. The elders are dependent upon the gifts and skills of others (some of whom may be more gifted than any of the elders in certain areas of ministry) for the overall care of the local church. Biblical elders do not want to control a passive congregation. They desire to lead an active, alive, every-member-ministering church.

Furthermore, the deacons are the church’s ministers of mercy. Like the elders, they are to attend to the people’s many practical care needs (Acts 6:1-6). So the elders need to delegate to the deacons many of the practical mercy needs of the congregation. Like the apostles, the church elders must remember that although they are involved in ministering to practical care needs, their priorities must always be “prayer, and...the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).

Love for the Lord’s People

The secret to caring for sheep is love. A good shepherd loves sheep and loves to be with them (2 Sam. 12:3). The best elders, likewise, are those who love people, love to be with them, and are fervently involved with them. Charles Jefferson admirably summarizes this quality when he writes, “This was the crowning virtue of the shepherd--his self-sacrificing love.”^{xii}

The shepherd’s love for his sheep is widely recognized by those who know sheep and shepherds. Old Testament professor John J. Davis discovered this truth while doing research on shepherds. He questioned a modern Palestinian shepherd named Mohammad Yaseen about the attitudes required of a good shepherd and reports that the shepherd “constantly mentioned the fact that the best shepherds are those who genuinely love their sheep.”^{xiii} Phillip Keller, in his delightful book on Psalm 23 (which should be required reading for every elder), also takes note of the shepherd’s love: “All the care, all the work, all the alert watchfulness, all the skill, all the concern, all the self-sacrifice are born of His Love--the love of One who loves His sheep, loves His work, loves His role as a Shepherd.”^{xiv}

The loving heart of a true pastor is dramatically displayed in the life of Paul. Reminding the troublesome Corinthians of his deepest motives and feelings, Paul writes: “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you” (2 Cor. 2:4). D. A. Carson, professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, describes Paul’s life and prayers as “a passion for people.” Detailing Paul’s passionate love for the new Christians in Thessalonica, Carson writes:

Here is a Christian so committed to the well-being of other Christians, especially new Christians, that he is simply burning up inside to be with them, to help them, to nurture them, to feed them, to stabilize them, to establish an adequate foundation for them. Small wonder, then, that he devotes himself to praying for them when he finds he cannot visit them personally.^{xv}

If you were to ask the average Christian what he or she most wants from spiritual leaders, the answer in most cases would be, “To be loved and cared for!” Nothing ministers to people’s deepest needs more than genuine Christian love. There is an old saying that should be inscribed and placed on the wall of every elder’s home: “Man before business, because man is your business.”^{xvi}

The elders’ work is people-oriented work. If a body of elders lacks certain gifts or dynamic personalities, the elders’ love for the people can compensate for such deficiencies. There is, however, no compensation for a lack of love and compassion on the part of the elders. Without love the eldership is an

empty shell. Without love an elder is “a noisy gong,” “a clanging cymbal,” a spiritual zero (1 Cor. 13:1,2). So, like the Lord Jesus Christ, a good shepherd elder loves people.

Clarifying Our Terminology

Before ending this chapter we must return to a tough, deeply rooted problem that we raised at the beginning of the chapter--the definition of the term *elder*. Although the term *elder* is the predominate New Testament term used to describe local church leaders and is especially suited to the nature of the New Testament churches, it conveys to the overwhelming majority of Christians and non-Christians today ideas that are different from those found in the New Testament. People today think of church elders as lay, church-board members who are separate and distinct from the professional, ordained pastor (or clergyman). I refer to these elders as “board elders;” they are not true biblical elders. They are advisers, committee men, executives, and directors.

A true biblical eldership is not a businesslike committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church. So to communicate the New Testament idea of eldership, we need to reeducate ourselves as to the New Testament usage of the term *elder*, and in some cases choose a different term.

The New Testament uses a term other than *elder* to describe local church leaders. That term is *overseer*, and it comes from the Greek word *episkopos*.^{xvii} The term *overseer* was a common designation used by Greeks for a variety of officials. In contrast to all priestly or lordly titles, nothing in the title *overseer* (or *elder*) violated the local church’s family character, humble-servant nature, or priestly and holy status. The fact that the apostles and first Christians used the term *overseer* as a synonym for *elder* demonstrates flexibility in the use of leadership terminology and the desire to communicate effectively among Greek-speaking people.

The New Testament apostles, led by the Holy Spirit, were extremely careful in choosing the vocabulary they used to describe the person and work of Jesus Christ, His “new creation” the Church (Gal. 6:15), and those who provided leadership for the people of God. It is critically important for Christians today to understand that the language we use to describe our church leaders has the power to accurately reflect biblical thinking and practice or, conversely, to lead us far away from the true Church of Jesus Christ and into the false church. The term *episkopos* (*overseer*), for example, developed a meaning that was quite different from the New Testament usage. It became one of the most significant ecclesiastical titles of the hierarchical church. We know the term in English as *bishop*, meaning a church official who presides over many churches and the lower clergy. Thus the original sense of the term *episkopos*, which was synonymous with *elder* and indicated a local church official, was lost.

If we choose to use the term *elder*, which many Protestant churches do because it is a key biblical term for church leaders, it is necessary to explain that the term *elder* means “pastor elders,” “shepherd elders,” or “pastors.” I use these terms interchangeably depending on the audience to which I am speaking. Throughout this book I use these descriptions in order to distinguish between “board elders,” which is a misleading concept, and “shepherd elders,” which is the biblical concept. In some churches the term *elder* is used in its full New Testament sense, thus no need to search for another term exists. The people in these churches know that the elders are their spiritual leaders, but this is true of very few churches.

I know some churches that sought to implement a biblical eldership but weren’t able to make it work effectively until they dropped the term *elder* and called their elders “pastors.” In these churches the term *elder* was so deeply entangled with temporary, committee-board connotations that the term was a hindrance to the practice of biblical eldership. Even the elders were helped by the language change. They started thinking of themselves as pastors who were responsible for the spiritual care of the flock and began to function as pastors. Despite the clerical and professional connotations of the term *pastor*, it best communicated what the church wanted to say about their elders’ function and position.

Many times I use the word *shepherd* because it does not carry all the unbiblical connotations that people usually associate with the terms *pastor* or *elder*. However, even the term *shepherd*, like all the other terms, has its own problems: it is a word devoid of religious meaning for most people outside the church, and

some inside as well. Some people might think you are referring to a literal shepherd and may want to know where your farm is located!

Whatever terminology you choose to describe local church leaders will have advantages and disadvantages. In the end, every local church is responsible to teach its people the meaning of the terms it uses to describe its spiritual leaders, whether it be elders, overseers, ministers, preachers, or pastors. Biblically sensitive church leaders will insist that the terminology they use represents, as accurately as possible, the original biblical terms and concepts of a New Testament eldership. False teachers have had their greatest triumphs when they redefine biblical words in a way that is contrary to the original meaning. Listen to the judicious counsel of Nigel Turner, one of the world's foremost Greek grammarians:

The Church today is concerned about communicating with the contemporary world and especially about the need to speak in a new idiom. The language of the Church had better be the language of the NT. To proclaim the Gospel with new terminology is hazardous when much of the message and valuable overtones that are implicit in the NT might be lost forever. "Most of the distortions and dissensions that have vexed the Church," observed the late Dean of York, "where these have touched theological understanding, have arisen through the insistence of sects or sections of the Christian community upon words which are not found in the NT."^{xviii}

Nowhere is this definition problem more evident than with the vocabulary Christians use to describe their church officials. Much of our church vocabulary is unscriptural and terribly misleading. Words such as *clergyman*, *layman*, *reverend*, *minister*, *priest*, *bishop*, *ordained*, and *ministerial* convey ideas contrary to what Jesus Christ and His apostles taught. Such terminology misrepresents the true nature of apostolic Christianity and makes it difficult, if not impossible, to recapture it. As a result, most of our churches are in desperate need of language reform. I hope that this book will challenge church leaders to more faithfully adhere to the true meaning of biblical terms and concepts.

ⁱ Victor A. Constien, *The Caring Elder: A Training Manual for Serving* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), p. 10.

ⁱⁱ D.J. Timball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 46,48.

ⁱⁱⁱ Phillip W. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at the Great Shepherd and His Sheep* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 25.

^{iv} Charles Edward Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd* (1912; repr. Fincastle: Scripture Truth, n.d.), p. 43.

^v James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), p. 20.

^{vi} Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd*, pp. 59,60.

^{vii} Neil Summerton, *A Noble Task: Eldership and Ministry in the Local Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), pp. 26,27.

^{viii} Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd*, p. 47.

^{ix} For a good discussion of the differences between leaders and managers, see Kenneth O. Gangel, *Feeding and Leading* (Wheaton: Victor, 1989), pp. 13-46.

^x A. J. Broomhall, *Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*, 7 vols., vol. 5: Refiner's Fire (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985), p. 350.

^{xi} R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1985), p. 147.

^{xii} Jefferson, *The Minister as Shepherd*, p. 65.

^{xiii} John J. Davis, *The Perfect Shepherd: Studies in the Twenty-Third Psalm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 39.

^{xiv} Phillip W. Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), p. 130.

^{xv} D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), p. 81.

^{xvi} See Pauline G. Hamilton, *To a Different Drum* (Littleton: OMF Books, 1984), p. 38.

^{xvii} **The noun, *episkopos*:**

"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28; italics added).

“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the *overseers* and deacons” (Phil. 1:1; italics added).

“An *overseer*, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2; italics added).

“For the *overseer* must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain” (Titus 1:7; italics added).

The related noun, *episkope*:

“It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the *office of overseer*, it is a fine work he desires to do” (1 Tim. 3:1; italics added).

The related verb form, *episkopeo*:

“Shepherd the flock of God among you, *exercising oversight* not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God” (1 Peter 5:2*a*; italics added).

^{xviii} Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1981), p. viii.