

The Shepherding, Spiritual Leadership of Elders

1. **Recommended Resource:** *With a Shepherd's Heart: Reclaiming the Pastoral Office of Elder* by John Sittema

2. **A brief overview of shepherding as seen in Scripture**

Shepherding is not a new or a NT-only concept. The concept of shepherding was pictured long before Christ. Moses asked God to give the people a leader so “that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd” (Numbers 27:17). Later, we see the leader of Israel (in this case, David) combining themes of leadership and “people-care” in 2 Samuel 5:2, “you shall shepherd my people Israel, and be ruler over Israel.” In Psalm 23:1, David views the Lord as the ultimate shepherd.

General biblical references to shepherding:

Numbers 27:17 "Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd."

2 Samuel 5:2 "Also, in time past, when Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel out and brought them in; and the LORD said to you, 'You shall shepherd My people Israel, and be ruler over Israel.'"

Psalm 23:1	The LORD [is] my shepherd ; I shall not want.
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1 Peter 2:25	For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the shepherd and overseer of your souls.
1 Peter 5:2	Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly...
1 Peter 5:4	and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.
Revelation 7:17	for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

Galatians 6:1- Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual
 2 restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Acts 14:21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying, “We must go through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God.” So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Act 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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.

3. The biblical basis of shepherding

The first deacons were appointed to fulfill pastoral tasks of helpfulness (Acts 6:1-6). The church in Galatia was instructed to “bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). The strong were urged to “bear with the failings of the weak” (Romans 15:1). Pure religion was seen as “visiting orphans and widows in their affliction” and keeping oneself “unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

a. *Old Testament:* God is pictured as a shepherd: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd” (Isaiah 40:1-11). In Ezekiel 34, the leaders of Israel were deemed unfaithful as “shepherds of the people,” and in the process the true role of shepherds was presented:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, even the shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord God, woe to the shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought and with force and harshness you have ruled them (34:1-4).

b. *New Testament:* Jesus pictured the good shepherd as one who leaves the ninety-nine and seeks the lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). Jesus saw the crowds and was moved with compassion because “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). He taught that “the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11), referring to Himself as “the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14), making elders “under-shepherds” (1 Peter 5:2-4 by implication). In John 21:15-19, He commanded Peter to feed and to care for the sheep.

1. Elders are pictured as shepherds of the flock (Acts 14:21-23).

2. Elders are seen restoring those that are in sin—in a spirit of gentleness—while guarding themselves in the process and bearing the burdens of others (Galatians 6:1-2).

3. Elders protect the flock from wolves coming from outside as well as from those that arise from inside the flock to deceive (Acts 20:28-31). The shepherd lays down his life to oppose those that would destroy the flock.

4. It is the responsibility of the flock to hear and to follow their shepherd’s voice (John 10:27).

4. The role, duties, and qualifications of the elder-shepherd are stated explicitly throughout the NT. In 1 Peter, the shepherd cares for the sheep in an ongoing way, particularly in spiritual matters. The shepherd is to lead eagerly, not in ways that show dishonest gain, nor to act as a lord over the sheep. In 1 Timothy 1:5-9, the character qualifications are set forth for the spiritual shepherd. *Ultimately*, Christ, the eternal Lamb of God—pictured as the Shepherd and Leader (Revelation 7:17)—leads the people to “springs of living waters.” It is this portrait of Christ as Shepherd and Leader that the local

church elder needs to emulate in his daily life—a genuine care, concern, and sacred desire for the nurture and spiritual well-being of those sheep entrusted to his oversight.

5. History of Shepherding in the Church

In the early church, shepherding took two primary forms: ministry to the unfortunate (in sickness and in distress) and ministry to those desiring forgiveness of sin (remember, at that time confession was largely public, as the *Didache* stated that three things that should be observed on the Lord's Day was the breaking of bread, the giving of thanks, and public confession of transgressions).

One of the significant factors leading to the Reformation was the practice of shepherding. Luther was very faithful in the shepherding to individuals in sickness and in distress. One of the chief contributions in the Reformation to shepherding was to produce the "Protestant Pastor" who married and lived with, and ministered to his people. In Geneva in the sixteenth-century, there was a regular practice of "the cure of souls." "Soul care" was the topic of much writing in the Reformation. An ordinance for the clergy issued in 1550, stating that they must visit in the homes at least once a year.

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) influenced the Reformation in England and beyond with his influential work, *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), writing it on the shepherding task of the minister, calling him a "pastor." Baxter's method was evangelistic, authoritarian, and advice-giving. He saw more results from one-hour private shepherding visits in people's homes than from many sermons. This approach to shepherding produced a spirit of compassion and concern.

6. The office of elder as described in the PCA Book of Church Order

8-1. This office is one of dignity and usefulness. The man who fills it has in Scripture different titles expressive of his various duties. As he has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he is termed *bishop* or *pastor*. As it is his duty to be grave and prudent, an example to the flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he is termed *presbytery* or *elder*. As he expounds the Word, and by sound doctrine both exhorts and convinces the gainsayer, he is termed *teacher*. These titles do not indicate different grades of office, but all described one and the same office.

8-2. He that fills this office should possess a competency of human learning and be blameless in life, sound in the faith and apt to teach. He should exhibit a sobriety and holiness of life becoming the Gospel. He should rule his own house well and should have a good report of them that are outside the Church.

8-3. It belongs to those in the office of elder, both severally and jointly, to watch diligently over the flock committed to his charge, that no corruption of doctrine or of morals enter therein. They must exercise government and discipline, and take oversight not only of the spiritual interests of the particular church, but also the Church generally when called thereunto. They should visit the people at their homes, especially the sick. They should instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourner, nourish and guard the children of the Church. They should set a worthy example to the flock entrusted to their care by their zeal to evangelize the unconverted and make disciples. All those duties which private Christians are bound to discharge by the law of love are especially incumbent upon them by divine vocation, and are to be discharged as official duties. They should pray with and for the people, being careful and diligent in seeking the fruit of the preached Word among the flock.

8-8. As there were in the Church under the law, elders of the people for the government thereof, so in the Gospel Church, Christ has furnished others besides ministers of the Word with gifts and commission to govern when called thereunto, who are called *ruling elders*.

8-9. Elders being of one class of office, ruling elders possess the same authority and eligibility to office in the courts of the Church as teaching elders. They should, moreover, cultivate zealously their own aptness to teach the Bible and should improve every opportunity of doing so.

7. Curt: my theological application and praxis of shepherding as it applies to the roles of shepherds and how they are often worked out towards people in the church of different commitment levels (some church people are lay leaders, some are disciples, others are just people in the crowd, some are uninvolved. How an elder recognizes each person as to where he/she is in their spiritual walk and commitment level to the Lord and the church will determine his effectiveness as a shepherd as he engages them.

As an elder, you are an under-shepherd to Christ, the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-4). That means that you embody in your office the three redemptive roles that Christ fulfilled in His work of salvation (Prophet, Priest, and King). These three redemptive roles are to be seen in your shepherd engagement of the flock, based upon their spiritual commitment levels. The following functions below represent a starting engagement. Much more can and should be added when evaluating what each sheep needs and what you should do in your shepherding.

	PROPHET	PRIEST	KING
Shepherding LEADERS , those leading, doing things	Feed them meat	Pray for/with them	Empower them to discover their gifts and to use them in service
	Challenge them on the standards of God's Word and their commitment	Engage them in worship	Direct them to do things within and outside the church
	Teach them	Pursue Deeper Relationships with them	Mutual accountability (doing things)
		Encourage them to be involved in church's prayer ministry	
Shepherding DISCIPLES Involved, Engaging, Growing, Participating, learning things	Feed Vegetables Teach Worldview Spiritual gifts Application of God's Word Equip them in the basics	Model the Gospel to them Counsel them Teach them how to pray Pursue Koinonia with them	Mission Trips Mercy Evangelism Missions Encourage their involvement in outreach opportunities Nurture their passions
Shepherding the CROWD Attending things	Give Milk Befriend them Share them the Claims of the Gospel Communicate to inform and to involve	Pray for their life Hospital visitation Funerals, Be there for Crisis Moments Prayer Warriors	Actively pursue Hospitality with them Call them Create opportunities for discipleship (way of life) around their interests

UNINVOLVED Those who aren't here Seeking things	Go to them, visit the lost sheep Invite to activities	Pray for them to connect Communicate to them with calls/cards Sympathize with them where applicable	Challenge them about their spiritual state and commitment, asking them to clarify their commitment
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Implications:

- a. **The key to shepherding effectiveness:** each elder needs to develop a one-year *strategy* whose objective is *to move each sheep up one level of commitment*. In other words, if they are in the “uninvolved” category, attempt in a year’s time to do things that will encourage them to move to the “crowd” category. If he/she is in the crowd, strategize ways to move them to the “disciples” position. If he/she is in the “disciples” position, think of ways to encourage them to leadership. The sky’s the limit as to the things you can do; your creativity, time and commitment is the only thing that stands in your way to effectiveness.
- b. **The essential importance of communication:** be prepared every quarter to report to the pastors and Session the progress regarding your shepherding initiatives.
- c. **Critical importance:** Next to the worship, preaching, teaching, evangelism and discipleship ministries within a church, shepherding is one of the most strategic directives in a congregation’s ministry.

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