

FAITHFUL SHEPHERDS: THE SHARED VALUE OF ELDER-GOVERENED & ELDER-LED CHURCHES

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Editors' Note: This content is drawn from C.J. Mahaney's lectures and sermons on pastoral ministry. While the substance, ideas, and most of the language is drawn from him, the article was compiled and drafted by Jared Mellinger.

Tim Laniak is a Bible scholar and teacher who made several trips to the Middle East to learn about the life of shepherds: real shepherds. One of those trips was nearly a year-long, and he spent time observing and interviewing shepherds in Israel, Jordan, and the Sinai. His goal was to learn more about Scripture's primary metaphor for leadership: shepherding the flock.

In his travels, Dr. Laniak learned more about "the vast variety of ills and harmful habits that befall sheep around the world." The ills include pneumonia, cancer, hypothermia, maggots, and snake bites. They also include self-inflicted ills such as getting stuck in fences, falling down banks, eating poison, and falling into streams. Laniak says, "I am in awe that the health and well-being of hundreds of animals is often left in the hands of a single person out in the wilderness."¹ Then he adds, "Only an attentive and knowl-

1. Timothy Laniak, *While Shepherds Watch their Flocks* (Franklin, TN: Carpenter's Son Publishing, 2007), 65.

edgeable shepherd is competent to counter every affliction."²

Attentive and knowledgeable shepherds who faithfully lead the flock are not only essential in the wilderness; they are essential in the church.

Elder-governed and Elder-led Churches

The fifth shared value of Sovereign Grace Churches is "Elder-governed and Elder-led Churches." We've explained it this way:

Attentive and knowledgeable shepherds who faithfully lead the flock are essential in the church.

"Jesus Christ reigns as head over His church, and He gives to His church elders (or pastors) to govern and lead local churches under His authority (Col. 1:18; Eph. 4:11; Titus 1:5). We believe that men, qualified by both character and gifting, are to serve as elders, shepherding God's people as under-shepherds of Christ (1 Tim. 2:12; 3:1-7; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). A church's health is to a great degree dependent on the health of its elders, and so our aim is to strengthen the current elders in our churches while identifying and training new ones (Acts 20:28; 2 Tim. 2:2)."

Christ is the good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep. He alone reigns as head over his church. But he appoints shepherds to govern and lead churches under his authority.

In the New Testament, responsibility for governance and oversight is repeatedly placed on a plurality of elders rather than being the responsibility of the entire congregation. It is the overseers who guard and pay close attention to the flock (Acts 20:29). It is leaders who watch over the souls of those in the church (Heb. 13:17).

The responsibilities of the congregation are many and are crucial to the health of the church. However, the exercise of governing authority is not among them. We have tremendous respect for faithful churches that are governed by the congregation or by an extra-local leader, but we believe

2. Ibid., 66.

God calls local elders to govern and guide the flock.³ As our *Statement of Faith* affirms, "Elders occupy the sole office of governance and are called to teach, oversee, care for, and protect the flock entrusted to them by the Lord."

A Pastoral Crisis

This shared value is more than a polity position, although that is certainly included. The churches of Sovereign Grace are also united in our understanding of pastoral identity and responsibilities. Thomas Oden says, "The importance of the office of pastor still quietly pleads with us to think with extraordinary care about the better and worse ways in which that office might be conceived and practiced."⁴

Too often, pastors and churches fail to bring the necessary theological discernment and extraordinary level of care to their thinking about the pastoral office, inevitably influencing pastoral practice. This has resulted in pastoral crises. The 1900s saw a shift in how the pastoral role was understood. The focus was no longer on theological depth, ministering the word, or caring for souls but had shifted to administration, personality, practice, and methodology. Church growth had replaced faithfulness, and popular trends had replaced the truth.

We are not exempt from these dangers today, and that ought to strike fear in our hearts. This happens slowly over time as our affections for Christ are slowly disengaged, and we come to resemble a modern CEO more than we resemble shepherds of the flock. I don't want this to happen to me, and I don't want this to happen to the pastors of Sovereign Grace.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we are committed to taking seriously the study of pastoral theology and to maintaining a biblical understanding of the pastoral task. This takes a personal commitment from each pastor. The books of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are unique gifts from God regarding the nature of pastoral ministry, and pastors must study them closely. Study Acts 20, 1 Peter 5, Ephesians 4, and other passages addressing leadership in the church. Study the metaphor of shepherding in the Old and New Testaments.⁵ This metaphor is essential to understanding the biblical teaching

3. Alexander Strauch says, "The authority to govern and teach the local church resides in the plurality of elders—Christ's undershepherds, God's household managers. ...The New Testament does not indicate that the congregation governs itself by majority vote, and there is no evidence that God has granted every member one equal vote with every other member. Rather, the New Testament congregation is governed by its own congregational elders. The elders, according to the express instruction of the New Testament, have the authority to shepherd the congregation." (*Biblical Eldership*, 219, 293)

4. Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1983), 13.

5. I highly recommend Dr. Laniak's outstanding book *Shepherds After My Own Heart*. "At a time when books on leadership are being published at a dizzying pace, one wonders if the Bible has anything to say about it. ...One of the primary metaphors by which biblical authors conceptualized leadership is shepherding. This is quite consistent throughout the Old and New Testaments." (21)

regarding pastoral leadership in every generation and in every culture. Pastors need their sense of identity to be deeply shaped by the biblical imagery of shepherding.

Shepherd the Flock of God

In 1 Peter 5:1-4, the apostle Peter draws from the shepherding metaphor in addressing pastors.

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."

Pastors need their sense of identity to be deeply shaped by the biblical imagery of shepherding.

Elders are those men who have been temporarily entrusted with the responsibility to shepherd the flock of God and to exercise oversight. They temporarily serve under the Chief Shepherd. By identifying the church

as the flock of God, Peter reminds the elders that those whom they presently serve belong to God himself. Members of the flock of God are those who are "ransomed...not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

Peter's exhortation to shepherd the flock was informed by his vivid memory of his post-resurrection encounter with the risen Christ. Jesus restored Peter to public ministry and charged him three times with these words: feed *my* lambs, tend *my* sheep, feed *my* sheep. So Peter now reminds these elders that those they serve don't belong to them; they belong to God.

To shepherd the flock of God is to feed, protect, and care for the flock. It is to love them, serve them, exhort them, and pursue them. This type of faithful shepherding involves exercising oversight, being attentive, discerning the needs of the flock, and acting for their good. The charge is a sacred one: we

are to act on behalf of the Chief Shepherd, caring for those he has ransomed by his precious blood.

God Wants Happy Pastors

As elders lead and govern, we must keep a close watch on the flock and on ourselves. There are inward pitfalls related to the pastoral task, and Peter addresses these in 1 Peter 5:2-3. Faithful pastors will exercise oversight "not under compulsion, but willingly." This means that a pastor must labor with joy and gladness. Pastoral ministry does require certain skills, but God requires that the labor of pastoral ministry be done with gladness.

This is an essential part of every pastor's job description: God wants happy pastors because happy pastors accurately reflect the character of God. Our happiness reflects the privilege of our calling to serve those for whom Christ died.

It is also imperative that pastors shepherd the flock of God "not for shameful gain, but eagerly." We shouldn't confine this temptation to finances. It is a warning about the temptation to use ministry as a means of personal gain in any form: public recognition, developing a platform, or any form of self-promotion.

There is only one way to serve the flock of God, regardless of position or responsibility: "eagerly." This means serving with enthusiasm and energy. Whether you are a lead pastor or serve in another role, whether you are compensated full-time or serve in a bi-vocational role, whether your ministry involves public preaching or more private counseling and discipleship—fellow pastors, we are commanded by God to shepherd the flock eagerly and energetically.

Elders and Their Authority

Peter gives one more description of faithful shepherding: "Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." This is a call for pastors to not misuse their God-given authority. Pastors are delegated a genuine authority in plurality for the service of the church. They are to exercise oversight, but they must never lord it over the flock. There is a difference.

In order to avoid domineering over those in your charge, pastors and church members must understand the nature, the extent, and the purpose of the

authority that has been delegated by the Chief Shepherd to the elders of the church.

In his commentary on 1 Peter, Ed Clowney writes,

The elder has authority; he is called to exercise a shepherd's oversight. Christ, the chief Shepherd, has called him to exercise a shepherd's care. But the undershepherd is not a stand-in for the Lord. He presents the word of the Lord, not his own decree; he enforces the revealed will of the Lord, not his own wishes. For that reason, any undermining of the authority of Scripture turns church government into spiritual tyranny. If church governors add to or subtract from the word of God, they make themselves lords over the consciences of others.⁶

Every Christian must understand that their pastors are not stand-ins for the Lord, nor do we desire to be. And we have no intention of adding to or subtracting from Holy Scripture, which can both can be temptations for pastors. Pastors must resolve to preach the whole counsel of God courageously, to never domineer over those entrusted to our care, and to lead by personal example.

Healthy Elderships and Future Pastors

Each one of the seven shared values of Sovereign Grace Churches plays a valuable role in our partnership. Having elder-governed and elder-led churches is important because God uses pastoral leadership to shape the church of Christ and care for the flock. The health of a church is largely dependent upon the health of its elders.

What should this shared value look like in the life of a local church in Sovereign Grace?

A cross-centered ministry. Acts 20:28 commands pastors to "care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The gospel is the central message we proclaim, profoundly shaping our view of the church and our pastoral calling.

The value of leadership. Every member plays a vital role in the life and mis-

6. Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 1989), 202.

sion of the church. At the same time, elders are uniquely called and gifted as leaders in the church and should exercise this gift with zeal (Rom. 12:8) and love. Pastoral leadership is the means God uses to feed, equip, protect, and mature the flock.

Building healthy teams. Too many pastors labor in isolation or in a context that lacks camaraderie and genuine friendship. Even where there is plurality, it requires effort to cultivate unity, love, and maturity among pastors. It is good and pleasant when brothers dwell in unity (Ps. 133:1), and therefore in Sovereign Grace, we intentionally seek to strengthen elderships.

Caring for pastors. Partnership among churches provides a context for pastors to care for each other and benefit from extra-local leadership. Pastors,

church planters, and missionaries will find themselves in need of care as they labor for the gospel. Caring for each other is one of the means God uses to preserve men through decades of pastoral ministry and the inevitable hardships we face.

*May Sovereign Grace
churches always be led
by happy pastors.*

Happy pastors. God has been exceedingly kind to give pastors the privilege and joy of shepherding their people.

No one is more amazed than I am that God has entrusted to me those for whom Christ died! Hebrews 13:17 commands pastors to carry out their work with joy and not with groaning. May Sovereign Grace churches always be led by happy pastors.

Identifying and training new elders. An essential part of the pastoral task is to identify and equip faithful shepherds. Paul says to Timothy, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). Our churches take seriously the call to equip future generations of pastors.

Ordinary Pastors, Extraordinary Savior

D.A. Carson wrote a biography of his father, Tom Carson, called *Memoirs of an Ordinary Pastor*. The book is powerful because Tom Carson wasn't a famous man, a visionary, a gifted administrator, or a published author. He

was a faithful Christian and pastor who, when he passed into glory, surely heard the voice of his Savior saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

God temporarily entrusts to ordinary pastors those for whom Christ died that we might care for them with the gospel. There are many joys in pastoral ministry, but the greatest joy and the greatest reward comes at the end: "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory" (1 Pet. 5:4).

Pastors will not be evaluated by our culture's definition of success but by their biblical job description. Faithful pastors govern and lead as God requires, serve gladly and eagerly, lead by humble example, devoting their lives faithfully to serving and sacrificing for the flock of God. Pastors like this will be personally honored on that final day by the chief Shepherd himself. Christ himself will place an unfading crown of glory on the head of each and every faithful, ordinary pastor.

How is this possible? How is it possible for an ordinary pastor—who, being a sheep himself, is quite familiar with temptation and sin and weakness and failure—to receive an unfading crown of glory from the holy and flawless Chief Shepherd? It is only possible because the Chief Shepherd first wore a crown of thorns as he made his way to a hill called Calvary, where his death would save from sin and sanctify and empower the service of ordinary pastors.

Christ gave his life for the flock, rose as Lord of the church, and gave shepherds to guide his people until he returns in glory. What a privilege and what grace to serve those for whom Christ died and be rewarded for it! May the Lord empower the pastors of Sovereign Grace to be faithful until he returns or calls us home. "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

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