

Shepherd The Flock Of God That Is Among You

A vision for Biblical eldership at Whitton Avenue Bible Church
by Pastor Chris Davis, on behalf of the Elders

I. Christ the Savior and Head and Chief Shepherd of the Church

The church would not exist apart from Jesus Christ. This is clear from the first time the word “church” is used in the New Testament, where Jesus proclaims, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Jesus’ primacy in the establishment and growth of the church began with the cross and resurrection, but did not end there. After his ascension he sent the Holy Spirit, who equips individual members with gifts for the building up of the body¹ of which Christ is the head.²

Thus when we discuss church leadership, our first focus is on Christ. He is the Chief Shepherd under whom human shepherds lead the flock.³ He is the foundation upon which God’s servants build⁴ and the cornerstone of the new temple of God of which believers are the stones.⁵ He is the ultimate, true leader of the church.

¹ “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills” (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

² “For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior” (Ephesians 5:23).

“And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent” (Colossians 1:18).

³ “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4).

⁴ “For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:9-11).

⁵ “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22).

“As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:4-5).

II. The Apostles and Disciples: Ministries of Word, Prayer, and Service

Jesus did not leave his disciples with a clear-cut plan for organizing his followers. He left them with a mission (make disciples) and a promise (the empowerment of the Holy Spirit) but no structural guidelines. So the infant days of the church following Pentecost must have been an organizational nightmare. By the time we read of the first conversation about leadership roles in Acts 6, the number of Christ followers had exploded from the hundreds to the thousands as “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

Though this burgeoning group of believers lived in remarkable harmony and generosity,⁶ they were not free from problems. In Acts 6:1 we read that the Jewish believers who spoke Greek complained against the Hebrew-speaking Christians because “their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.” This legitimate need expressed among the rank and file of the church would cause the twelve to identify what it looked like for them to lead. Their response is instructive:

“And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, ‘It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word’” (Acts 6:2-4).

What does this text teach us? One note should be made about what it does not teach us. The New Testament gives us no indication that the office of “the twelve” would be an enduring post. These apostles were historically unique because they had been chosen by Jesus and had witnessed his resurrection. Hence we should not look to this account to derive leadership titles or structure.

However, we can look here to discover leadership roles. One role focused on the spiritual needs of God’s people while the other focused on their physical needs. This is not to say that the two could not overlap, but the apostles’ emphasis was on preaching the word of God and prayer, while the men they set aside emphasized merciful ministry to the physical needs of God’s people.

⁶ “Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:32-37).

III. Church leadership after the Apostles: Elders and Deacons

As the church continued to grow through the expanding proclamation of the gospel, the apostles' spiritual leadership over all the churches was duplicated at the level of the local church through the elders. This is made clear through Paul and Barnabas' first missionary journey, in which they doubled back to the cities where they had preached the gospel, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:22-23).

A number of significant implications flow from this account. First, as stated already, it is noteworthy that Paul, who was an apostle, did not appoint more apostles to oversee the church. The leadership mantle was passed from an apostle to elders, which would be a sustainable and reproducible form of church government. Second, the language of verse 23 makes it clear that Paul and Barnabas appointed multiple elders in each church. Their intent was for a group of godly men to carry on the work of attending to the spiritual needs of the church through the preaching of the word and prayer. Third, in light of the great responsibility left with these elders, it is noteworthy that Paul's ultimate hope for the churches he planted rested not in the elders; rather "they committed them [all the believers] to the Lord in whom they had believed." Christ is the true leader of the church.

This understanding of church government from Paul's first missionary journey is confirmed by an event on his third missionary journey. As Paul and his team made their way from Greece to Asia Minor (Turkey), Paul was able to meet up with the elders from the church he had planted in Ephesus. The plural nature of this leadership is affirmed by the record that Paul "sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him" (Acts 20:17). Likewise, the elders' spiritual responsibility over the church is made clear by Paul's charge that they "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Furthermore, as in Acts 14:23, Paul's ultimate trust rested not in men but in God. "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

Paul's work of appointing elders in new churches continued even through his apostolic emissaries, Timothy and Titus. In God's providence, Paul's letters to these young proteges have been preserved so that we might understand the apostle's criteria for choosing the church's spiritual leaders. As he wrote to Titus, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town

as I directed you...” (Titus 1:5). Sections in Titus⁷ and 1 Timothy⁸ outline the necessary qualifications for elders, including character qualities, leadership skills observed in family life, and a firm grasp of sound doctrine.

Along with these standards for eldership, Paul lays forth the qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy,⁹ confirming that the distinction of roles established by the apostles in Acts 6 continued in the local church through the elders and deacons, who would focus on the spiritual and physical needs of the body, respectively.¹⁰

IV. The Nature of the Elder Role

What can we learn from the New Testament when it comes to our understanding of the role of Elder in our day?

1. Elders serve as shepherds of God’s flock under Christ, the Chief Shepherd.

Peter, one of Jesus’ closest disciples, gave the elders in Asia Minor a clear charge regarding their work: “Shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Peter 5:2). Yet

⁷ “If anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:6-9).

⁸ “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

⁹ “Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

¹⁰ Outside of these texts we have little data in the New Testament regarding the particularities of the deacon’s work. Thus the rest of this paper will focus on the New Testament’s teaching on elders, which is addressed more often. What we do know about the deacon role is that it is a non-authoritative, non-teaching role of service in the body of Christ that requires a season of faithful ministry before appointment. Our hope is that, as we as a church grow in our understanding of deacons and their role in the body, that we will develop a more robust structure of elders and deacons.

he left them with a sobering backdrop against which they were to view this shepherding role: “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (v. 4). In this way Peter reminded the church leaders of their subordinate role to Christ as the church’s head, and consequently, their accountability to Christ on the final day for their work as elders.

This context resonates with the charge Paul gave to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, reminding them that (1) it was the Holy Spirit who made them overseers in the church, (2) the church belongs to God, not to them, and (3) God obtained this church by the very blood of his Son. Such realities were surely meant to preserve the elders’ perspective as stewards of God’s people and to prevent them from becoming either lazy or domineering in their work.

2. Under Christ, elders are to exercise loving, servant-hearted authority in the local church.

With 2,000 years of church history behind us, we have good cause for caution when speaking of human beings having authority in the church. The abuse of power has plagued the church in every generation and gives us even greater reason to heed the words of Peter and Paul mentioned above.

Yet previous abuses should not deter us from pursuing a Biblical understanding of church leadership. In the 1 Peter 5, Peter charges the elders to exercise oversight and calls those who are younger to “be subject to the elders.”¹¹ In Hebrews 13:17 the church is exhorted to “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.” Likewise, Paul calls the young Thessalonian church “to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

With Christ as the head of the church it should not surprise us that such authority is placed within the context of love and service. Peter’s charge to exercise oversight is qualified by “not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that in their position of overseers that they are “to care for the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Certainly such postures as

¹¹ “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. Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” (1 Peter 5:1-5)

sacrifice, gentleness, and care are learned from the head of the church who loved her, gave himself up for her, and continues to nourish and cherish her.¹²

In the final analysis, the authority and responsibility of elders is for the benefit of the church. The writer of Hebrews, in exhorting the church to obey their leaders, clarifies why this is important: “Let them do [their work as elders] with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17). When the relationship of elders and congregation is in line with God’s design for biblical leadership, it will result in joy for the elders to the advantage of the believers.

3. The word of God and prayer are central to this work

The high place of gospel proclamation and instruction is inescapable in the New Testament texts on the elder’s role. From the example set by the apostles in Acts 6 to the specific instructions Paul gave to elders in Acts 20 and the Pastoral Epistles, the work of shepherding the flock consists of both setting up fences (of what the gospel is and is not) and nourishing the flock with the gospel grass within the fences. While this certainly must take place in the pulpit, it also takes place through elders who do not preach as they speak God’s truth into the lives of God’s people in both formal and informal settings.

Prayer is also central to the work of the elders. Since Christ is the head of the church, elders are to pray for him to be at work in specific ways in his body and to point her members to what he has accomplished for them in his death and resurrection.

4. Elders and the broader work of the ministry

The apostles established a template for understanding church leadership when they responded to the situation of neglected widows by appointing faithful men to carry out that work while keeping their own role in focus.¹³ The apostle Paul would flesh this out more specifically in Ephesians 4:12 when he said that Christ gave shepherd-teachers to the church “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

Thus elders are not to do every ministry but to ensure that every ministry gets done. The role involves pinpointing needs in the body—both from concerns shared by church

¹² “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church” (Ephesians 5:25, 29).

¹³ “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2-4).

members and needs they perceive—and laboring to see ministries to those needs established and carried out in concert with the church’s overarching mission.¹⁴

V. Putting the Biblical Vision for Eldership into Practice

This understanding of eldership from the New Testament informs our view of leadership at Whitton Avenue on multiple levels. At the structural level, it explains why we have an elder-led church government. But more importantly, within that structure, the patterns discussed above inform at least three aspects of our approach to eldership:

1. *Choosing new elders*

In the transfer of spiritual responsibility and authority in the church, the apostle Paul left us with both commands and example in how elders are to be pursued. The explicit commands concern the qualifications of elders, which Paul lays out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 (see text in footnotes 7, 8). While these are not exhaustive lists, they certainly give us helpful guidelines in discerning who should be elders in Christ’s body.

We also learn much from Paul’s own work of establishing elders in churches. In particular, Paul’s language about elders is instructive. While the book of Acts never mentions that Paul appointed the elders in Ephesus, it is a strong likelihood that he did, since this was his pattern in other church plants¹⁵ and he spent so much time in Ephesus.¹⁶ Yet in Acts 20:28, Paul refers to the elders as those whom the Holy Spirit has made to be overseers.¹⁷ Likewise, in his letter to the Ephesians, Paul says that it is Christ who gives shepherds and teachers to the church.¹⁸

In these verses we see that it is God who raises up and empowers godly men to shepherd his flock. Thus the questions we ask when considering new elders flow from this reality: “Who is doing the work of an elder now? Which qualified brothers are shepherding those around them?” While the process of choosing new elders has

¹⁴ Whitton Avenue Bible Church’s mission statement is: Sent by God, compelled by Christ’s love, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we exist to glorify God through: reaching up in worship of God, reaching in to equip the saints, and reaching out with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹⁵ “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed” (Acts 14:23).

¹⁶ “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears” (Acts 20:31).

¹⁷ “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

¹⁸ “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift...And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers” (Ephesians 4:7, 11).

multiple layers to it, these questions are the central concerns that we should consider as we seek to recognize the elders God is raising up in our congregation.

One other word from the apostle Paul is appropriate here. In 1 Timothy 5:22, Paul warned his son in the faith, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands.” Paul’s reasoning for such a charge emerges from the previous verses¹⁹ which outline the process of dealing with persistent sin in the life of an elder. The amount of attention the apostle gives to the purity of the eldership—both in life and doctrine—suggests that the health of a local church will rise and fall on the health of her elders. Thus we approach the appointment of new elders eagerly and proactively, but with all the caution and gravity that characterized Paul’s ministry.

2. The duration of the elders’ labor

While the New Testament nowhere specifies the longevity of the elder’s service, the commands to elders and nature of the work suggest that the labor to which the Holy Spirit has appointed them is one of significant duration. The apostolic mandates to “pay careful attention to...all the flock,” “to care for the church of God” (Acts 20:28), and to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Peter 5:2, 4) imply years of service.

Added to that perspective, however, is the reality that elders are not infallible. Paul warned the Ephesian elders that “from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). In 1 Timothy 5:19-20 Paul instructs his protege on how to deal with persistent sin in the lives elders. Beyond this is the reality that the work of an elder is a happy but weighty work, a work which requires rest and refreshment for the good of both the shepherd and the flock.

For these reasons, we have a structure in place in which a non-salaried elder may serve two three-year terms before taking a one-year leave of absence, modeled after the Biblical pattern of Sabbath rest. We believe this is healthy for both the elder and the congregation, and keeps the reality of Christ’s headship of the church in focus.

3. The interplay between elders and the congregation

Since elders are to exercise authority that is loving and servant-hearted, we believe church leadership should have a particular flavor to it. On the one hand, elders should proactively lead in the ways already discussed: clear proclamation of the gospel, prayer, and keeping alert for wolves in the flock, which can necessitate church discipline. On the other hand, this work is not to be carried out from a distance, like a political body making decisions for the country. Like the good shepherds portrayed in the Scriptures, elders should lead from within the flock, knowing the sheep and guiding them with firm gentleness.

¹⁹ “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear” (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Thus the elders at Whitton Avenue seek to be as accessible as possible and to communicate with appropriate frequency concerning the ongoing affairs of the church. We also have structures in place where congregational approval is required for significant church decisions, including the installation of elders. Such a system is not intended to give the church a political feel but to allow the congregation to confirm that the elders are leading the flock well as they follow Christ's lead.

VI. Conclusion

In the final analysis, the church—and consequently the work of the elders—is all about Christ. She exists by virtue of his death, resurrection, and continued nurture, and she exists ultimately to belong to him. After Christ returns as conquering King, he will take his church to be his bride forever as her Bridegroom. It is that final day that the church anticipates and toward which her leaders labor:

“Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,
‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his Bride has made herself ready;
it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure’—
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints” (Revelation 19:6-8).