We are picking up our series on the church by discussing spiritual leadership: leading the body to follow Christ. We began this section by focusing on the headship of Jesus Christ over the church and since then we’ve been discussing biblical eldership, those who function as under-shepherds, leading the church to follow Christ according to the scriptures. Last week we focused on the qualifications for elders in 1 Tim 3. Today we are going to give our attention to the role and responsibilities of elders.

Before we jump into that, let me just comment on two things.

1) Note the subtitle of this section: “leading the body to follow Christ.” I have chosen those words carefully because shepherds are not to lead the church just anywhere—certainly not after their own agenda. This is why one of the qualifications for elders in Titus 1:7 is that they not be self-willed. Elders are called to ensure that the body of Christ is following Christ as their Head. So our leadership should result in God’s people experiencing Christ’s leadership.

2) It is necessary for a local church to have a plurality of elders. Not just a single leader, but a team of shepherds co-laboring together. This is the pattern we see in all the NT churches. There is a richness of wisdom and safety in accountability when multiple elders shepherd or lead together.

Today we often think of a church being led by the pastor when we would do better to think of churches being led by a team of elders, the pastor being one of them. It may surprise you that the term pastor, referring to position/officer is only used once in the Bible. But the verb form of the word, which means to shepherd or to pastor, is used twice to describe the work of elders for overseers. In Acts 20:28 Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit has made the overseers to shepherd/pastor the church of God. In 1 Peter 5:2, Peter tells his fellow elders to pastor/shepherd the flock of God among them.

I simply want you to see that the NT specifically calls a plurality of elders to shepherd or pastor God’s people. (Not B.O.D. but team of shepherds)

What is the responsibility of biblical elders? The general term that I use the most to refer to the role and responsibility of elders is to shepherd God’s people. But what does it mean to shepherd? I want to suggest that the NT describes 4 aspects to shepherding.

Elders are called to feed, lead, protect, and correct God’s people as under-shepherds in the church of Jesus Christ (who is the chief shepherd).

Let’s take a more careful look at each of these aspects:

1. Elders are called to feed God’s people through the ministry of God’s word (Acts 6:4).

The first work of shepherding in the early church was done by the apostles who set a pattern of leadership for elders leading local congregations. In Acts 6 we find definite priorities established for those leading the church.

[Acts 6:1-7] What’s happening in Acts 6 is that the scope of needs in the church has grown beyond the capacity of the current leaders. So the apostles recognize the need for the church to select additional leaders who will function like deacons and take care of the secondary physical and financial needs so that the apostles could ensure that they would not neglect their first priorities in vs. 6: “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.” The apostles knew that if they neglected prayer and the ministry of the word as their primary focus, the mission and health of the church would suffer. If they did not delegate secondary ministries to other leaders the unity and effectiveness of the church would suffer. So the apostles led the church in a process of selecting additional leaders who were men of good reputation, full of the Spirit, and full of wisdom (vs. 3).

Now take note of the result that is recorded in vs. 7 as a result of delegating other leadership responsibilities so that the apostles could maintain a singular devotion to pray and the ministry of the word: “And the word of God kept spreading and the number of disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem.”
God builds, grows, sanctifies, purifies, and unifies His church through the ministry of the Word. Yet the ministry of the word will wither if it is not accompanied by prayers of faith that militantly combat the hardness and deceitfulness of our sinful hearts to receive the Word of God for what it really is, the Word of God, which performs its work in those who believe (I Thess 2:13).

Throughout his letters to Timothy, Titus, and their fellow elders, Paul continually and firmly stressed the need to feed God’s people with the Scriptures.

2. Elders are called to lead God’s people by their example and with biblical authority (1Peter 5:1-4).

Peter’s primary concern is not so much with what shepherds do, but how they do it. Elders should shepherd…

- Not under compulsion, but voluntarily (vs. 2)

Serving under compulsion is doing the job without a God-given motivation. It is the difference between being a drafted soldier and volunteering to serve. A man should not serve because he feels pressured by other church members or leaders to serve. He should not serve because his wife wants him to. He should not serve out of obligation or guilt because no one else is stepping up or to merely avoid a vacancy. That would be serving under compulsion. Now that’s not to say that there aren’t times we should serve because its right to care for one another, even though we may not feel like it in the moment. But overall, we want to serve from the heart, voluntarily; not for the purpose of advancing one’s own agenda, but “according to the will of God.” Elders must be modeling a willing gladness to serve the body, even though many times it requires personal sacrifice. We don’t want to be like the Israelites in Deut 28:47 who were disciplined because they did not serve the Lord with joy and a glad heart. If we are struggling to serve with voluntary gladness (in any ministry), it may be that a certain ministry is not the best fit for us, or it may be that our hearts need to be renewed. Those who serve compulsively will lack diligence and passion. Those who serve voluntarily will be energized and diligent.

- Not for sordid gain, but with eagerness (vs. 2)

In other words, our leadership should not be motivated by personal gain, whether money or reputation. Rather elders should set the example of serving with zeal and enthusiasm, with a passion for God and the growth and health of His people. This kind of shepherd is unconcerned about receiving personal recognition because his desire for God to be glorified through a faithful, healthy, flourishing church is worthy of sacrifice. Greedy ministry will be driven by selfishness while eager ministry will be driven by selflessness.

- Not as domineering, but as examples (vs. 3)

[vs. 3] “Lording it over” suggests “forcefully gaining mastery over others.” Peter here is echoing the words of the Lord Jesus in Matt 20:25: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant.” We know from the rest of the NT that Jesus and Peter are not saying that spiritual leaders do not have authority but that their authority is to be manifested from a servant’s heart. Its’ loving authority that seeks to meet the needs of the people we oversee by serving God’s interests supremely. What Peter and Jesus are warning us against is the abuse of spiritual authority. We must make sure that we are not using the authority of God’s word as a means for personal power. Rather, we are called to set an example of humble, selfless, godly devotion to Christ through our voluntary, eager leadership. Domineering leadership is abusive and stifling. Exemplary leadership is motivating and inspiring.

Paul further highlights the kind of example spiritual leaders should set:

- 1 Tim 4:12-16 – “…in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity show yourself and example to those who believe.”

While elders are not to be motivated by power or control over others (lording it over them), they must still function with a level of biblical authority.

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3 Lenski cited by Alexander Strauch in Biblical Eldership, pg. 245.

4 Alexander Strauch, Biblical Eldership, pg. 246.
I Tim 5:17 – “The elders who rule well are...worthy of double honor”
The word rule used here is the same Greek word in I Tim 3:4-5 of fathers managing or ruling their children. While it is to be a loving authority, it is not less authority; An authority that leads by example.

We see a clear level of authority implied in Heb 13:17 where the church is instructed to “obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” This is certainly not an authority without accountability for the elders must give an account to God for how they shepherded his children.

Piper: In the church, “authority refers to the divine calling of spiritual, gifted men to take primary responsibility as elders for Christ-like, servant-leadership and teaching in the church... Submission refers to the divine calling of the rest of the church, both men and women, to honor and affirm the leadership and teaching of the elders and to be equipped by them for the hundreds...of various ministries available to men and women in the service of Christ.”

Furthermore, we see spiritual authority in the elders’ teaching ministry which bears the authority of God’s Word. Titus 2:15 – “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority.” The context in Titus 2 is that the gospel of salvation should lead to sanctification for godly living. The Hope of Christ should produce holiness in life. So an elder’s authority is an outworking of the authority of Scripture which he stewards both in teaching and discipline.

3. Elders are called to protect the body of Christ and the gospel of grace (Heb 13:17).

[Heb 13:17] What does this verse have to do with the idea of protecting the body? It comes from the phrase “they keep watch over your souls.” Keeping watch implies the potential of danger. In a sense, biblical elders are spiritual guardians. They are to stand guard, to watch over, the spiritual safety of others who are susceptible to false teachers and the deceitfulness of sin. “Since false teachers and spiritual pitfalls abound, since all Christians start out as newborn babes in Christ, and since some Christians are perpetually weak in faith, watching over the spiritual development of God’s people is indispensable, continuous work.”

It is detrimental to the flock if elders do not shepherd well.

This is something we are still growing into at Trinity. As I said last week, our elders are attempting to change paradigms from being a board of directors to being a team of shepherds. One significant step toward this is implementing a shepherding plan in which each elder is specifically entrusted with a group of families in the church that he is communicating with for the purpose of encouragement and prayer to help guard you against spiritual pitfalls in your life.

So how is the congregation supposed to respond to elders who are keeping watch over their souls? Hebrews 13:17 gives us two answers:

a) You are to obey and submit to shepherds who keep watch over you. BTW, Much of what I am going to say on these two points comes from Alexander Strauch in his excellent book, Biblical Eldership. Submitting to designated godly leaders is essential because it will help you in your battle against sin. Church members will be spiritually nourished and protected by following the example of their elders (Heb 13:7) and obeying their teaching. The author uses two verbs in vs. 17 that are both imperatives or commands. First he uses, “obey” which means to listen and follow. Then he adds to this “submit” which means to yield or to defer to. “This means Christians are to be responsive to their leaders, yield to their authority, and subordinate themselves to them even when they have a difference of opinion.” Do you see why it’s so important to select godly men who themselves are gladly under the authority of Christ and His Word? Do you see why it’s important to have a plurality of elders, so that there is accountability even among the shepherds? Do you see why it is so important to have shepherds who understand that they are ultimately accountable to God?

6 Strauch, pg. 268.
7 Strauch, pg. 268.
“A spirit of obedience and submission to authority is fundamental to Christian living... submitting to authority is the fruit of genuine humility and faith. It is a mark of the Spirit-filled life (Eph 5:18—6:9).” As one man said, “Christ Himself led the way here below in this path of invariable and unswerving obedience...[believers] are only blessed as they walk in obedience and submission, instead of a vain clamor for their own rights, which if we realized, would be Satan’s slavery.”

“People who are stubborn and unsubmitting are unteachable, and incapable of changing for their own good.”

b) *Let your elders shepherd you with joy and not with grief.* The joy being referred to here is “the inexpressible joy of seeing lives transformed by the power of the gospel, watching people grow as the result of teaching the Word, and seeing the flock prosper.” The apostle John said, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (3John 4). Yet when God’s people disobey, complain, fight, display a critical spirit, or persist in unbelief, the joys of shepherding quickly vanish. True shepherds “groan in sorrow over those who refuse to grow, learn, change, or receive correction.” And yet, “while disobedience distresses church shepherds, it has an even more serious impact on the wayward believer”—it is “unprofitable.” In fact, to cut oneself off from God’s watchmen or to run away from the shepherd’s care is dangerous business.”

So Elders must watch over, or protect, the souls of those they shepherd. Furthermore, shepherds must guard or protect the gospel of grace. Referring to the gospel, Paul admonished Timothy to “guard what has been entrusted to you” (1Tim 6:20). Again referring to the gospel, Paul urged Timothy, “*Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.*” (2Tim 1:13-14)

In Acts 20:28 Paul warns the Ephesian elders about the vicious false teachers that they must protect God’s people from, who were seeking to distort the gospel of grace. [*Acts 20:28-32*] Elders are called to protect God’s people by guarding the gospel of grace.

4. Elders are called to correct persistent sin and false teaching (Acts 20:28).

What I am trying to emphasize here is the elders’ responsibility to provide correction on two fronts. First they must confront sin, guarding the church from corruption.

- 1 Tim 5:20 – speaking of sinning elders, Paul says, “*those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest will be fearful of sinning.*”
- Titus 3:10-11 – Regarding those in the body, Paul instructs Timothy to “*reject a factious man after a first and second warning, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.*”

Secondly elders must provide correction by refuting false teaching.

- Titus 1:9 – Paul required elders to “hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” to be able to “exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict.”
- Titus 1:10-14 – Paul commanded Titus to silence rebellious, false teachers, by reproving them severely so that they would be sound in the faith.

So what I hope you’ve been able to see is a fuller sense of the role responsibility of biblical elders to feed, lead, protect, and correct. Furthermore, if we had time for a study of the book of Acts we would see that elders were also responsible for some administrative oversight (i.e. regarding financial concerns and needs of people—Acts 11:30; cf. 1Tim 5), as well as judging doctrinal issues (Acts 15:1-2), providing counsel, and resolving conflicts (Acts 21).

Now one final word. In light of all that we have seen about biblical eldership, how are congregations regard those who shepherd them?
We’ve already seen from Hebrews 13:17 that congregations are to obey their leaders and submit to them in a way that proves joyful to them and not grievous because they keep watch over your souls. Let me just add to this Paul’s instructions in [1 Tim 5:17-21]. Three Words:

- **Honor**: We must **Honor** those who rule well, especially those who are diligent in preaching and teaching the Scriptures. In other words, give honor where honor is due. And due honor is for those who don’t seek honor or serve for the praise of men. (I Tim 1:17-18)

- **Guard**: We must guard our shepherds against frivolous accusations or slander for this would damage the church and God’s name. Accusations must not be entertained unless they are serious and verifiable. (I Tim 5:19)

- **Accountability**: We must hold elders accountable as those who model and lead from a life above reproach. If they persist in sin, they must be disciplined for their own sake and for the sake of God’s people. (I Tim 5:20)

May God continue to raise up godly elders to shepherd here at Trinity to ensure that God is glorified and the gospel is advanced for the joy of all people.