

Study of Elders

The Reason for Elders in the Church

In looking at the purpose of elders, one thing is clear; the purpose and responsibilities are combined. Perhaps the purpose might be more clearly understood in looking at the three ways that the leadership is defined: Elder, Overseer, and Shepherd. Anderson sees three main purposes for elders: shepherd, mentors, and equippers (1997, p. 11-122). Anderson contends that the most important function of an elder is that of a shepherd (p.126). To shepherd the flock means to watch out for the welfare of the flock. This would include protecting from “wolves” without and within (Acts 20). To be a shepherd like Jesus (I Peter 5:1-5) requires knowing your “flock.” They must know the needs, concerns, and problems that face the people they are to shepherd. “They must be available!”

The elders, or shepherds make sure that people have spiritual food, that they watch over the welfare of the congregation, that they are known to those who are following. They mentor those who want to develop their talents and skills, or those who want to grow into becoming a leader. They encourage and equip “for good works” (Matthew 5:16, II Timothy 3:17).

Wray (2006) discusses five spiritual qualities for shepherds (pg. 55). First, they need an effective method of identifying and supporting weak disciples. Shepherding requires demands that many do not feel they can achieve. It requires seeking first God’s righteousness, and to live a sacrificial life (pg 56). In Galatians (4:19) Paul states: “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—.” Wray believes this is a biblical mandate for shepherding. Shepherds should be examples (I Peter 5:3) of faith and living a spiritual life. They should also be mentors who help the “flock” to develop their spiritual talents. Anderson () also believes that it is a shepherds job to equip, and mentor the flock.

Wray contrasted two different elderships he had worked with. The first felt that they were a “board of directors” and acted that way. They felt it was their job to hand down orders, and then would check to make sure their orders were carried out. The second group acted as shepherds who were concerned for the spiritual growth of their congregations. They mentor the minister and helped him grow in his talents and abilities, as well as caring for the rest of the congregation. The difference is in seeing the eldership as “governors” and as “shepherds.” If a congregation is to grow spiritually as well as in numbers, then it needs shepherds—not a board of directors.

The second spiritual quality needed by elders is how to participate in God's healing process for the sick and injured Christians (Wray, pg 57). Concern should be for strengthening the weak, and healing of the sick. Love and care for those who are sick, whether spiritually, physically, or emotionally, should be the concern of those who lead as elders, as shepherds. Those who are sick in whatever capacity are vulnerable and defenseless. The concept of an elder as a shepherd conveys the idea that you make sure that your flock is healthy. James (5:14-16) says that when sick call for the elders. That they should pray "over you," and "anoint with oil in the name of the Lord." He further states that they should lay their hands on the sick. There is great comfort being prayed over, and touch is a powerful way to soothe and comfort. Those who practice aroma therapy believe that the smells in certain oils have the ability to heal, to soothe, to comfort.

Wray says that when elder's central concern is to bind the injured that they will begin providing spiritual care when there is grief, or loss of any kind. When the elders approach is a caring for injury, in whatever form the injury takes, they will "identify with their people (pg 59)." Once they begin to identify with those they are shepherding they will visit the sick, counsel those who are grieving, and carry out the pastoral duties that God intended.

Clark believes that a congregation needs elders, shepherds, who can provide what the congregation needs. Although most congregations are not dealing with homeless, and drug addicts (at least not ones who have let people know), they are dealing with people who have marriage problems, emotional problems, financial problems, and a myriad of other problems that can interfere with their growing into the spiritual faith that God wants for His people. It should be the responsibility of the elders to know what they need, and to provide what they need to deal with their problems. People should think first of calling elders when they are sick (James 5:14-15). The first person they call is the minister to visit when sick or in the hospital because those whose job it should be to visit, to pray over them, are too busy, or uncaring for them to call.

When concern is binding up the injured they will know when people in their congregation are having problems with their marriage, when they have children who are causing problems, when they are having spiritual crisis. The "board of director" approach to eldership separates them from people, and says we are above you. Concern is in governing, and the focus is more on monetary issues, and numbers, than it is on the needs and welfare of the congregation.

The third spiritual quality for elders discussed by Wray is to find ways to search for brothers and sisters who go astray (pg 60). Isaiah shows how God cares for the lambs that stray by gathering them up and carrying them close to his heart (Isa. 40:11, John 10:12-14, I Peter 2:24-25). In Acts (20:28) elders are told to be on guard for both themselves and for the flock that they stand before. Christ used the concept of the lost sheep to highlight the importance of going after the "lost sheep." It is so important that he says that there is more joy in heaven over one

who repents than for all the others who haven't been lost (Luke 15:7). What we term as elders, Paul called "overseers" of our spiritual welfare (Acts 20:28-32). Paul's use of the word we translate "overseer" and that we translate "shepherd" are synonymous (Piper, 1976, p. 6). They are to "guard the flock," "go after the strays," and "feed the flock." Spiritual feeding and care is or should be of primary importance to the shepherd.

The fourth quality for elders, shepherds, that Wray expounds, is to find effective strategies for reaching the lost (those who do not know Christ). There has been several times in the last few years that we heard of people lost climbing Mt. Hood. How many people would have been irate, and justifiably so, if those responsible for looking for them just said: "We will just forget about finding them. It is their fault they are lost." In the physical world we know the importance of searching for the lost, but we seem to have lost the desire to search out the spiritual lost. Those who are leaders should be examples of seeking out the lost. That may require understanding the modern culture, developing methods to get their attention in order to teach them. Because we have a building does not mean that it will attract the lost to our door.

Sibert (2007) relayed what happened when a family had a child in the hospital. Many people from the church brought food for the family, and because others were also waiting they began to provide food for them also. One of the elder's saw a family crying in the corner of the waiting room. He approached them and asked about their child. He asked if he could pray for them, and put his arms around them and prayed. His actions had a positive impact on that family, as well as many others. His influence went beyond as even the hospital workers were impressed with what was happening. How much influence would we have in the world if we had elders who visited the sick in the hospitals, and then offered their concerned prayers to others there?

Sibert contends that elders who hold firm to Christian teaching that they enable the faith community to fulfill its aim (p. 127). All Christians are to live lives that show self-control, upright and godly lives, and to be "zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:11-14)". The congregation takes its cue from its leaders. If they are unconcerned for the lost—don't seek them out, then the rest of the congregation will not be concerned either. Elders should be an example to the "flock (I Peter 4:3).

Newton (2001) found that the same concepts of leadership could be equally applied to family relationships. He had four basic principles First, that leaders need to base their security, and their identity on God—not other sources. When God laid out rules to govern the kings (Deuteronomy 17:15-20) he did not include his economic strategy, managerial ability, expertise, or social status. What God felt would be a good leader was to fear God, and to depend on Him. When as leaders they became arrogant and self-centered, and prideful, then God removed them (I Samuel 15:11). When our leaders make their decisions based on values that are not rooted in

God, or in “power” they may have acquired, on money, or any other thing, then their leadership is crippled.

The second principle Newton believes elders, leaders, must possess is to be an example that is worthy of imitation. The followers must see that they are “walking the talk.” Jesus is, and should be, the model for any leadership. As leader model Christ, then others can see that they are worthy of imitating also (John 13:15, Luke 9:23-24, Philippians 2:5-8, Ephesians 5:2, I Corinthians 11:1).

Newton’s third principle is that the leader should be actively serving—not demanding to be served, or lording it over others. Christ, our supreme example, said that He came to serve—not to be served (Matthew 20:28, John 10:11-13). Christian leadership is based on being the one who serves—not the one who is served (Luke 22:25-27, John 13:12-17). Christ service was so great that He gave His life for us.

The fourth principle of leadership Newton expressed is that leadership requires accepting the responsibility when God has given to the leader. Leaders must give an account to God (Hebrews 13:17). The responsibility they have does not mean that they make decisions on their own. In Acts 15 we find that the Apostles didn’t make a decision with consultation, elders didn’t make a decision without consultation, and in fact they had input from others (vs 5). The Pharisees argued that circumcision was necessary—and there was “much debate” over the matter. After the discussion (in the presence of the church) the James, an elder, expressed what would be done. This decision was not made by a few off in a room by themselves. This is obvious in verse 12, where it says “the multitude kept silent.” Because of a idea that the elders are a board of directors, there seems to be the idea that in their own small group they make all the decision, and then hand them down.

The fifth quality of a shepherd that is expressed by Wray is: to minister with kindness and gentleness. A leader who shows kindness, and gentleness in their dealings with others will create trust, and a sense of belonging. Anderson (1997) says that we have many distorted models of leadership that are not biblical (p.30-31). The first is the “hired hand.” The hired hand does not care for the sheep (John 10:12). This leader will not stay the course. They will save themselves at the expense of the “flock.” Anderson says that under pressure they will do “the organizationally expedient thing (p. 31.)”

Another distorted leadership style Anderson provides is the cowboy (32). Anyone who has watched westerns know what a cowboy does. They drive the herd, forcing them to go the way they want. If the leader follows Christ’s example then they will lead “even through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalms 23). They will clear the path for the “flock.” They will walk among them.

The third distorted style Anderson five is that of the sheriff. This leadership style is a peace keeper—which is done at the point of a gun. This person is “the law, and what he says goes.” This leader demands—doesn’t ask. He coerces instead of gaining cooperation. The effect of this style is either minimal compliance, or open rebellion (p. 33). This person has certainly become a lord, not a servant (Acts 20: 25-28). Anderson says that his father told him that “a Church leader who has to assert his authority doesn’t have much (pg. 33).” If the answer to a question is because “I say so,” then it is because they have no answer.

Other models Anderson gives is the pop-manager—the one that follows current trends in business such as the ‘minute manager.’ It also leads into the next model that Anderson says is used. This is the one we see often used today—that of the CEO/Chairman of the Board (p. 34). This model separates those who should be leading from the rest of the flock. They avoid fellowship events, and opportunities to know those who they should be leading. Anderson says this model “represents a profound misunderstanding of their role and its process (p.34).” This creates a sense that there is something wrong in the followers, even though they may not be able to express what is wrong.

Christ said that the “hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me (John 10:27).” If the leaders are not in with the flock, they do not know them, and the flock won’t know the leader.

“God has provided a number of biblical principles for effective leadership.(Newton, p.7)” If those principles are abandoned then the leadership will be ineffective, and greatly diminished. Those who view their spiritual leadership as a hierarchy, as a board, or an office, are missing the point of an eldership. They are shepherds that guide, protect, encourage, teach, and when necessary admonish. The concept of admonishment conveys ideas of encouragement and reproof (Jackson, 2007/August, p.1).

Those who lead have a great responsibility to the followers. The followers have a responsibility to those who lead. Nowhere in the scriptures have I found that God intended for the leaders, overseers, shepherds, to be rulers, dictators, or sole decision makers. Hamilton says that the outcome of Godly spiritual leadership is: the perfecting and maturing of the saints, the work of the ministry, and the edifying of the body in the unity of faith (p.1). What God intends is that we have shepherds. Pray that God will provide a congregation with shepherds—not CEO’s.

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