

What is a Pastor? (Acts 20:17-38)**Matthew Williams****January 9, 2022**

This morning we have the joy of seeing our brother Josh Kruger ordained as an elder at KingsWay. We thank God for you, my friend. Many of us have been waiting for this day for a long time, though perhaps none longer than Josh. A variety of people will be speaking today, including Josh, Karin, and our regional leader, Mickey Connolly. I want us to begin, however, by asking a very important question: What is a pastor?

If you grew up in the church or have spent time in different church settings, you probably have all manner of mental associations with pastors. Some may be positive. Some may be negative. As real as those experiences may be, it is ever so important, my friends, that we do not ground our understanding of a pastor in our experience or the latest news report. Our understanding of who a pastor is and what we should expect him to do must be grounded in the Word of God.

Hear the Word of the Lord from Acts 20:17-38. **(READ THE TEXT)** What do we discover when we open God's Word and listen as God himself answers the question, "What is a pastor?" Several things.

1) PASTORS ARE GIFTS FROM GOD

There is no greater gift God has ever given or could ever give than the gift of himself. The Father sent the Son into the world to rescue us from sin and death that we might know the joy of loving the God who first loved us. Jesus is God's best gift. He defines the measure of God's love for us. Good news of salvation through Jesus was the theme of all the Apostle Paul declared and taught to the Ephesians (v. 21), "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ."

But there are many other gifts God gives as expressions of his love for us in Jesus. The risen Christ is a fountain of goodness overflowing in streams of manifold blessing! When Jesus finished his saving work on earth and ascended to the right hand of the Father, he did not do what most kings of old did on the day of their coronation. He did not receive gifts from his people. He gave gifts to his people.

Eph 4:11, "And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ." There is only one Great Shepherd of the sheep and it's not Josh, or Chris, or me. It's King Jesus. The Lord is our Shepherd. But one of the most important ways he shepherds his sheep, the people of God, is through the faithful labor of under-shepherds or "pastor-teachers" who care for the church on his behalf.

So exactly who are these pastor-teachers? They are the men who occupy the biblical office of an elder or overseer. It's easy to get really confused here because different churches use the terms elder and pastor to mean different things. In many churches, the "pastor" is the man, often a full-time employee, who does the preaching, counseling, and administration. He's hired by a board of elders who function as the decision-making body. The pastor cares for the people. The elders make all the important governance decisions.

That's not the model we find in God's Word. God never separates the ruling function from the caring function. The only people to whom God entrusts authority to rule are the people whom God has called to care. In Acts 20:28, Paul charges every elder in Ephesus to be a pastor. "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for (or pastor) the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."

The call to care for, or pastor the church comes with a real measure of authority. If the Holy Spirit makes you an elder or "overseer", that means he's given you authority to exercise oversight. But the whole idea of eldership isn't about who's in charge. It's about who God has called to care for the church and as an expression of that care, exercise appropriate and necessary oversight. Think of it this way. Elder is the office. Pastor is the job description. That's why the elders at KingsWay refer to themselves as "pastors," men with the authority to care. We want to emphasize the essential shepherding function of biblical eldership.

In an age that delights to deconstruct the authority of offices and institutions, we do well to remember the model of church leadership I'm describing here is not a creation of man. It's God's design. Yes, Paul says in Acts 14:23 that he appointed elders in every church, Ephesus included. But he recognizes it wasn't ultimately his work. It was God's work. He doesn't say in Acts 20:28, "I made you overseers." He says, "The Holy Spirit made you overseers."

It's God the Spirit who calls, equips, and establishes weak, finite, imperfect men as pastors so he can accomplish his perfect work through them. Pastors are not perfect. We need the mercy and grace of the gospel just like everyone else.

Notice in v. 32 how Paul's confidence for the church in Ephesus isn't grounded in what the elders bring to the table. It's grounded in the prevailing power of God at work in their lives. "Now I commend you to God and the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." Take heart in that, Josh!

Paul knows the church in Ephesus is not the elders' church just like KingsWay is my church or Chris' church or Josh's church. What are we, brothers and sisters, according to v. 28? We are "the church of God." We are God's church, infinitely precious in his sight. He cares so much for us that he was willing to obtain us at the price of his own blood.

And having purchased us, he continues to care for us through men he fashions and calls to be our pastors. Men who gladly confess with Pastor John Stott, "If the church was worth his blood, is it not worth our labor? The privilege of serving it is established by the preciousness of the price paid for its purchase." A pastor is a gift from God.

2) PASTORS SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD

In Jer 3:15, the Lord promises to give his people "shepherds after my own heart." So what does a shepherd after God's own heart do? A pastor's biblical responsibilities are readily organized into four categories.

First, pastors lead the flock. Biblical examples abound for a pastor's leadership role in the church. 1 Tim. 5:17 describes elders who "rule well". In 1 Tim. 3, Paul says if an elder doesn't know how to "manage" his own household, how will he care for God's church? 1 Thes. 5:12-13, "...respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord..." 1 Pet. 5:2, "...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight..." Heb. 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account..."

Note, these Scriptures do not teach that pastors make all the decisions or even that elders must be involved in all the decisions. Being faithful to "exercise oversight"

does not mean that if there's a leadership role available, a pastor must fill it. Far from it. Remember in Eph 4:11, Paul charges pastors to "equip the saints for works of ministry". That means pastors will often lead by empowering others to lead!

That said, Paul exhorts no other church office-bearer to "rule well", indicating pastors must, at a minimum, assume ultimate responsibility for the overall vision and direction of the church (1 Tim 5:17).

Second, pastors feed the flock. They teach by explaining the whole counsel of God's written Word, centered on Jesus, the Word made flesh. Tit 1:9, "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." We do not want pastors to tell us what we want to hear or pastors who tell us what they think we need to hear. We want, we need, pastors who heed 2 Tim 4:2 with gravity and gladness. "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."

A true pastor feeds the flock best when the content of his teaching is ruthlessly unoriginal. He diligently explains what God has already said. Therein lies the good pasture. Therein lies the still waters. The pastor's faithfulness to accurately explain and apply the Word of God is the responsibility on which the health of the church ultimately rises or falls. 1 Tim. 4:16, "Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."

Without mandating that every elder must have the same level of gifting or exercise their teaching gift in the same context, every elder must have some form of recognized, public, teaching ministry. A pastor isn't just a good guy or a people person. He feeds the flock with the truth of God's Word.

Third, pastors protect the flock - particularly from false doctrines that would undermine our confidence in the gospel. After charging the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28 to "care for the church of God", Paul draws their attention in vv. 29-31 to the priority of protecting the sheep. "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert..."

When a pastor carefully contrasts the truth of Scripture with the spirit of the age, he is protecting the flock. When a pastor guides the church in loving discipline of wayward members who would otherwise corrupt our witness to the gospel, he is protecting the flock. When a pastor cares for you enough to point out where you have fallen into sin and how the life Jesus offers is so much better, he is protecting the flock.

When a pastor exhorts the church to gospel-centered unity during a time of cultural division over political or ethnic lines, he is protecting the flock. The Lord has given Josh a pronounced burden for this responsibility. We're grateful, brother.

Fourth, pastors care for the flock. In many ways, care speaks to the heart-orientation behind his leading, feeding and protecting. I love how Paul describes his own ministry in 1 Thes. 2:7-8, 11-12, in terms of the respective care of a mother and father for their children. "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us...For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God..."

The most important thing a pastor does, through his leadership, feeding and protecting, is to incarnate the love of God for his people. He follows in the footsteps of the Chief Shepherd by demonstrating strong, tender, and discerning spiritual care for the members of his flock. Jer 23:4, "I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD." Those are the primary ways a pastor shepherds the flock of God.

3) PASTORS ARE ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD

The Lord does not merely care about what a pastor does in public or when he's on stage on Sunday morning. He primarily cares about who the man is in private. Why? Because ministry (how we serve) always flows from life (who we are). The Lord knows that if a pastor stumbles in scandalous sin, it can have a devastating impact on the church and her witness to the gospel.

So, Paul provides two lists of essential character traits for elders in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1. The summary of these character qualities appears at the beginning of both lists. An elder must be “above reproach”, calling for a sound, but not perfect, example of godliness for the church to follow.

Paul then clarifies what that means. He must be respected by outsiders, mature and humble, sexually pure, a leader at home, sober-minded, self-controlled, gentle and content. He must also be hospitable, using his home to show generous love toward church members and neighbors alike. The qualifications for eldership, save “able to teach,” are qualities every Christian man should aspire to. That’s because much of an elders pastoring occurs simply through the example of his life to a watching flock.

1 Tim 3:10 commands us to carefully test a prospective pastor before setting him into office. And Paul warns in 1 Tim 5:22, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands...” Why not? Because it takes time to observe whether a man is truly qualified for ministry, to evaluate whether he is faithful to speak the truth and live the truth, for the Great Shepherd will hold him accountable for both.

Jas 3:1 warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Heb 13:17 explicitly says church leaders will give an account of their conduct to God. But it’s not merely a threat of consequences for wrongdoing. It’s a promise of tremendous reward for pastors who persevere in faithful ministry. To elders who shepherd the flock willingly, eagerly, being examples to the flock, Peter promises (1 Pe 5:4), “And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

CONCLUSION

Josh, you are a gift from God. You have proven yourself faithful in shepherding the flock of God over the last 9 years. And you labor with the sober joy and humble courage of a man who knows he is ultimately accountable to God.

It is no exaggeration to say I could not have walked through the last 7 years of serving as lead pastor in this church without your tireless support. It’s one of the highlights of my life to see you ordained as my friend in the church I love the most. Please come and share your story of how God brought you to this place