

Lessons in Shepherding 4: Acts, 1 Peter, and Revelation

By Paul Alexander

[Editor's note: In the interest of providing pastors with good resources, or at least of pointing them toward good ideas, we are grateful to present Pastor Paul Alexander's elder training seminars for new elders. Alexander himself says that this study is dependent on and adapted from Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart* (IVP, 2006), and A.D. Clarke, "Leadership," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP, 2000). This issue of the *9Marks eJournal* presents the first half of Alexander's curriculum (classes 1 to 4), which exclusively focuses on the metaphor of shepherding in Scripture. In a future issue, we will present the latter half of his curriculum, which moves to the more practical aspects of eldering.]

Over the last three classes, we have seen that the shepherding metaphor can be used to tell the story of how God deals with his people in the Bible. The metaphor is used to describe God's work and the work of his Son in the Old and New Testaments. The metaphor is also used to describe the men he specifically delegates to represent him in his work, again, in both Testaments.

In this fourth and final class of tracing this theme through the Bible, we will focus on Acts, 1 Peter, and Revelation.

ACTS

Addressing the elders of the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul says,

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. 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 20:28-32).

In the paragraphs preceding these verses, Paul reminds the elders that he served the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came on him because of the Jews (v.19). He hadn't shrink from declaring to them anything that was profitable, teaching them publicly and from house to house, testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (vv.20-21). His whole purpose in life had become to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God (v.24). And then he assures them that, as he had gone about them preaching the kingdom, he had declared the whole counsel of God to them (vv.25-27). After speaking of his own ministry, Paul then switches gears to command the elders in Ephesus to be on guard for themselves and the flock.

What then is the connection between Paul's ministry and the ministry of the local church elders? In other words, how does this context of proclamation and testimony inform Paul's command to the elders to shepherd the flock of God? Paul was modeling in his own apostolic ministry how to be a shepherd of God's flock. Shepherding involves serving, humility, tears, trials, courage, declaring everything in Scripture, public teaching, house-to-house teaching, testifying to

repentance and faith in Christ, preaching the kingdom, and declaring the whole purpose of God to the flock.

The Greek word there for “be on guard” (v.28) is *pros-echo*, meaning, to be attentive to, to be aware of, to turn your mind toward a person or thing. Being on guard entails paying close attention to something and keeping watch over it. Elders are to attend to two things: themselves and the flock.

Why must an elder pay close attention to himself? Isn't that selfish? No. It's responsible. An elder is the leader of the flock. If the shepherd goes down, the sheep will go down with him. That's why Paul tells Timothy elsewhere, “Pay close attention to yourself and your doctrine. Persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you” (1 Tim. 4:16).

How do we obey this command? By reading our Bibles. By steadfast praying. By reading good doctrinal books that instruct us in biblical doctrine and keep us faithful to the biblical text in our teaching. By mutually edifying friendships and discipleship relationships. By accountability relationships. By giving and receiving godly encouragement and criticism among each other.

We're also to be on guard or pay close attention to all the flock. Why does Paul say “all” the flock? To help the elders avoid the danger of favoritism.

What kinds of things are we watching out for when we pay close attention to the flock? Based on what Paul says in verses 29 and 30, we're to watch out for false teachers, false doctrines, false methods, and false practices that draw disciples away from the flock. We're not called to examine the vitality of people's social lives or their financial status. We're called to look at their doctrine, their practice, and how those doctrines and practices affect both their own spiritual state and the spiritual state of others in the church. This is what it means to be overseers of the flock. We oversee the doctrine and practice of our flock, and how both impact the spiritual growth or spiritual atrophy of the congregation. We want to ask ourselves questions like these:

- Is the doctrine and practice making the church and its members stronger or weaker, spiritually speaking?
- Are they being fed on the best grass?
- Are they being given pure water to drink?
- Are they biting one another or are they caring for one another?
- Are there goats among the sheep who domineer the weaker ones, or do the stronger ones help to protect the weaker?

Where do these dangers, these wolves, come from in verses 29 and 30? They come from both outside the flock and inside the flock. Therefore, elders have to be on the lookout for dangers from within and without.

To reflect further on the dangers from within for a moment, an elder must pay attention to the relationships inside the church between natural leaders and followers: “from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things,” Paul says. Someone in the church, maybe even an elder, might rise up and teach things contrary to sound doctrine.

How do we oversee those kinds of internal dynamics? Small groups are one way. When a man leads a small group, he has a better relational sense of different individuals in the congregation. Another way is to provide clear biblical and doctrinal direction for the church generally. This should be done through the pulpit, through Sunday School, through the statement of faith, through a church newsletter, and through any number of other venues. The clearer sound doctrine is in a church, the clearer any challenges to sound doctrine become.

In order to reflect further on the dangers from without for a moment, recall what Paul says in verse 29: “savage wolves will come in among you [from the outside], not sparing the flock”. There are people teaching bad doctrine “out there,” and we need to make sure we’re protecting the flock from these kinds of influences, whether the influences are coming from community Bible studies, conferences, or books sold at the Christian bookstore.

How do we oversee such external dynamics? By personal Bible reading so that we’re saturating ourselves in the truth. By personal prayer for the light of the Holy Spirit to give us the mind of Christ on his word. By reading good theological books that reinforce biblical truth. By reading bad books carefully to discern where their dangers and errors lie. By studying church history to see where the church has erred in the past.

(Luke calls these men “elders” in verse 17, but Paul calls them “overseers” in verse 28, overseers who shepherd the flock. Scripture treats these words as interchangeable. The Greek term *episkopos*, which we translate bishop or overseer, is used interchangeably with *presbuteros*, “elder,” as well as with the “shepherd” word group, *poimen*. An elder *is* an overseer, who *is* a pastor/shepherd. There is no distinction. They all point to the same office. This is one of the main reasons we don’t believe in bishops like the Catholic church does.)

Overseeing dangers from within and without means being willing to step into that uncomfortable territory of admonishing other people. As Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders in verse 31, “Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.” Again, what’s the connection between Paul’s ministry and the ministry he wants the Ephesian elders to have? He wants his ministry of heart-felt admonition to be the model for theirs. What does it mean to admonish someone? The Greek word is *nouth-e-teō*, from *nous*, mind, and *tith-ae-me*, to place. To admonish is to place something in someone’s mind. It’s to instruct or exhort or warn them (BAGD), particularly about the truth of God in Christ and the personal and corporate implications of this truth for God’s people.

PETER

Suffer for the Sake of the Name

When Peter first uses the metaphor of Christ as our shepherd, he uses it in the context of Christ's suffering, and Christ's call on Christians to follow in these very footsteps. Peter writes,

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. ²⁵ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls (1 Peter 2:21-25).

The Great Shepherd became a sacrificial lamb. His suffering as a substitute for all who repent and believe is unique. There's nothing for us to emulate here. Only Christ's sacrifice can atone for sin. At the same time, Peter does say that Christ suffered "as an example for us to follow in His steps."

Again, this passage is directed to Christians in general, but how might it apply to elders in particular? Becoming a shepherd is a call to Christ-like self-sacrifice for the spiritual good of the sheep. Being a shepherd after the example of the Great Shepherd means being called to suffer for the sheep. At the very least, it means being called to a willingness to suffer for their spiritual protection and advancement in the gospel. We're not to have a messiah complex, as if we're the ones who must do the saving. That doesn't honor Christ. He is honored when we prove our willingness to sacrifice of ourselves in order to do spiritual good to his sheep.

This passage also calls elders to personal and practical holiness in the context of suffering on behalf of God's flock. Jesus committed no sin as our example of suffering, and we should commit no sin when we suffer for the spiritual good of his sheep.

Are we willing to suffer for Christ's sheep? How do we become willing to suffer? We must ask him to increase our love and respect for the glory of God and the way in which it's magnified by our suffering on the flock's behalf. Only his Spirit can increase our love for Christ, working it into our hearts by his Spirit.

The connection between an elder's call and the willingness to suffer becomes even more clear in chapter 5.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And

when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1Peter 5:1-4).

The word “Therefore” in verse 1 connects us back to the preceding text in chapter 4, where Peter relates our suffering as Christians to God’s glory as our Creator and Redeemer. As he says in verse 14, “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.” Then in verse 16: “if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name.” It’s in this context of Christian suffering and self-denial for the sake of God’s glory that Peter says “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you.” Here, then, shepherding is explicitly linked to suffering for the name of Christ. In other words, the call to shepherding the flock is a call the suffering for the glory of Christ in a particular way, by performing a particular service to God’s people. The elder’s willingness to suffer for Christ’s glory should be a model for the members of their churches. They should be “first in line,” as it were, leading the rest.

Voluntarily and Eagerly

How else are elders called to shepherd the flock here? By exercising oversight. The exercise of oversight is the participle that describes the command to shepherd. The word for exercising oversight is *episkopeō*, from which we get the word “overseer” or “bishop.” It means to look after or care for. We shepherd people by looking after them, giving attention to their spiritual condition.

Elders should perform this oversight voluntarily.

Elders should do this work with eagerness.

And elders should prove themselves examples to the flock.

How does Peter want God’s under-shepherds to be examples? It seems to be through their humility. Peter instructs them not to lord it over the sheep in their care. Notice that the very next command for all his readers in verse 5 is for us to clothe ourselves with humility, and in verse 6 to humble ourselves. As one commentator has written, “Elders are not to enter the ministry so they can boss others around but so they can exemplify the character of Christ to those under their charge.”¹ Elders are examples, *tupoi*, types of Christ.

Peter goes on to say here that “when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” Suffering as shepherds leads to glory from the Chief Shepherd. Why does he mention this? As an incentive to faithfulness. If we are to be willing to suffer for the flock as Christ suffered and died, then we have to have a horizon that extends beyond this life and into the next. We won’t be willing to suffer if our thoughts and prayers are this-worldly concerns. We have to have heaven in our hearts in order to endure suffering for the flock in a holy and God-honoring way. Eternal joy with God is what keeps our suffering in this world in the right perspective.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *The New American Commentary: 1, 2 Peter, Jude* (B&H, 2003), 235.

REVELATION

Finally, what do we learn about both the Great Shepherd and the work of under-shepherding in the final book of the Bible? Let's begin in chapter 7:

Then one of the elders answered, saying to me, "These who are clothed in the white robes, who are they, and where have they come from?" I said to him, "My lord, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. "For this reason, they are before the throne of God; and they serve Him day and night in His temple; and He who sits on the throne will spread His tabernacle over them. "They will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 7:13-17).

The Shepherd Lamb in verse 17 guides his sheep to the springs of the water of life. As his under-shepherds, that, too, must be our destination with the sheep that God has portioned to us. We must guide the flock to the springs of the water of life. We are to show them Christ crucified in the power of the Spirit by our words, by our example, and by the direction we lead the church.

The apostle's words in chapter 14 then point us toward the themes we've been tracing to their most glorious pitch, as the Shepherd who is the Lamb stands gathered with his flock.

Then I looked, and behold, the Lamb was standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His name and the name of His Father written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder, and the voice which I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps. And they sang a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and the elders; and no one could learn the song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been purchased from the earth. These are the ones who have not been defiled with women, for they have kept themselves chaste. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These have been purchased from among men as first fruits to God and to the Lamb. And no lie was found in their mouth; they are blameless (Rev. 14:1-5).

In Laniak's words, "The heavenly Jerusalem, it turns out, was all along as much anticipated by the deserts and dispersions of the community's journey as by the earthly city bearing its name. In both experiences the Shepherd-Lamb was teaching them to follow Him to their real home" (245).

CONCLUSION

As under-shepherds of Jesus Christ, we shepherd his flock not simply through this world, but into the next. Our great business as elders is to ensure the salvation of those who listen to us and follow us (1 Tim. 4:16). We are not adequate in ourselves for such an eternal responsibility, but “our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant....” And He makes us adequate by his word. “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Praise God for his grace and for the power of his word that both equip us for the task. May we trust him wholly in this work, that we might find him wholly true.

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