

## *Five-Fold Ministry Gifts*

### *Part 5: Shepherds*

#### **Introduction**

The ministry gift of pastor is the most familiar of the five-fold offices. Virtually all of us in the church have experienced the personal care and counsel of one of God's called, committed and anointed shepherds. As most of us have discovered, the ministry of the pastor has been invaluable to our well-being in the Lord. None of us would be where we are in the Lord without the ministry of caring shepherds and many of us would not even be walking with the Lord if it had not been for the encouragement and healing ministry of a trusted shepherd in the body of Christ. My wife and I would probably not be in the ministry today if not for the care of pastors in (and to) our city by the names of Don and Ruth Rousu who brought us through a difficult time in ministry.

Unfortunately, I have known some who have yet to recover from the wound that they received at the hand of a shepherd in the body of Christ who violated their trust. As we will see, the call to be an overseer in the body of Christ is one that should never be taken lightly or with ill-motive. The sheep matter very much to the Great Shepherd and those called to oversee the flock of God have been given a critical trust indeed.

You may have noticed that I have used the terms "pastor" and "shepherd" interchangeably. That is because, biblically, there is no difference. The word, "pastor," as we find it in Ephesians 4:11, is the Greek word, "poimen," which means "shepherd." Ephesians 4:11 is the only place that you will find "poimen" translated "pastor." Every other time it is found in the Bible it is translated, "shepherd." "Pastor" is an Old-English word akin to "pasture" that was used by the King James translators as another word for shepherd. Foreign language translations do not make a distinction between Ephesians 4 and other places where "poimen" is used. This is why the term, "shepherd," is actually the more accurate term to use in the list of the five-fold ministry gifts.

#### **Shepherds in the Scriptures**

The depiction of the people of God as the sheep of his care with under-shepherds appointed to keep watch over them is one that pervades the Old Testament and fully carries over into the New. Here are some notable examples:

- *Moses said to the Lord, "May the Lord, the God of the spirits of all mankind, appoint a man over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd."* –Numbers 27:15-17
- *And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them.* –Psalm 78:72
- *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He gives me rest in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.* –Psalm 23:1-4
- *Return, faithless people," declares the Lord...I will bring you to Zion. Then I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understanding.* –Jeremiah 3:14-15
- *Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!* –Jeremiah 23:1
- *'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not*

*strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them." `Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them." `For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign Lord. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.... I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the Lord will be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken. -Ezekiel 34:2-16, 23-24*

- *'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'* –Matthew 2:6
- *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."* –Matthew 9:36-38
- *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--just as the Father knows me and I know the Father--and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. -John 10:11-16*
- *For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. -Revelation 7:17*
- *"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. – Matthew 18:12-14*
- *"Take care of my sheep...feed my sheep."* –John 21:16, 17

From these scriptural examples we observe the following regarding the nature of the sheep and the role of those called to shepherd:

1. God's people are prone to go astray and become vulnerable to predators. They, like sheep, need someone to lead, protect and heal them.

2. Shepherds need to lead the sheep with skill and integrity.
3. Shepherds find their example in the Lord Jesus who lead the sheep into rest and righteousness and who comfort and restore their souls.
4. Shepherds must have the heart of the Lord in order to lead the sheep with knowledge and understanding. Like Jesus, they have compassion on those who are harassed and helpless.
5. Shepherds who scatter and destroy the flock will come under strict judgment.
6. Shepherds who look after only themselves will be removed from tending the flock.
7. Shepherds are to strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, search for the lost and bring back the strays.
8. Shepherds are not to be callous or harsh.
9. Shepherds are not to abandon the sheep.
10. Evangelism is for the sake of bringing people into a safe place in the flock of God.
11. Shepherds must have a divine call to serve the flock. It has to be more than a job.
12. Shepherds follow the example of Jesus and lay down their lives for the sheep.
13. Shepherds are called by Jesus to take care of and feed his sheep.

## Feed My Sheep

*The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." -John 21:17*

When Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, fishermen by trade, he said, *"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"* (Mt 4:19 KJV). At the end of Jesus' ministry on earth he gave Peter another commission—to feed his sheep.

You know the story of how Peter denied Jesus the night he was led away to be crucified. After promising that he would never fall away, three times Peter disavowed any knowledge of the Lord. Then came that fateful rooster crow that brought Peter to bitter remorse. The revelation of the resurrected Jesus brought much relief, but the lingering effect of the guilt of having denied Jesus in his hour of trial was no doubt still with Peter. So, the risen Lord meets the disciples on the beach one morning and over breakfast asks Peter if he loves him—not once, but three times. The third time that Jesus asked him, Peter was hurt. "Why does he have to ask me three times if I love him," Peter is thinking, "Isn't once enough?" No, actually, once is not enough. It seems that Jesus is sending Peter a message. Jesus is allowing Peter to reaffirm his love for him three times to contradict, as it were, the three times that Peter disowned the Lord. And each time that Peter affirmed his love for the Lord, Jesus followed it with a commission: *"Feed my sheep."*

Peter's commission to feed the sheep was important to Jesus. It was not just because he emphasized it three times as he reinstated Peter to his apostolic station. Peter's commission was more than that. It was to the place of leadership in the soon-to-be-birthed church. Peter's top priority would be to make sure that Jesus' lambs were taken care of and that his sheep were fed. This was Peter's commission and from that point on it would be job one.

Peter never lost that calling as a shepherd. The young brash fisherman did become a fisher of men. But when you read his letters, you see a man whose heart and calling are with the sheep. In one of those letters he says to his fellow "elders," *"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock"* (1 Peter 5:2-3). To Peter, Jesus was the *Chief Shepherd* (1 Peter 5:4)—the one who still commissions those whom he has called to feed his sheep.

## Hirelings, Neglect and Ecclesial Dysfunction

The Lord has appointed and placed true shepherds over his people who, right now, are leading and caring for them with the heart of the Good Shepherd. You can find these shepherds in countless places all over the world tending the flock of God. It is a beautiful thing to see. As wonderful and numerous are these examples, there are still three problems I have seen: Hirelings without a true call who tend the flock as a career choice; shepherds with a call who neglect the sheep; and shepherds who have been deprived or hindered in their call to oversee and tend the flock by ecclesiastical systems full of man-made rules, requirements, distractions and expectations.

I was at a denominational convention one summer, staying at a friend's apartment. Another guy was bunking in as well and I got to talking with him about the convention. He was very explicit about his reasons for traveling across the country to attend the annual meeting. He said, "This is the place to be to make contacts to advance your career in ministry. I am here to meet as many people as possible so I can get the best offer for a pastoral position." I was appalled. Maybe I'm more idealistic than pragmatic—but I've never seen shepherding the flock of God as a "job." It is a calling—and that calling can never be fulfilled by one who is trying to advance his or her "career."

In John 10, Jesus likened his relationship with his disciples to a shepherd with his sheep. He knows us, he calls us by name and he leads us—and we follow him because we know his voice (see vs 3-4). From the other biblical references cited we know that a true shepherd will feed the sheep (see John 21:17), keep watch over the flock (see Acts 20:28), search for the lost sheep until he finds it (see Luke 15:4) and lead the flock to places of safety and provision (see Psalm 23). Jesus described himself as "*the good shepherd*" who "*lays down his life for the sheep.*" And he differentiates himself from one who is just a *hired hand*. The hired hand is not a true shepherd. *When he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Why? Because he doesn't really care about the sheep—he cares about himself and the compensation he receives. "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!"* (Ezekiel 34:2).

Only the Holy Spirit can call you to be a pastor—one who shepherds God's church. Even those who have the call may not be functioning with the heart of Jesus and properly overseeing and caring for the flock. The church of God does not need "hirelings" (KJV) but, alas, there are many. You cannot be a pastor without a shepherd's heart and you cannot have a shepherd's heart without the heart of Jesus for his sheep—a heart that is even willing to lay down his life for the sheep. And no hired hand is willing to do that.

There are also those who have a genuine call and commission from the Lord to be shepherds in God's church who are curtailed from fully functioning as such because of the ecclesial system in which they are forced to operate. They can certainly give pastoral care to those in need—but those in a democratic/board-run church have often been hindered in or even stripped of their effectiveness when it comes to leading and discipling the church. In these systems the shepherd is often coerced and bitten by sheep who will not submit to the shepherd because they are actually the ones who carry the ecclesial authority.

## Elders, Overseers and Shepherds

In the New Testament you will find three words that are used to describe the three different functions of the pastoral office. The three words are elder (Greek: *presbuteros*), overseer (KJV: Bishop) (Greek: *episkipos*) and shepherd (Greek: *poimen*). These three terms are used interchangeably and their synonymous usage can especially be seen in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5:

*From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church... “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.” –Acts 20:17, 28 To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. -1 Peter 5:1-3*

Notice that in both cases the “elders” of the church are being addressed and exhorted to keep watch as “overseers” as they serve as “shepherds” of God’s church. They are, at the same time, elders, overseers and shepherds. It can be said that these are the three functions of the same New Testament office which we know as “Pastor.” There is no biblical distinction between an elder and a pastor—they are one and the same office. Churches that have “elders” as distinct from “Pastors” are not following the New Testament pattern. Such distinctions are “purely artificial and without scriptural warrant.”<sup>1</sup> The same can be said of the distinction of someone who is known as a “bishop.” Bishop is merely the King James term for “overseer.” Any ecclesial hierarchy that distinguishes a “bishop” from or above other pastors in the church is biblically unjustifiable and violates the New Testament pattern of a plurality of elders with collective authority to direct the affairs of the church.

Most “Bible-believing” churches in North America are governed in one of two unbiblical ways. In one, we have the democratic model where authority ultimately rests with the voting members of the church and a board that represents them. The pastors are accountable and submitted to the voting membership and the board. In another, we have an autocratic model where the authority rests with one person, the senior pastor or founding pastor. In this system, the senior pastor is not accountable to any earthly person. The potential problems with each of these two systems are more or less obvious. But I must point out that neither system follows the New Testament pattern. You are probably aware that you will not find a church board or a church vote in the pages of the New Testament, but are you aware that neither will you find someone designated as the pastor, or the Senior Pastor, of a church? So what is the alternative? What is the New Testament pattern?

Part of the answer can be found in Paul’s address to the elders of the church at Ephesus. Knowing in the Spirit that he would not be returning to the province of Asia, *Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church* (Acts 20:17). Now, notice that he sent for the elders, plural. This is key. The New Testament pattern is always rule by a plurality of elders. Notice, again, that in the same breath Paul refers to the elders as *overseers* and *shepherds*. They are the ones who are to oversee, shepherd and direct the affairs of the church (see 1 Timothy 5:17).

So, to whom are they to be accountable and submitted? Each other. When Paul instructs the Ephesian elders and says, “*Keep watch over yourselves,*” he is speaking to them collectively, not just as individuals. They are responsible for keeping watch over the flock of God, but also each other. You may say, “Well isn’t this self-governing model a self-serving one?” No. If you have true shepherds appointed as elders, their first responsibility will be to protect, care for and feed the sheep, and their highest priority will be to guard the trust of their flock. They will keep watch over themselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers.

Of course, most churches would consider themselves too deeply enmeshed in their particular form of church government to consider it a viable option to change to a more biblical model. Those who have control would have too much vested interest to want to change. After reporting to a group of pastors how we as a church were changing to the New Testament model, one pastor approached me afterward and said, “I can’t deny that what you are saying is biblical, but my board would never go for it.” In our transition, we taught and talked on the subject for two years followed by a trial period of one year. When it came time for the church to vote

on a permanent change to New Testament church government, the trial was so successful that the vote was one-hundred percent.

## Qualifications for Shepherds

The most important factor in the successful ministry of a pastor or team of pastors is trust. The sheep must be able to trust the shepherd. The shepherds of a church must diligently guard that trust. This is why there is a higher standard and stricter discipline for those who are functioning as shepherds in God's church. According to 1 Timothy 5:20, elders who sin must be rebuked publically. This is because trust in the integrity of the eldership cannot be compromised. Of course, the integrity of the process of dealing with an accusation against a pastor must be in place to protect the pastor from false accusations—but if the people feel like the pastors can't be trusted, the sheep are bound to be scattered.

This is why entrance into the eldership must be guarded diligently. To this end, we find this list of character qualifications for New Testament overseers:

- *Above reproach*. No valid accusation can be brought to discredit (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6).
- *Faithful to their spouse* (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6).
- *Temperate* (serious minded) (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7).
- *Self-controlled* (Greek: *sophron*: sound mind/wise) (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- *Respectable* in conduct and demeanour (1 Timothy 3:2).
- *Hospitable* (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- *Able to teach and guard sound doctrine* (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9).
- *Not given to addictive behaviour* (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- *Not violent* (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- *Gentle* (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- *Not quarrelsome* (Greek: *amachel*: “not using a sword”) (1 Timothy 3:3).
- *Free from greed and the love of money* (1 Timothy 3:3; 1 Peter 5:2; Titus 1:7).
- *Managing their family well/obedient children* (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6).
- *Not a recent convert* (1 Timothy 3:6).
- *Having a good reputation outside of the church* (1 Timothy 3:7).
- *Not overbearing* in needing to always have their way (Titus 1:7).
- *Not quick-tempered* (Titus 1:7).
- *Lovers of what is good while hating what is evil* (Titus 1:8; Romans 12:9).
- *Upright/having integrity* (Titus 1:8).
- *Holy* (Greek: “*Hosios*.” Someone or something that is consecrated to the Lord) (Titus 1:8).
- *Disciplined* (Titus 1:8).
- *Eager to serve* (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2).

It is not that anyone must, or even could, perfectly satisfy all these requirements for eldership. But at the same time, no one should be appointed as an overseer who currently has a glaring shortfall in any these areas.

## Duties

Eugene Peterson has coined the phrase, “soul care” to describe the primary purpose of the pastor.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament identifies some other significant duties of Jesus' appointed shepherds:

- *Oversee the governmental affairs of the church* -1 Timothy 5:17
- *Preach and teach* -1 Timothy 5:17, 2 Timothy 4:2

- Pray -Colossians 4:2: Acts 6:4
- Guard sound doctrine -Acts 20:30-31, Titus 1:9
- Pray for the sick -James 5:14.
- Appoint deacons -Acts 6:3, 6; 1 Timothy 3:10
- Correct, rebuke and encourage -2 Timothy 4:2
- Watch over the other shepherds -Acts 20:28
- Evangelize -2 Timothy 4:5

There are many specific duties that fall under pastoral responsibilities in the church today that are not specifically mentioned in the New Testament but can legitimately be seen as part of the care and nurture of the church (i.e., weddings, funerals, counseling, hospital visitation...). But pastors must be careful not to get sidetracked from their true biblical calling and give themselves to administrative work that would be better handled by deacons who are called to those aspects of the work of ministry.

### **Respect for Shepherds**

The shepherd and sheep relationship in the church is to be marked, not only by the service of the shepherds to the sheep, but by submission of the sheep to the shepherds:

*Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over your souls as those who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. –Hebrews 13:17*

*Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. -1 Thessalonians 5:12-13*

In the early years of my ministry, a man in our church, reputed to be a pillar, was dissatisfied with the style of our worship. He would stand with his arms folded across his chest during worship, refusing to participate. He, his wife and another couple had a chance to share some of their “concerns” with us and we were attempting to be sensitive to their context. On a subsequent Sunday he made a scene during worship, walking out of the sanctuary in a huff to stand in the foyer in protest. Days later, after we as pastors discussed the proper remedy for the situation, I approached him and said, “Your action is clearly divisive and the Bible says, ‘Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him’ (Titus 3:10). Consider this your first warning.” He said, “What right do you have to tell me what I can and can’t do?” I said, “Have you ever heard of pastoral authority?” At that point he knew that he would have change his attitude or no longer be welcome to be part of the fellowship. He chose to not return to the church.

The New Testament writers clearly exhorted the people of God to obey and submit to their pastors. These shepherds not only *keep watch*, they keep watch as those *who must give an account*. As such, their motives are to be trusted for the decisions they make. But if the people they are shepherding are ornery, difficult and rebellious, their ministry is turned from a joy to a burden—and no one benefits from that. This leads me to a question which points to a scandal in the church. How many pastors find their work a burden? Far, far too many. In most cases, that burden can be attributed directly to disobedience and insubordination within the ranks of the church. Unfortunately, much of that struggle can be linked to non-biblical forms of church government that allow for insubordination. But just as parents know the joy of parenting when their children obey and the burden it can become when there is ongoing disobedience, pastors can find their ministry either a joy or a burden. We know that no pastor (or parent) is perfect, but what advantage is it to the sheep that the shepherds would see their work as burden and not a joy?

## **Conclusion: The Flawless Shepherd**

Of course, no shepherd is completely flawless. But the following acrostic describes one who is faithfully fulfilling the call as a New Testament shepherd:

- **F**eed the Sheep
- **L**ead the Sheep
- **A**dmonish the Sheep
- **W**atch Over the Sheep
- **L**ook for the Lost Sheep
- **E**xample to the Sheep
- **S**trengthen the Sheep
- **S**erve the Sheep

<sup>1</sup> It was circa 1998 when I first came across this quote from Steve Atkinson, who, at the time, was a professor at Mid-American Baptist Seminary in Memphis, TN. The website from which this quote was taken is no longer available.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, Leadership Journal, April, 1997, *The Business of Making Saints*, p.20.