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## JOB DESCRIPTION FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Acts 20:28

By

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Acts Lesson 53

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Acts 20:28

"All right, let's come to order. We've got a lot of business to take care of tonight. First on our agenda is what color to paint the social hall. There will be a work day at the church in two weeks, and we need to decide. It's been green for as long as I remember, but I think we need a change. Let's paint it off-white. Yes, Bob?"

"If you paint it off-white, you're going to have a rebellion on your hands! Some of our members have been used to a green social hall for 40 years. They might withhold their giving if you change the color!"

"Okay, let's take a vote. All in favor of off-white? Two. All in favor of green? Five. It stays green. Ernie, will you buy the paint?"

"Our second agenda item concerns the offerings. They've been down lately. We need to figure out some ways to get them back up to par. Any ideas?"

That sort of church leadership meeting probably sounds familiar if you've been involved with very many churches. In many churches, the leadership board functions pretty much like the board of any organization, following Robert's Rules of Order, taking care of business decisions, and voting on matters in democratic fashion. It is often assumed that the pastor takes care of the spiritual needs of the church, while the board, elected by the congregation, takes care of the business of the church.

Thankfully, that is not the way our elder board functions, because I believe that the common way described above is not in line with Scripture. It is important for all of us to understand biblically what church leaders should do. Our text, which is at the heart of Paul's farewell address to the Ephesian elders, gives us a biblical job description for church leaders. It shows us that ...

The main job of church leaders is to shepherd God's flock.

Before we look at how Paul tells the church leaders to do that task, let's clarify some terms and concepts that may not be clear

because of cultural ways of viewing church government. First, the leadership in a local church is always plural, not singular. Paul “called to him the elders of the church” (20:17). Every time in the Bible the term elder is used with reference to a local church, it is in the plural (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; Titus 1:5). The only time that the New Testament refers to a single man who seemed to be running a local church, it is not positive (Diotrephes, who loved to be first among them, 3 John 9-10). The Lord knows the propensity of the fallen human heart to abuse power, and so He designed leadership in the local church to be multiple, not singular, to check that tendency and to provide the wisdom of several over one.

Second, the leaders in the local church are referred to by various terms. “Elder” comes mainly from the Jewish synagogue, whereas “overseer” comes from the Greek culture (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* [Eerdmans, p. 416, note 56], but they are used in the New Testament to refer to the same men (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1; 5:17; Titus 1:5, 7). The term “elder” focuses on the necessary maturity of the man, whereas “overseer” focuses on the main responsibility, to superintend or manage the local church. The term “pastor” looks at the leader from the metaphor of a shepherd (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Sometimes the term “leaders” is used (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24, from one Greek verb; Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12, from another Greek verb).

In 1 Timothy 5:17-18, Paul distinguishes between elders who rule well and work hard at preaching and teaching, who are worthy of financial support; and, the other elders, who presumably did not receive such support. In modern terms, the pastoral staff is generally made up of the teaching elders who are supported. The other elders support themselves by an outside job and thus cannot devote as much time to the church. But this should not imply a distinction between so-called “clergy” and “laity,” because every Christian is in the ministry, as we saw last week.

Hebrews 13:17 commands church members to obey their leaders and submit to them (a radical concept in our day!), because “they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account” (a scary thought for church leaders!). This implies that the local church is not to be governed as a pure democracy, where the congregation has ultimate authority. That authority and responsi-

bility for the spiritual condition of the church before God lies with the leaders. Of course the leaders must be accountable to the Lord, to one another, and to the congregation (1 Tim. 5:19-20). Wise leaders should involve the congregation in major decisions (Acts 6:2-3).

The main idea of New Testament church government is that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4; Heb. 13:20) or head (Eph. 5:23) of His church. The church, through the leadership of the elders, is corporately to seek the mind of the Lord for His church. This requires that every member, but especially the leaders, walk closely in dependence upon the Lord, in knowledge of and obedience to His Word. This is far different than a democracy where everyone “votes his mind” and the majority vote wins.

With that as background, let’s examine how Paul says that church leaders should shepherd God’s flock. They must be on guard for themselves first, and then for all the flock.

1. To shepherd God’s flock, church leaders must pay close attention to themselves.

The verb translated “be on guard” has the nuance of turning one’s mind to, or attending to. The opposite would be to neglect or be oblivious to something. Before a man can shepherd God’s flock, he must shepherd his own soul. Before he gives oversight to a body of people, he must give oversight to his own walk with God. Church leaders must practice what they preach by applying God’s Word to themselves first. Elders are to be examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3), which requires paying attention to themselves. Our spiritual lives do not run on auto-pilot. We must constantly pay attention or we will get off course. We can break this down into three broad areas:

- A. A church leader must pay close attention to his heart before God.

Proverbs 4:23 states, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” God does not look on the outward person, but at the heart (1 Sam. 16:7; 2 Chron. 16:9). His penetrating Word judges the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). Thus a primary requirement for every church

leader is often to examine his heart in the light of Scripture, confessing and repenting of all sin so that he grows in true godliness.

This is where every leader must be brutally honest with himself before God. If we play games here, we become like the Pharisees, whom Jesus condemned as hypocrites. They were like white-washed tombs, beautiful on the outside, but full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness on the inside (Matt. 23:27). It's easy to look good on the outside before the church, especially if you're involved in preaching and teaching. Everyone thinks, "What a godly man!" But all the while, if you're not walking honestly before God in your heart, you can be secretly engaging in lust, pride, greed, and all manner of evil. When I teach on an area where I struggle, I try to be honest about that fact with those I am teaching, so that I don't fall into hypocrisy.

So we have to do business with God, beginning on the thought level. Am I taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:3-5)? Am I judging wrong attitudes toward God and others? Am I submitting in my heart to God's dealings with me? Am I developing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23) and the qualities required of elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)? Is my love for God growing or declining? Being on guard for myself means paying attention to my heart before God.

B. A church leader must pay close attention to his doctrine.

Paul goes on to warn the elders of the dangers of falling into false doctrine (20:20). Elders must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). They must hold fast the faithful word so that they "will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9). This does not mean that every elder will have the gift of teaching publicly, but every elder should be knowledgeable enough about biblical truth to be able to spot false teaching and to set forth what Scripture teaches. Part of being able to teach is to be teachable and growing in your grasp of biblical and systematic theology. Not every elder will have the opportunity to study theology in a seminary, but every elder should be reading and growing in his overall grasp of biblical truth.

C. A church leader must pay close attention to his relationships.

I have seen pastors who can preach well and they know the Bible and theology, but they are abrasive or insensitive to others. Sometimes they are nice to church members, but they verbally abuse their wives and children. But a primary qualification for an elder is that he manage his own household well (1 Tim. 3:4). That certainly includes maintaining biblically loving relationships with his family. If we lose our temper and yell at our mates or children, we should be quick to confess it to the Lord and to seek the forgiveness of the ones we sinned against. And we need to take the necessary steps to gain control over anger. "The anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (James 1:20). A quick-tempered man is not qualified to be an elder (Titus 1:7).

Also, it is crucial for every elder to guard his relationships with the opposite sex. When a church leader falls into sexual sin, the name of Christ is dishonored and many in the church and outside of it are hurt. If an elder is distant from his wife and is growing close or is attracted to another woman, he is in serious danger and needs to seek help immediately. Every elder must avoid situations where he could be tempted. He should not flirt or do anything that opens the door for unfaithfulness.

So the first requirement for shepherding God's flock is to shepherd yourself by paying close attention to your heart before God, to your doctrine, and to your relationships. We cannot minister to others if our own lives are not exemplary.

2. To shepherd God's flock, church leaders must pay close attention to all the flock.

A shepherd who does not pay attention to the flock is a negligent shepherd. In Ezekiel 34, God condemns the shepherds of Israel who fed themselves but did not feed the flock. Rather, they used the flock for their own purposes and did not care when the flock was scattered and prey for wolves. Paul here gives the mandate, the model, and the motivation for paying close attention to God's flock.

A. The mandate for paying close attention to the flock is the fact that the Holy Spirit appointed you as an overseer.

Elders (or overseers) are to desire the office (1 Tim. 3:1), but they do not "run for office" in political fashion. Graduating from

an accredited seminary is not by itself a sufficient reason to put a man into the office of pastor-teacher. The church should never put a man into the office of elder because he contributes a lot of money to the church or because he is a leader in the business world or because everyone likes him. Especially the church should never put a man into office in an attempt to get him involved!

Paul reminds these Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit appointed [lit. Greek] them as elders. What did he mean? In Acts 14:23, we see Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey appointing elders in the various churches after a time of prayer and fasting. In Titus 1:5, Paul tells Titus that he is to appoint elders as Paul directed, and then Paul lists the necessary qualifications. F. F. Bruce is thus correct when he states (*ibid.*), "Probably the reference to the Holy Spirit here does not mean that their appointment to this sacred ministry had been commanded by prophetic utterance in the church, but rather that they were so appointed and recognized because they were manifestly men on whom the Holy Spirit had bestowed the requisite qualifications for the work."

This is why I dislike saying that we are going to vote for new elders. It is better to say that we are going to recognize new elders. In other words, by the consensus of the body, we acknowledge that a man approximates (no one fulfills them perfectly) the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. This is why we do not take last minute nominations for elder from the floor at our annual meeting. Every candidate for elder must first fill out an extensive questionnaire and answer some very personal questions. The elders go over this with him, clarifying any areas where there may be questions. If during the screening process, anyone in the body knows a reason why this man should not be an elder, they need to bring it to the attention of the elders. Our aim is to recognize men as elders on whom the Holy Spirit has already bestowed the requisite qualifications for the work.

B. The model for paying close attention to the flock is that of a shepherd.

Paul refers to the church as a flock and tells the leaders that their job is to shepherd this flock. The metaphor was much more familiar in biblical times than in our culture, where many of us have never observed a flock of sheep for any longer than it takes to

drive by on the road and say, "Look, a flock of sheep!" While books are written on it, I must limit myself to three aspects of what it means to shepherd God's flock:

- 1) Shepherding the flock involves caring for God's people.

The good shepherd cares for every aspect of his flock's well being. Paul mentions *all* the flock; no one should be overlooked or ignored. A shepherd will genuinely care about every person in the church, desiring that each one grow in Christ. Paul told the Thesalonians, "But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us." He goes on to remind them of how he had exhorted, encouraged, and implored each one as a father would his own children (1 Thess. 2:7-8, 11).

Caring about people involves effort. If that were not so, Paul would not have had to command these elders to pay close attention to all the flock. It's always easier just to talk to the people you know at church, rather than to meet new people. It takes effort (a great deal of effort for some of us!) to try to remember names. I try to write down the names of new people I meet soon after talking with them. I go over the list of visitors who fill out the welcome slip. While some are more naturally gifted at remembering names, all of us need to work at it.

Beyond the effort to remember names, it takes effort and time to get together with people and get to know them. As an elder spends time with people, he needs to be observant regarding where the person is at with the Lord. An overseer needs to *see* (the word comes from a word meaning "watchman")! Does this person know Christ as Savior and Lord? Is there evidence that he is walking with the Lord? Did that sarcastic remark toward his wife reflect a need in his marriage? Did the way he snapped at his kids reveal a problem with anger? You can't care for people spiritually and help them to grow in Christ if you don't make the effort to observe them and know where they're at. Caring relationships are the basis for influencing people for Christ.

- 2) Shepherding the flock involves feeding God's people from His Word.

Again, not every elder is devoted to preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17), but every elder must be able to teach so that he can help people deal with their problems and grow in their faith. God's flock today is scattering into worldly areas such as psychology for answers to life's problems because the shepherds have not shown them the sufficiency of Scripture for all of life and godliness. A question that I have repeatedly asked my Christian psychologist friends is, "Can you name a single emotional, relational, or spiritual problem where the Bible lacks an answer that psychology provides?" I have yet to get a substantial answer to that question!

- 3) Shepherding the flock involves guarding God's people from spiritual wolves.

I will cover this more next week (20:29-31), and so I only mention it in passing. Shepherds need the biblical discernment to spot wolves and the courage to ward them away from the flock.

Thus the mandate for paying close attention to the flock is the fact that the Holy Spirit appointed a man as elder. The model for paying close attention to the flock is that of shepherd.

- C. The motivation for paying close attention to the flock is to remember the price that God paid for it.

He purchased it with "His own blood" (NASB). The phrase is theologically difficult (how can God, who is spirit, have blood?), which has led to variant readings. The Greek phrase can be translated, "with the blood of His own," which is a term of endearment to near relations (Bruce, *ibid.*). Notice that all three members of the Trinity are mentioned in this verse: The Father, who purchased the flock; the Son, who shed His blood to pay for their sins; and, the Holy Spirit, who appointed elders over the flock.

The main point is clear: Since God paid so great a price for the church, namely, the blood of His own Son, elders should value the church and give themselves to build it up and protect it. Since Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her, elders should also love the church and give themselves in service for her.

## Conclusion

Paul is here handing the torch to these Ephesian elders. They were responsible to shepherd this flock of God. That is the main job description for church leaders. Churches are strong or weak, depending on the godliness of their leaders and the leaders' diligence to pay close attention to themselves and to all the flock. It is both an awesome privilege and a weighty responsibility to shepherd the church that God purchased with the blood of His own Son!

I hope that this message doesn't cause any of our leaders to resign and run for cover! With Paul, we all can exclaim, "Who is adequate for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:16). But Paul's charge should challenge us to be even more diligent and conscientious about the task entrusted to us, to shepherd God's flock. And, I hope that some men who are not yet elders will be challenged to aspire to the office of overseer, because, as Paul says, "it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim. 3:1).

## Discussion Questions

1. Realizing that no man perfectly meets the qualifications for elder (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9), how do we determine if a man is ready for the task?
2. Why is congregational church government, patterned after American democracy, not biblical? How important is the form of church government to the well-being of the church?
3. How do busy elders find the balance between shepherding the flock and taking care of church business and administration?
4. What is the difference (if any) between an elder being able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and having the gift of teaching?

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