

The Biblical Basis for Elder-Leadership

This is the second week of coming together as the body to think and wrestle through 10 questions on elder leadership to answer one question: “Should Meadow Creek Church adopt elder leadership?”

As we do this, we are acknowledging the biblical roots of the Meadow Creek and this church’s deep love for the Bible. I love that about Meadow Creek. We have been preparing for these sessions have discussed and we believe that the existing deacon based governance structure grew out of the early members’ understanding of the Bible and their experiences. We want to build on that and pursue further our understanding of biblical church leadership and its forms.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Psalm 23:1

My aim tonight is to paint for you a picture from the whole of the Bible of Elder-Leadership.

Last we put forward this definition of “elders”:

- **Elders:** Christ-minded men, who are not new converts and who are able to teach, chosen by the congregation who give themselves to:
 - praying and ministering the Word (teaching and preaching);
 - shepherding or caring for the members of the body by knowing, feeding, protecting, watching over, and leading them;
 - overseeing the life of the church;
 - modeling Christ-like maturity with their lives; and
 - raising up faithful and qualified men to serve, shepherd, and lead the church.

Elders are not the same as deacons. We put forward this definition of “deacons”:

- **Deacons:** Christ-minded men and women chosen by the congregation who manage the church’s resources in a way that serves the unity of the church and supports the ministry of the Word.

There are three aspects of the work of the deacons:

1. They care for the physical needs of the Church
2. They work for the unity of the body
3. They support the ministry of the Word

Elders focus on prayer and the Word, shepherding the church and giving oversight, while deacons manage the church’s resources in a way that serves the unity of the church and supports the ministry of the Word.

If you know your Bible, you know the many, many texts that describe elder-leadership from the Old Testament through the New Testament. Tonight, starting in the Old Testament and working to the New Testament, we will quickly consider:

1. God as a shepherd of his people.
2. God's use of men in the Old Testament as under-shepherds for his people.
3. Christ as the Chief Shepherd or the Good Shepherd.
4. Christ's commissioning of the Apostles as his under-shepherds, and
5. Christ's & the Apostles' appointment of elders as under-shepherds of Christ.

God as the shepherd of his people

These texts begin in Genesis, when Jacob described Yahweh as "the God who has been my shepherd all my life." (Gen. 48:15). One of the most quoted and clung to verse in the Bible is Psalm 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." (Psalm 23:1).

In Psalm 95:6-7, the Psalmist says this about the relationship between God and the people of God, "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care." (Ps. 95:6-7, NIV).

God is referred to as the shepherd of his people in Psalm 77:20, "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron." And in Psalm 78:52, the protective shepherding care of God over the Israel in the wilderness is described, "Then he led out his people like sheep and guided them in the wilderness like a flock."

Isaiah describes the gentle and tender care that God gives to his people in shepherding terms in Isaiah 40:11, "11 He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

It seems that shepherds and sheep exist in the Old Testament as a metaphor for the way that God cares for his people. This picture of God's shepherding care began in Genesis and runs through out the Old Testament.

God's use of men in the Old Testament as under-shepherds for his people.

It is also interesting that God extended this shepherding care to those men he called to lead the nation of Israel. The two greatest leaders of the people of God in the Old Testament are Moses and David, and both of them were shepherds of sheep before they were called to be shepherds of God's people.

Moses is described as the shepherd of God's people in Isaiah 63:11, "Then his people recalled the days of old, the days of Moses and his people-- where is he who brought them through the sea, with the shepherd of his flock? Where is he who set his Holy Spirit among them,"

When the leaders of Israel came to ask David to rule over their 10 tribes, they referenced God's calling of David to lead and said, "In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, 'You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.'" II Sam. 5:2.

God extended his shepherd-like care to the leaders he established over his people. This imagery is applied not only to Moses and David, but to the spiritual leaders of Israel in Ezekiel 34:1-10.

The failings of these human shepherds or under-shepherds of God is called out by God:

Eze 34:2 NIV -- "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?'

Yet, God promises, in Ezekiel 34:11 to shepherd his people despite the failings of human under-shepherds:

Eze 34:11-12 NIV -- 11 " 'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. 12 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.

Then in verse 23, God promises to set over Israel a future shepherd who will care for his people,

Eze 34:23 NIV -- I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd.

This shepherd is referred to as "my servant David", but David has long passed at this point. This shepherd will be like David, a shepherd-king, and this shepherd will be the descendant of David. This shepherd is the Messiah, the Good Shepherd.

Christ as the Chief Shepherd or the Good Shepherd.

The Good Shepherd is the terminology that Jesus applied to himself in John 10, in contrast to the Pharisees, who were like the failed human shepherds of Ezekiel 34,

John 10:11, 14 NIV -- 11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... 14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—"

Jesus is the ultimate shepherd of God's people. He feeds not just their stomach but their souls. He meets the deepest longings and needs of his people. He gives them "bread of life" and "living water". Jesus gives the meaning of Psalm 23 that we quote:

2 He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters,
3 he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

We are not thinking grass and H2O when we quote this. We recite this when our souls are distraught or something ominous is coming at us and we feel threatened, because the deepest needs we have are not biological, but spiritual. Our deepest needs are met only by the Good Shepherd of our souls, who met those needs by giving himself to us in his death and in his life.

Christ's commissioning of the Apostles as his under-shepherds

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, appointed under-shepherds to care for his people. We see this in the sending of the 12 Disciples:

Matt 10:5-6 NIV -- 5 These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. 6 Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel."

Shortly before Jesus returned to heaven, Jesus spoke these words to Peter, while restoring him, "Feed my lambs...take care of my sheep...feed my sheep." John 21:15-17. Clearly, Jesus wanted Peter to be an under-shepherd to the Good Shepherd.

Peter understood this and did this. In I Peter 5, Peter refers back to Jesus' calling on him to shepherd Jesus' flock:

1Pe 5:1-4 NIV -- 1 To the elders ("presbyteros" or elder who pastors or shepherds) among you, I appeal **as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings** (on the night of Peter's betrayal) who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 **Be shepherds of God's flock** that is under your **care, watching over them**--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; 3 not

lording it over those entrusted to you (like the rebuked under-shepherds of Ezekiel 34), but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the Chief Shepherd (the Good Shepherd God promised in Ezekiel 34) appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

Don't miss this, too. Peter is passing along this eldering or shepherding responsibility to others. With the death of the Disciples, the shepherds of God's flock did not cease.

Christ's & the Apostles' appointment of elders as under-shepherds of Christ.

This succession of shepherding care for the people of God is clear in the New Testament, and particularly in Acts. Remember that in Matt 16, Jesus said that he would build his church on the confession of Peter, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Jesus, in Matt 28:19, prior to his ascension, tells the 12 disciples to declare Christ to others who will identify with Christ and follow him. Jesus repeats this instruction just prior to his ascension in Acts 1:8, when he commands the disciples to be witnesses of his in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Acts unfolds how the disciples moved forward with Christ's instructions and how Christ builds his church.

Acts begins with the Apostles, and chiefly Peter, witnessing of Christ. Jesus, in Acts 9, calls Paul to become an apostle born out of time. The church of Christ is established in Jerusalem and then it spreads to Judea, Samaria and Antioch. From Antioch, the Holy Spirit sends out the Apostle Paul and Barnabas to witness to Christ by declaring the Gospel and establishing churches. Notice what Paul does in Acts 14 as he plants new churches:

[Act 14:23 NIV] 23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

This was Paul's modus operandi in carrying out the Great Commission and the Acts 1:8 imperative to witness to Christ: He would declare Christ to Jews until rejected, then he would declare Christ to the Gentiles gathering the believers together as a church. Paul was evangelizing and planting churches as his primary means of making disciples.

As he planted churches, he appointed elders, and when he wrote leaders back to the churches, he addressed those elders. (Philippians & Colossians) When leadership stumbled, he sent Timothy to shore it up by appointing elders. (I Timothy) And where the work had not been finished, Paul sent Titus to appoint elders. As Paul moved out of a geographic area, Paul was handing off the shepherding responsibility to other men.

This is seen most clearly in the very personal and heart-felt meeting between Paul and the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. Paul is on his way to Jerusalem and imprisonment. He calls to himself the elders of Ephesus to say goodbye, for what could be the last time, and he says this:

[Act 20:28, 35-37 NIV] 28 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. ... 35 In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' " 36 When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. 37 They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him.

Jesus did not leave his church without care. The Good Shepherd appointed apostles as under-shepherds and the apostles appointed other men as under-shepherds after them and gave guidance to train other men and identify them by their shepherd like qualities.

Paul said of Jesus himself, that he gave these under-shepherds as good gifts for the care of the church, in Ephesians 4:11,

[Eph 4:11 NIV] 11 So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors (poimen – shepherds or elders) and teachers,

The writer of Hebrews confirms that these shepherds are put in place to care for you:

[Heb 13:7, 17 NIV] 7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. ... 17 Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

God has always been a shepherd to his people from Genesis to today. Jesus, the God-man, is the Chief Shepherd and the Good Shepherd of his people, giving his life for the sheep and caring for their souls from heaven. Though he returned to heaven, he did not leave us without earthly shepherds. Christ, the Good Shepherd, gives elders as earthly good gifts to care for his flock as under-shepherds and watch over the souls of his sheep until he comes again for his sheep.