

SHEPHERD LEADER *TRAINING*



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Module A: Elders in Christ's Church

Introduction

This Module provides a biblical introduction to the role of elders in God's mission through the church. It focusses on the biblical basis for eldership, the biblical qualifications required of elders, and the primary biblical functions of elders in the life and mission of the church.

Contact Details

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Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this module, participants will:

Know and understand

- The biblical basis for eldership.
- Some biblical arguments for the Presbyterian form of church government.
- The primary biblical qualifications required of elders.
- The main biblical tasks assigned to elders and their role in the church's mission.

Be able to

- Defend the biblical basis for the Presbyterian form of church government.
- Play a part in assessing the suitability of individuals to serve as an elder or in other church leadership roles.
- Distinguish eldership functions from other forms of Christian service.

Be in a position to

- Affirm, with understanding, the PCA ordination vow that "the Presbyterian form of church government is founded on the Word of God and agreeable thereto".
- Function effectively in a team of elders, co-operating with a minister or ministers in overseeing a congregation of God's people.



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Alignment of Module with Graduate Attributes

Graduate Attribute Descriptor	Code
Be devoted to reading the Scriptures and prayer	1.B
Be thankful for their talents, personality, gifts and calling	3.B
Develop healthy relationships, beginning with own family	3.C
Develop and communicate a vision derived from God's mission	5.A
Work as part of a shared leadership based on PCA polity	5.C

Learning Plan

This Module has five components:

1. Discussion Notes: these provide an overview of the Bible's teaching about elders, and include two sets of discussion questions.
2. Two 5-minute Videos: these summarize the Discussion Notes and introduce the discussion questions.
3. One 20-minute podcast: this answers common questions about biblical eldership.
4. A short book to read: this provides an additional resource on biblical eldership
5. An assessment (for individual students; optional for church groups): this is designed to help land your reading and discussion in the realities of real gospel mission in and through the church.

You can work through these components in any order. If you are working with a group, the following may work well:

Before Meeting 1:	Read Part 1 of the Discussion Notes: "The Biblical Vision of Eldership"
Meeting 1 (30 minutes):	Watch Video 1 (5 mins) on Biblical Eldership Discuss the questions at the end of Part 1
Between Meeting 1 and 2:	Read Part 2 and 3 of the Discussion Notes: "Calling and Qualifications" and "The Pastoral Charge"
Meeting 2 (30 minutes):	Watch Video 2 (5 mins) on "The Calling, Qualifications, and Charge to Elders"



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After Meeting 2:

Discuss the questions at the end of Part 3

Listen to the Podcast (20 mins) answering five common questions about biblical eldership.

Complete the Assessment (details below)

Throughout the term:

Read J. Rinne, *Church Elders*, or any of the other books and articles listed in the Recommended Reading section at the end of these notes.



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Assessment: Ministry Artefact

Task: Job description for a church elder

Write a 2-page job description for a future church elder, which could be used in the process of recruiting a new elder to your session. In your job description, include a short section on each of the elements listed below. For each element, include reference to biblical texts which provide the basis for your description (esp. 1 Tim 3:1-8 and Tit 1:5-9), and apply the description to the particular needs and opportunities of your congregation and its mission.

(i). role: a brief statement explaining the role of an elder in the life of the church (1 paragraph).

(ii). qualifications: a list of the qualities required in the prospective elder, both character qualities and gifts / abilities.

(iii). primary tasks: a statement outlining the major tasks that the elder will need to perform (e.g. contribute to session meetings, lead bible study group, visit members of the congregation etc).

Due Date: The last day of the public school term in which the module is studied

Word Length: 2 x A4 pages

Mark: TBD (check Module on NOVA for more details)

Alignment to Learning Outcomes: TBD (check Module on NOVA for more details)

Marking Criteria:

- A clear role description for an elder
- Appropriate use of the Bible in providing a basis for the job description
- Thoughtful application of biblical qualifications and tasks to the needs and opportunities of a particular concrete congregation



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Elders in Christ's Church: Discussion Notes

Part 1. A Biblical Vision of Eldership: Shepherds in God's Mission

Introduction: Church Eldership and Gospel-Centred Mission

Church eldership is not a presbyterian thing. It's a God thing. It's part of God's mission in and through his Church to the world. The purpose of this first Part is show where eldership fits in God's mission to save his people and redeem his world. It's true, of course, that the phrases "church government" and "gospel-centred mission" aren't often put together. For many Bible-believing Christians, the two might seem to be in opposition. And, sadly, church structures certainly can get in the way of gospel mission! Nevertheless, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) is right to see a strong connection between biblical church government and the gospel-centred mission of the Church. It affirms that "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His Church, has therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers", and then almost immediately affirms that Christ has committed to these officers "the ministry of the Gospel" (WCF 30.1-2).

In this first Part, we'll begin to explore this connection between biblical eldership and God's mission through the Church. We'll look briefly at two points: 1. The biblical framework: how the Lord Jesus leads his Church, and; 2. The biblical vision: teams of shepherds leading each church in its gospel-centred mission. The following Parts will address the important questions about the calling and biblical qualifications of elders (Part 2), and the Lord's pastoral charge to elders: "Shepherd God's Flock!" (Part 3).

The Biblical Framework: How the Lord Jesus Leads his Church

The Lord Jesus leads his Church

The place to start, of course, is with Jesus. The most important thing to say about the Bible's vision for pastoral leadership is that the Lord Jesus himself is the leader of his Church. To use the biblical language, Jesus is: the 'head' of the Church, his 'body' (Eph 1.10, 22-23; 5.23, 27, 32; Col 1.18), the 'husband' of the Church, his 'bride' (Eph 5.25-33), the 'cornerstone' of the Church, his 'temple' (Eph 2.20; cf. 1 Cor 3.11; 1 Pet 2.1-8), the 'true vine' in which all of the 'branches' of the Church find their life and bear fruit (Jn 15.1-11), the 'Good Shepherd', 'Chief Shepherd' or 'Great



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Shepherd' of the Church, his 'flock' (John 10.14; 1 Pet 5.4; Heb 13.20). The Lord calls others to lead his Church, but their leadership – our leadership – is always derived from his, ordered under his, and directed towards him. As our Confession puts it: the Lord Jesus Christ is the one and only King and Head of the Church (WCF 30.1).

The Lord Jesus, however, is no longer physically present with us. Having been raised from the dead, he ascended into heaven and now sits at the Father's right hand, from where he has also poured out his Holy Spirit on his people. So Jesus' ascension, together with his gift of the Spirit, provide the two primary co-ordinates for our thinking on how church eldership fits in God's mission. These two realities simultaneously create the need for, and enable, an ongoing embodied human leadership for the Church.

The Lord doesn't leave the leadership of his Church to others

It is easy to fall into two equal and opposite errors at this point. On the one hand, the Roman Catholic Church tends to imply that Jesus' ascension means that he has left the leadership of his Church to others. Rome makes too much of the Church's hierarchy. The Pope, it says, is the "Vicar of Christ" who stands in for Christ in his absence. That's what "Vicar" means. The Roman Church therefore tends to identify God's work in the world with the Church's hierarchy from the Pope downwards, and so effectively leaves no room for the Lord himself to work by his Spirit. But if the Lord Jesus is King and Head of the Church, his rule is not dependent on an historical order of ministry. He has ascended, but it is not as if he is an absent King who needs a Vicar to stand in his place. No: the Lord rules over all things for his Church, as Paul says in Ephesians 1.22. He actively calls his Church into being by his Word, and he actively rules his Church by that same Word, which will always challenge and overturn any merely human structures that we might want to set up. More than that, he is powerfully present in his Church by his Spirit, who works when and where and how he pleases (Jn 3.8). So the Lord's work can't be limited to, or restricted by, a Church hierarchy. The Lord doesn't leave the leadership of his Church to others.

The Lord doesn't lead without others

At the same time, the Lord doesn't lead without others. If the Roman Church tends to make too much of the Church's hierarchy, popular protestantism, evangelicalism, and pentecostalism tend to be suspicious of any form or structure or order. These movements tend to identify God's work in the world with the ministry of the Spirit through the gospel, especially focussed in the life of the individual believer. The result is that these movements effectively leave little to be said for the ordered ministry of the Church's leadership. But if the Lord Jesus is King and Head of his Church, he is well within his rights to appoint others to lead under him, to invest them with his authority, to charge them with particular tasks, and to work through them as his agents in the world, enabling them by his Spirit. The Lord's rule in his Church can't be restricted to any formal leadership structure. But nor should it be separated from the forms of leadership that he has established.



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The Lord appoints under-shepherds and under-servants

When we turn to Scripture we see that the Lord has appointed pastoral leaders for his Church, and that he has done so in two stages, what we might call the “extraordinary” ministry of the apostles, and the “ordinary and perpetual” ministry of those he appointed to lead the Church after them.

The apostles: extraordinary under-shepherds

The Gospels show us that Jesus appointed the apostles as his representatives. All four Gospels make this point in their own way, but you see it perhaps especially in the Gospel of Matthew, where Matthew records how, following Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, Jesus re-named Simon, “Peter” and promised:

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” - Matthew 16:18-19

Jesus here promises that he will build his Church, but that he intends to work through Peter as he does so. For this reason, he invests Peter with authority in the Church (“the keys of the kingdom”), and promises that heaven itself will be behind Peter’s leadership.

The Gospel of Matthew later records how Jesus extended this same authority for “binding and loosing” to the twelve apostles (Matt 18:18), and then after his resurrection called the Twelve to himself on the mountain in Galilee and sent them out with his authority to make disciples of all nations:

“And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” - Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus appointed the apostles to continue his mission in the world, bearing his authority, making disciples in his name. This is a mission that extends to “all nations” as the good news goes out and God gathers his people to himself. It is also a mission that extends down through the ages of church history. It will continue until Jesus returns. From this it is clear that Jesus planned for the leadership of his Church in the period after his resurrection and ascension. This only makes sense: the Church is too dear to him, too loved by him, too crucial to his mission, for him to leave without providing a plan and the promise of power for its leadership in the period between his ascension and return.

The apostles had a unique role to play in this mission. When you pull together everything the New Testament says about them you see at least six ways in which the “extraordinary” ministry of apostles is distinguished from the “ordinary and perpetual” ministry of those who follow after them. The apostles had:

- a unique qualification as “eyewitnesses” of the gospel events “from the beginning” (Acts 1:20-22; 10:39);



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- an immediate call and direct commission from Jesus as authoritative “witnesses” to his life, death, and resurrection (Matt 10.1-23; 16.19; 18.18; 28.18-20; Luke 9.1-6; 24.46-49; Acts 1.8; 9.1-19; Jn 16.7, 13; 20.21-23; 1 Cor 15.8-11; Gal 1.1, 11-12);
- an unparalleled appointment to be “first” and to have “authority” in the Church (1 Cor 12.28; 2 Cor 10.8; 13.10; Eph 4.11; 1 Thess 2.6);
- the unrepeatable responsibility for “laying the foundation” – or even being part of the foundation – of the new covenant Church (Matt 16.18-19; Eph 2.20; 1 Cor 3.10-11; Rev 18.20; 21.14);
- a remarkable God-given attestation to their ministry in the miraculous “signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor 12.12; Acts 2.43; 5.12), and;
- a catholic or universal jurisdiction over all the churches, rather than a limited responsibility for any one particular church (Acts 15.36-41; 1 Cor 7.17; 14.33).

The unique ministry of the apostles means that we need to distinguish between what was unique to them, and what has been passed on to us. Paul and Peter and James and John are models for us in some ways, but not in others. They provide for us a model of Christ-like servant leadership, devoted to prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6.4), and full of sacrificial love for God’s people (1 Thess 2.1-12), proclaiming Christ, and seeking to present everyone mature in him (Col 1.28). But, unlike the apostles, we are not the authoritative eyewitnesses. We are not laying the foundation for the Church. Our teaching is not normative for all of God’s people in all ages. And so when we read the passage in which the apostles describe their own ministry, we need to remember that while much of it will provide a model for us, some of it will be unique to them.

Elders and deacons: “ordinary and perpetual” under-shepherds and servants

The next question, of course, is the big one for us. What about after the apostles? The Lord appointed them to lay the foundation, but after that did he leave it up to each generation to work out its own plans for pastoral leadership and mission?

There’s a long tradition in the Anglican church, and also in evangelicalism and pentecostalism, which says “yes: the apostles gave us the gospel, they gave us the faithful deposit, but they did not give any particular shape to the Church’s pastoral leadership, and so each generation is free to keep the traditional forms of pastoral leadership, or to make up new ones, as long as they are designed to promote the gospel”. On this view, there is no biblical form for pastoral leadership in the post-apostolic Church, no biblical form of church government. The roles established by the apostles, and reflected in the New Testament, are ad hoc arrangements designed for some churches in the first century, but they were never intended to be binding on the Church beyond that. The apostolic arrangements are not prescriptive for the Church but only descriptive.

Reformed and Presbyterian churches, however, have rightly recognised that the Lord, through the apostles, provides a very clear vision for the form of the ongoing pastoral leadership in his Church. This is what Reformed theology has tended to call the “ordinary and perpetual” ministry. That language, in fact, comes from the Form of Presbyterian Church Government, which is the classic statement of Presbyterian polity, part of the Westminster



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Standards adopted by the Church of Scotland in 1645 along with the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Catechisms. Part of the Preface to this document reads as follows:

"JESUS CHRIST, upon whose shoulders the government is ... being ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things, received gifts for his church, and gave officers necessary for the edification of his church, and perfecting of his saints ... The officers which Christ hath appointed for the edification of his church, and the perfecting of the saints, are, some extraordinary, as apostles, evangelists, and prophets, which are ceased. Others ordinary and perpetual, as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons." – Form of Presbyterian Church Government, Preface and §3.

The Westminster Divines used the term of "ordinary" in the sense that they believed a particular form of pastoral leadership is ordained by the Lord, and also therefore in the sense that it is the regular, "bog standard" form that leadership should take in his Church. They called this leadership "perpetual" because they believed it was the form that the Lord intended pastoral leadership to take in his Church not only in the first century, or in the sixteenth century, but until his return. This is the leadership that the Lord has provided for his Church as it pursues its mission in the world – proclaiming the gospel of Christ, bearing witness to him in lives transformed by the Holy Spirit, and calling people from all nations to repentance and faith in Jesus.

This position hasn't always been recognised in all branches of the universal Church, but there are at least five good biblical reasons to accept it.

1. The Lord Jesus himself, by his Holy Spirit, appoints elders for the Church.

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, tells us that Jesus himself, having ascended on high, gave not only the apostles, prophets, and evangelists, but also "pastors" or "shepherds" and "teachers" to his Church (Eph 4.11-12). The same apostle, speaking to the "elders" of the Ephesian church says that none other than the Holy Spirit made them "overseers" (Acts 20.28). It is Lord himself, by his Spirit, who – even after the apostles – continues to appoint leaders in his Church.

2. The Lord has always led his church by "elders"

In the Old Testament, God provided prophets, priests, and kings to lead his people. Underneath and alongside the ministry of these prominent leaders, however, God also had "elders" lead his people from the very beginning of their life in Egypt (e.g. Exod 3.16, 18; 12.21; 19.7; 24.1). Leadership by elders continued all the way through the period of the Judges (e.g. Jdg 2.7; Ruth 4.4), and the Kings (e.g. 2 Sam 5.3), and the Exile (e.g. Jer 29.1), and the Return (e.g. Ezra 5.5; 10.14). From the Exodus onwards, there is no period in biblical history in which God's people were not led by elders. God's people were still being led by elders at the time of Jesus, as we see from the numerous references to the Jewish elders throughout the Gospels. The NT is clear that the roles of prophet, priest, and king are especially fulfilled in the Lord Jesus. He is one true Prophet, Priest, and King for God's people (WLC 42-45). The new covenant Church, in Christ, is a "kingdom of priests" (1 Pet 2.9; Rev 1.6; 5.10), and all of God's people are now "prophets" (Acts 2.17-18). But in the new covenant period, there is no ongoing office in the Church



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of prophet, or priest, or king; we look to Jesus to fulfil these roles. The situation is different when it comes to the office of elder, which clearly continues into the new covenant. The book of Acts, in particular, shows how the “Chief Priests and elders” of the Jews disqualified themselves for the role by their rejection of Jesus, and how God raised up, in their place, Christian “apostles and elders” in Jerusalem (Acts 4.5, 23; 15.2, 4, 6). So the role that elders played in the old covenant Church is taken up by new elders in the new covenant Church. Leadership by elders is a point of continuity across the covenants.

3. The apostles appointed “elders in every church”

The general principle is clear from Paul and Barnabas’ concern to “appoint elders for them in every church” (Acts 14.23), and from Paul’s instruction to Titus by “to appoint elders in every town” to complete Paul’s church planting work (Tit 1.5). But this principle was neither idiosyncratic to the apostle Paul, nor an ad hoc arrangement for only some churches. The apostles Peter and James also provide instructions regarding elders (1 Pet 5.1-4; Jas 5.14). The apostles appointed elders not only in Jewish churches, but also in Gentile and mixed churches (Phil 1.1; 1 Tim 5.17; 1 Pet 5.1-4), and across wide geographical regions, so that there were elders leading the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11.30; 15.2-6, 22-23; 16.4), in Ephesus (Acts 20.17; 1 Tim 5.17), in Philippi (Phil 1.1), in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 5.1-4 with 1 Pet 1.1), and in the whole of the dispersion addressed by James (Jas 5.14 with 1.1). While some NT churches were not yet fully ordered (e.g. Corinth), the apostles’ concern was to appoint elders in every church.

4. The apostles appointed elders to promote the gospel in the midst of opposition and to guard the gospel against false teaching

Jesus and the apostles present “false teaching” as a fulfilment of prophecy and a definite sign of the inauguration of the end times. In this context, the apostles explicitly appointed elders so that the churches might stand firm amidst threats from outside and betrayal from within (Acts 20.28-31; 1 Tim 3.1; Tit 1.9). The God-given office of elder is, therefore, necessary to the Church’s life and mission until Christ returns.

5. The apostle Paul provides universal and enduring regulations for elders and deacons

Paul’s instructions to Timothy regarding the appointing “overseers” and “deacons” are not only for Timothy in Ephesus but for all of God’s churches (1 Tim 3.1-13). These instructions come at the heart of a section of Paul’s letter which addresses universal and enduring concerns (1 Tim 2.1-3.16): the section begins with the universal truth that “there is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Tim 2.5); it continues with instructions regarding men as men and women as women, rooted in creation itself (1 Tim 2.8-15); it concludes with the affirmation that Paul’s instructions are “how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation



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of the truth." (1 Tim 3.14-15). At the heart of this section, Paul provides quite extensive regulations for the offices of "overseer" and "deacon" (1 Tim 3.1-13; cf. 5.17-22; Tit 1.5-9), and introduces these instructions with the formula "here is a trustworthy saying" (1 Tim 3.1). It is striking that every other time Paul uses this phrase in the pastoral letters it relates to a summary of the universal and enduring gospel itself. Paul's instructions to Timothy therefore give every indication that the institution of overseers (or elders) and deacons is for all of God's churches in every age between Jesus' resurrection and return. Far from being a distraction to the mission of the gospel, the apostle Paul regulates these offices so that the Church can effectively proclaim the gospel in all the world.

So what we have here is not merely some ad hoc arrangements for a few churches in the first century. The New Testament passages about "elders" and "overseers" and "pastors", when we take them all together, are not merely descriptions about what the apostles did, but prescriptions for how God intends things to be in his Church. This, certainly, is the classic Reformed and Presbyterian understanding, and it has been helpfully summarised in recent times in the World Reformed Fellowship's Statement of Faith (2010):

"Scripture indicates a number of ministries which God has given to the church at different times: apostles, prophets, elders, deacons and evangelists. Today, in each local church there are to be elders and deacons. The elders are to be pastors, overseers and examples and some of them are to devote themselves to preaching and teaching. Deacons are to care for the poor and needy, and to see to the practical, financial and fabric needs of the church. Like the eldership, this is a spiritual office requiring spiritual qualities." –WRF Statement of Faith 2010 §8.2

Biblical Church Government and the Gospel-Centred Mission of the Church

It is important to be clear about the relationship between the biblical form of church government and the gospel-centred mission of the Church. This is perhaps best stated in the form of four negatives.

First, a fully biblical church government is not part of the gospel. God is not saving the world through this particular form of pastoral leadership. The biblical form of pastoral leadership is an important secondary truth, but it is not a matter of first importance (1 Cor 15.3). It is therefore possible for a particular church to have the gospel and to proclaim the gospel without embracing the biblical vision for pastoral leadership.

For this reason, second, a fully biblical church government is also not one of the marks of the true Church. The true Church will be found wherever God's Word is proclaimed, and the sacraments are administered, in the power of the Spirit, because that's how God calls his people to himself, and produces saving faith in Christ, and so builds his Church.

Related to this, third, a fully biblical church government is not a means of grace which somehow guarantees church health and growth. It is tragically possible for a Church to have the biblical form of church government,



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but no gospel, no prayer, no love, and no spiritual vitality. If we are ever forced to choose between the two, it is an easy choice.

Finally, Scripture does not provide all the details of the Church's government, but only the central matters, including the offices of elder and deacon and their basic functions. The details of how these officers lead and serve together to enable the whole body of Christ to pursue its gospel-centred mission in the world need to be worked out with prayerful wisdom in culturally appropriate ways. As the Westminster Confession puts it: "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His Church, has therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers" (WCF 30.1), but "there are some circumstances concerning the ... government of the Church ... which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word" (WCF 1.6).

So where does this leave us? If the Lord has given us a framework for pastoral leadership in his Church – if he has given us a form of church government – but if this form of pastoral leadership is not the gospel, and not a mark of the true Church, and not a means of grace, what is it? To use the traditional categories in Latin we could say that the biblical form of church government is not part of the *esse* of the Church – not part of its "essence" – but is part of its *de bene esse* – part of its "well being". To state this more positively, we might say that the biblical form of church government is a God given means by which the Church best pursues its gospel-centred mission in the world. For this reason, we are right to ask the next question: what is the shape of the government that the Lord has given to his Church?

The biblical vision: teams of Shepherds leading each Church in its gospel-centred mission

Put simply: the apostles in the New Testament lay out a vision for pastoral leadership in which teams of shepherds (elders = overseers = pastors) work together to lead each particular church in its gospel-centred mission, and teams of servants (deacons) work alongside them to facilitate the Church's mission, to manage the practical and material needs of the Church, and especially to care for the needs of those who are vulnerable, weak and poor. Of course, while Shepherds (elders = overseers = pastors) lead the Church in its mission, and Servants (deacons) facilitate that mission, the whole body of Christ – each and every member – has a crucial role to play in gathering God's people from among all the nations, and building the body towards maturity in Christ and (Eph 4.11-16). Since this module is on the role of Elders in Christ's Church, we're going to focus on the teams of Shepherds called to lead the church.

The pastoral office: Shepherds (Elders = Overseers = Pastors)

The apostles envisage a single pastoral role or office – what we might call the office of "Shepherd" – and refer to these Shepherds by three interchangeable titles: "elders", "overseers", and "pastors" / "shepherds". The title "elder" emphasizes the wisdom and maturity required for the role. The title "overseer" emphasizes the work of governance and leadership. The title "pastor" or "shepherd" emphasizes the calling of these leaders to lovingly teach and care for God's people.



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Five key passages make it clear that all three of these terms refer to the same role.

Acts 20.17-31: Luke narrates how Paul summoned “the elders” of the Ephesian church to meet him in Miletus. Paul then addressed this same group of men as those whom “the Holy Spirit has appointed ... as overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20.17, 28). Luke thus indicates that, for the apostle Paul, the Ephesian “elders” were also “overseers” whose work was “to shepherd” or “pastor” God’s Church.

1 Peter 5.1-4: Peter writes to the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 1.1). Towards the close of his letter, he addresses “the elders among you”, and charges them to “shepherd God’s flock ... exercising oversight” not because you must but willingly” (1 Pet 5.1-2). The apostle Peter thus employs the same three terms as Paul to refer to the single group of leaders and describe their work.

Titus 1.5-9: Paul reminds Titus that he left him on the island of Crete to “appoint elders in every town” (Tit 1.5), and then immediately describes a member of the same group, using the generic singular, as “the overseer” (Tit 1.7). The switch from the title “elder” to the title “overseer” parallels the same switch in Acts 20.17, 28 and indicates that the same group are now being referred to with specific reference to their official function as governors.

1 Timothy 3.1-7 and 5.17-18: Paul lays out in some detail – again using the generic singular – the qualifications for “the overseer” (1 Tim 3.2). He then proceeds, in 1 Timothy 5.17, to speak, without any introduction or explanation, of “the elders who rule well,” some of whom also “labor in the word and teaching”. Paul underlines the identification of the generic “overseer” with these “elders” by recycling the language from his earlier description in the latter passage: just as “the overseer” must “rule his own household well,” so these elders “rule well” (1 Tim 3.4-5 and 5.17); just as “the overseer” must be “able to teach,” so some of these elders “labor in the word and teaching” (1 Tim 3.2 and 5.17). The common language – the key terms are all very close in the Greek – strongly suggests the identity of the generic “overseer” of 1 Timothy 3.2 is the same as the “elders” of 1 Timothy 5.17-18.

Ephesians 4.11: Paul speaks of how the risen Lord Jesus “gave” to his Church not only “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists,” but also “the pastors and teachers”. This is the only place in the New Testament where Christian leaders are identified as “pastors” or “shepherds” using the noun. Some have seen here a reference to an additional office, that of the “pastor-teacher”. Paul’s syntax, however, indicates that he speaks of two closely related groups (“pastors” and “teachers”) rather than a single group. Given that elders / overseers are elsewhere charged to “shepherd” God’s church, using the related verb, it seems most likely that the “pastors” / “shepherds” among these “pastors and teachers” are best understood as “elders” / “overseers” designated in this case by one of their primary functions rather than their more common titles.

The cash value for us is this: there is in the New Testament one pastoral office and one office only. All the elders are pastors; and all the pastors are elders; and all the pastors and elders are overseers.



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Teams of Shepherds in each Church

Further, the Scriptures consistently present plural leadership as the norm for God's people. The Old Testament, it is true, devotes significant space to the remarkable individual leadership of prophets, priests, and kings. In the new covenant period, however, these roles are primarily fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ, the one true Prophet, Priest, and King for God's people. Certainly, alongside the leadership of these remarkable individuals, the Old Testament also presents a consistent pattern of plural leadership, which stretches from the "council of the elders" of Israel at the time of Moses (Ex 12.21-27; 24.1) to the "elders and judges" (plural) of "each town" (singular) at the time of Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 10.14; cf. Ruth 4.2).

In the New Testament, the apostles always worked with teams of shepherds in each particular church. The book of Acts records that Paul and Barnabas appointed "elders" (plural) "in every church" (singular) (Acts 14.23), and then narrates how Paul called the "elders" (plural) of the Ephesian Church to him in Miletus. Paul subsequently charges Titus to "appoint elders (plural) in every town (singular)" (Tit 1.5). When the same apostle writes to the Philippian Church, he addresses "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers (plural) and deacons (plural)." (Phil 1.1). The apostle James, similarly, exhorts that if anyone is sick, "he should call for the elders (plural) of the church (singular)", who are to "pray over him" (Jas 5.14). And the apostle Peter, likewise, exhorts "the elders" (plural) to "shepherd God's flock among you" (1 Pet 5.1-2). Elsewhere the apostles speak of more generic terms of church leaders, but always in the plural (e.g. 1 Thess 5.12; Heb 13.17). Indeed, although we know quite a lot about the churches in Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossae, and Thessaloniki, there is no indication that any one of these churches was led by a single individual.

Moreover, beyond the local church, the NT also presents a pattern of plural elders taking responsibility for the oversight of multiple churches. The clearest example of this is in the "Council of Jerusalem" in Acts 15, where "the apostles and elders" met together to consider an important theological pastoral question and reached a decision that provided much needed guidance for all the churches (Acts 15:4, 6, 22). Elsewhere in the NT we read of the "council of elders" (1 Tim 4:14; Greek: presbuterion) which laid hands on Timothy and set him apart for his important gospel work.

There is no indication anywhere in the New Testament that the apostles established a form of church government in which a single individual took sole leadership of a particular church, let alone that a single individual exercised authority over multiple churches. The apostles, rather, appointed teams of shepherds – teams of pastoral leaders – to oversee and shepherd God's flock and to lead them in their mission in the world.

Some Shepherds give themselves more fully to the work

At the same time, the apostle Paul does provide for some Shepherds to give themselves more fully to the work of teaching, and for these Shepherds to be especially honoured and supported. The key text here is 1 Timothy 5.17:

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labor in the word and teaching." – 1 Timothy 5.17



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Paul here speaks of some of “the elders” who “labour in the word and teaching”. He does not in this text establish a different office. The men referred to here are still “elders”. They are not given a different title. Paul also does not give to these men a different role. Earlier in the same letter, the apostle is clear that all overseers / elders are to both lead and teach (1 Tim 3.2-5). So these elders are not performing different functions to other Shepherds. They are not doing a different job. The distinguishing feature of the elders referred to in 1 Timothy 5.17 is simply that they “labour in the word and teaching”. These are Shepherds who have given up other labour – other work, other jobs – by which they might have supported themselves and their families, in order to “labour in the word and teaching”. That is, these are Shepherds who have made the work of being a Shepherd their daily work. They are doing the same job as the other elders but with more of their time. They are labouring in it. The distinction Paul makes is not one of kind, but of degree. And so, Paul says, while all the Shepherds who rule well are worthy of double honour – both honour and an honorarium, both respect and remuneration – such double honour is especially due those who have given up other labour in order to “labour in the Word”.

The apostle doesn't give us a name for these “labourers”. Reformed and Presbyterian churches have tended to refer to them as “Ministers of the Word and Sacrament” or “Teaching Elders” as distinct from “Ruling Elders”. In the Presbyterian Church of Australia we use both the title “Minister” and “Teaching Elder”. Each of these titles has strengths and weaknesses. The first title (“Minister”) has the advantage of reminding us that such men are servants, first of the Lord, and then of his Church. The full title “Minister of the Word and Sacrament” helpfully reminds that the central focus of their service is the Word of God and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper which are “signs and seals” of God's “covenant of grace” in Christ (WCF 27.1). At the same time, since the apostles never use the word “minister” as a title for an ordinary and perpetual pastoral leader in God's Church, and do use it for the work that all of God's people do in serving him, we need to be careful that we don't fall into the trap of thinking that it is only the “Minister” or the “Ministry team” who do Christian ministry. The biblical vision is for all of God's people to be serving him in all of their lives.

The second title “Teaching Elder” has the advantage of recognizing that all elders share the same office, while marking a functional distinction between those whose primary role is “to teach” and those whose primary role is “to rule”. The weakness is that it might imply that the “Ruling Elders” only rule and don't teach, and if that's what it means, then it's unhelpful, because the Scriptures are clear that all of the Shepherds must teach God's word – that's absolutely crucial to their role in the church (1 Tim 3.2; Tit 1.9).

Whatever we call our “elders who labour in the word”, the big point is that the apostles give us a single pastoral office, while also recognising that some of those Shepherds / Pastors may particularly labour in the work of teaching, and that those who do should be especially honoured and supported.

Indeed, these men play a vitally important role in our churches. As those “elders” set apart “to labour in the word and teaching”, it is good and right that they exercise significant leadership amongst the team of elders and, especially, play a leading role in the church's preaching and teaching ministries. In the PCA we therefore require men who are to be appointed to this role (as “Ministers”) to be specially trained in a four year “Course of Training”. This, of course, is nowhere explicitly required by Scripture, but it seems a good and right inference that those elders who are going to lead the teaching ministry in our churches are appropriately equipped for the task. We also honour such men by paying a basic stipend. Again, the details of this are not given in Scripture, but 1 Timothy 5.18 gives us the basic principle that part of honouring those elders who “labour in the word” will be providing



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for them financially. Finally, we also honour these men by reserving certain eldership functions to them. In the PCA the Minister is responsible for the preaching and the public worship within his pastoral charge. He is also the Moderator of the Session, and holds the keys to the Church. Again, none of these specifics are given in Scripture, but they are reasonable applications of the biblical teaching that those elders who “labour in the word and teaching” are “especially” worthy of double honour.

No other pastoral office, but an important role for each of God’s people

Finally, it is important to recognise that the apostles do not establish any other ordinary and perpetual pastoral office in the Church, but do see an important role for all of God’s people in God’s mission. On the one hand, the Scriptures do not hold out any ordinary and perpetual pastoral office apart from that of elder/overseer/pastor. It has sometimes been suggested that Timothy and Titus provide the proto-types for the office of “Minister”, understood as the single pastoral leader of a congregation. Certainly, it is true that Paul charged Timothy and Titus with significant leadership functions. He calls Timothy God’s “worker” (2 Tim 2.15), or “the Lord’s slave” (2 Tim 2.24), or a kind of “Evangelist” (2 Tim 4.5). But Paul never calls Timothy or Titus an “elder” or “overseer” or “pastor”. He never gives them any title that might indicate they held a perpetual office. He never commands either of them to appoint a single individual as their successor. No, their job is to “put what remains in order,” namely, to appoint Shepherds (plural) for the churches (Tit. 1.5). Moreover, both Timothy and Titus exercised an itinerant ministry. Like the apostles, rather than staying put in one place, they moved on. Paul seems to have related to them as men to be sent on specific missions for specific tasks (Acts 19.22; 1 Cor 4.17). They were never the pastors of a particular flock for any extended length of time. So, it is difficult to argue that Timothy and Titus are the first “Ministers” of the church, and even more difficult to argue that they were the first “bishops” in an episcopalian sense. Timothy and Titus best understood as apostolic delegates, that is, as men who operated as an extension of the extraordinary ministry of the apostles. There is, then, no other ordinary and perpetual office in the Church apart from that of elder/overseer/pastor.

On the other hand – and this is vital – the apostles also teach that each and every member of the body of Christ has an important role to play in God’s mission through the church to the world. While the risen Lord Jesus gave some to be “shepherds and teachers” (Eph 4.11), the role of these pastoral leaders is “equip the saints for the work of ministry” so that the whole body grows to maturity in Christ “as each part does its work” (Eph 4:12-16). Both Paul and Peter remind us that God has gifted each and every member of the church in a unique way “for the common good” (1 Cor 12:7; also: 1 Cor 12:1-31; Rom 12:3-8; 1 Pet 4:10-11). The body of Christ will only be healthy and strong, fulfilling its God-given mission in the world, when all of God’s people – men, women, and children – “speak the truth in love” (Eph 4:15), and work together to build the body of Christ. Central to the role of pastoral leaders is their work of equipping and enabling each and every member of the church to play their part in God’s mission.



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Conclusion: Elders in God's Mission

The Lord Jesus, the King and Head of his Church, leads his Church through the ministry of under-shepherds whom he appoints for the task. In closing, it is important to notice that the Lord's appointment of these Shepherds is not merely designed to bring good order to his Church but also, especially, to enable the Church to be fruitful and effective in its gospel-centred mission to all the world. In 1 Timothy 3.15, immediately after Paul has given instructions regarding "overseers" and "deacons", he affirms that he has given these instructions so that "you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth". In the last analysis, the role of Shepherds (elders / overseers / pastors) is to strengthen God's Church in the truth of God's Word, so that it might stand firm as the "pillar and foundation" of that truth in the world. Paul concludes the chapter by reminding Timothy about the very heart of that "truth", "the mystery of godliness", which is nothing else but the gospel of Christ, who "appeared in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, and carried forward in glory" (1 Tim 3.16). The Lord appoints elders in his Church so that the gospel-centred mission of the Church might go forward into all the world.

For this reason, it is crucial that the right people are appointed as Shepherds for the churches, and that these people focus their energies on the crucial tasks of preaching and teaching the gospel from the Scriptures, praying with and for God's people, leading the church in its life and mission, and providing an example of Christ-like living in the world. The next two sections then, explore the calling and qualifications of elders (Part 2), and the primary tasks that the Lord has given them (Part 3).



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Part 1: Discussion Questions

1. In what ways was the ministry Jesus gave to the apostles “extraordinary”? How is the ministry of Christian leaders today similar and different from the ministry of the apostles?
2. The ordination vows in the Presbyterian Church of Australia require for ministers and elders to “own the Presbyterian form of government to be founded on the word of God and agreeable thereto”. The Discussion Notes provide five biblical arguments for the Presbyterian form of church government. Which of these do you find most convincing? Which least convincing? Why?
3. What wisdom can you see in teams of elders leading the church? What are some of the challenges in this form of leadership?
4. How does the biblical pattern of church government relate to the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel?
5. 1 Timothy 5:17-18 recognises that some elders might “labour in the word and teaching”, and commands that such elders are “especially ... worthy of double honour”. What does this mean for relationships between elders who “labour in the word” and the other elders? How can the other elders, and the whole church, honour those who labour in the word?



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Part 2. The Calling and Qualifications of Elders

Introduction

The significance of the Shepherd role in God's mission (Chapter 1) means that it is no surprise that the apostles provided clear regulations for those who would be appointed to it. These qualifications relate to the basic calling and primary tasks of the office. They may be conveniently summarised in six words beginning with C: Confession, Character, Competence, Conviction, Calling, and Circumstance.

Confession

Shepherds must confess the faith. That is, they must have a living faith in Christ, openly confess him as Lord and Saviour, and hold firmly to the truths of the faith. This requirement is grounded in the example of the Lord Jesus who "while testifying before Pontius Pilate made the good confession" (1 Tim 6.13). The apostle Paul then encourages Timothy that since he similarly "made [the] good confession in the presence of many witnesses" he must now press on and "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6.12) and "watch [his] life and doctrine closely" (1 Tim 4.16). In the same way, Paul charges the Ephesian Shepherds to "watch over yourselves" (Acts 20.28). He teaches Titus that a Shepherd "must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Tit 1.9). And writing to Timothy, he commands that a man to be appointed as an "Overseer" "must not be a recent convert" (1 Tim 3.6). The Shepherd's leadership must arise from a living faith in Christ and a steadfast confession of the truth.

In keeping with this biblical requirement, the Presbyterian Church of Australia (PCA), in common with Reformed and Presbyterian Churches around the world, requires that those who would be appointed to eldership, publicly own, accept, and affirm the faith. The Supreme Standard for our Church is the Word of God in Scripture. The Subordinate Standard is the Westminster Confession of Faith, read in the light of a Declaratory Statement. The first two vows taken by elders at their ordination reflect this commitment:

- (i). Do you believe the Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, to be the only rule of faith and practice?
- (ii). Do you own and accept the Westminster Confession of Faith, as amended by the General Assembly, and read in the light of the Declaratory Statement contained in the Basis of Union adopted by this Church on the 24th day of July, 1901, as an exhibition of the sense in which you understand the Holy Scriptures, and



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as a confession of your faith; and do you engage firmly and constantly to adhere thereto, and to the utmost of your power to assert, maintain and defend the same?

Chapter 8 provides an introduction to the Westminster Confession and the PCA's Declaratory Statement.

Character

Shepherds must be people of exemplary Christ-like character. The apostle Paul provides two overlapping and complementary lists of "qualifications" for Shepherds in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. These make it clear that the hallmarks of the Christ-like life to which God calls all of his people are to be evident in the life of any would-be elder before they are appointed to the office, and consistent in their life as long as they remain in the office. It is for this reason that Paul commands Timothy not to be hasty in the laying on of hands (1 Tim 5:22), and not to appoint recent converts to the office (1 Tim 3:6). This is crucial. Each Shepherd must, in short, be "above reproach" (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6). This does not mean that Shepherds must be sinless – that is impossible this side of Christ's return. It means, rather, that they must be free from unrepentant or gross sins which might bring the Church and its Lord into disrepute.

Each Shepherd must, therefore, watch their life and doctrine closely (1 Tim 4:16; cf. Acts 20:28). This begins with guarding their own heart (Prov 4:3), and growing in grace and in love for God and others as they are grounded in the gospel (Matt 22:37-38; Col 2:6-7; 2 Pet 3:18; Heb 13:9). It extends to faithfully loving their spouse as Christ loved the church (Eph 5:21-33; 1 Tim 3:2), managing their house and family well (1 Tim 3:4-5; Tit 1:6), bringing up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4), caring for weaker members of their extended family (1 Tim 5:8), and doing their daily work in a manner that blesses others and wins the respect of outsiders, while also enabling them to provide for their family and have enough to share with those in need (1 Thess 4:11-12; 2 Thess 3:6-12; Col 3:23-24; Eph 4:28; 1 Tim 3:7). Shepherds, further, must not be addicted to alcohol, and must not be violent, or quick-tempered, or lovers of money. Instead, they must be lovers of the good, sober-minded, self-controlled, gentle, respectable, hospitable, upright, holy, and disciplined (1 Tim 3:2-3; Tit 1:7-8). And in the midst of all of this, because Shepherds are not yet perfected in Christ, they must also lead the way in confession of sin and repentance from it (1 Jn 1:9). In short, Shepherds must model life in Christ for God's people.

This fundamental requirement of eldership is expressed in the sixth vow taken by elders at their ordination:

(vi). Do you engage through Divine Grace to discharge with diligence and faithfulness the various duties of your office, watching over the flock, showing yourself a pattern of good works, and giving a conscientious attendance on the meetings of Session, Presbytery, and Assembly, when duly called so to do?

Competence

Shepherds must have a basic competence in two areas, so that they are able to fulfil the roles assigned to them. They must be "able to teach" and able to lead.



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Shepherds must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3.2; Tit 1.9).

First, Shepherds must be "able to teach". Paul states this requirement twice, both times in the midst of the lists of qualifications for elders. This ability to teach is rooted in the Shepherd's character, as is indicated by the way in which Paul lists this qualification between four matching pairs of positive and negative character traits (1 Tim 3.2-3: "sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable" paired with "not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money"). The ability to teach the truth arises from a life consistent with the truth. Moreover, the ability to teach the truth requires that Shepherds must have a clear grasp of the fundamental truths of the gospel and, indeed, of the whole counsel of God in Scripture, and have the character and conviction to hold firmly to it, even – perhaps especially – in the face of false teaching and opposition (Acts 20.28-31). That is, they must be people who understand the Scriptures clearly and hold to the truth firmly so that they can instruct others in the faith, gently correct those who are in error, and firmly refute those who teach what is false (Tit 1.9).

In addition, however, the ability to teach extends to a basic competency in communicating the truth, both in its positive and negative aspects (instruction and correction) in the Church and in the world. Each Shepherd will, of course, teach in their own way, according to the gift that they bring to the Church. None of the apostolic language implies that all Shepherds must "preach" in the sense of publicly deliver an extended monologue to a large group each Sunday, or proclaim the gospel from the front in a public setting. Nevertheless, Shepherds must be effective in communicating the truth of God's Word in a way that builds up the body of Christ. They must be able to lead Bible Study groups, teach Sunday School, minister God's word to people one to one, or teach the truth of the Bible in a range of other ways that feed and strengthen the church, correct errors, and promote to gospel to unbelievers.

Shepherds must be "able to lead"

Second, Shepherds must be able to lead. The apostle Paul emphasises this ability in 1 Timothy 3.4-5 (cf. 1 Tim 5.17; Tit 1.6), where he makes a man's leadership of his family in the home the test of whether he is fit to lead the church. This parallel makes it clear that the kind of leadership envisaged is not so much the ability to oversee a large corporation as it is the ability to cultivate the conditions in which others might flourish.

As with teaching, this leadership ability will look different in each elder or prospective elder. Each shepherd will exercise leadership in his own way, as part of the team of elders who work together in leading the church. Nevertheless, a basic ability to provide leadership to others, modelled on the leadership of a father in the family, is a non-negotiable requirement for Shepherds in the church.

Conviction

Shepherds must also have a conviction that God is calling them to the task. The apostle Paul, in writing to Timothy, speaks of those who "aspire" to the office of Overseer, and affirms that those who do "desire a noble task" (1 Tim 3.1). Similarly, the apostle Peter charges the elders to "be shepherds of God's flock ... not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be" (1 Pet 5.2). If a person has no aspiration, no desire, no willingness – in short,



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no conviction – that God calls them to shepherd his people, they are unlikely to take up the role with vigour, or continue in the primary tasks assigned to them when things are difficult.

Calling

Shepherds must be called to the role by God through the Church. The writer to the Hebrews teaches that the High Priests of the old covenant did not take to themselves the honour of being appointed a priest, but only when they were called by God, and affirms that even Jesus himself waited on God to be appointed to the role of Great High Priest (Heb 5:4-10). The Lord himself called the disciples to follow him, appointed them to their role (Matt 4:21; 9:9; 10:1-4; Mk 1:16-20; 3:13-19; 6:7; Lk 5:1-11; 6:13-16), and later – having equipped them for the task – sent them out on their mission (Mk 6.7; Matt 10.5; 28.18-20; Lk 9.1-2; 24.46-49; Acts 1.8). The book of Acts records how the Holy Spirit appointed Paul and Barnabas to their mission to the churches when the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch laid hands on them (Acts 13.1-3). The apostle Paul, similarly, speaking to the Ephesian elders, affirms that they were appointed to their role by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20.28). Further, writing to Timothy, Paul reminds his young charge how he was appointed to his role as an apostolic delegate, and granted the gift necessary for it, through the laying on of hands in the “Council of Elders” (1 Tim 4.14: presbuterion). Given this context, it is no surprise that Paul speaks of elders being appointed through the laying on of hands (1 Tim 5.22). We are well justified in drawing the general principle that no-one may appoint themselves to office of Shepherd; they must be duly appointed, by the Holy Spirit, through the Church.

Reformed and Presbyterian churches have traditionally, and helpfully, distinguished between the “inward call” and the “outward call”. This language has sometimes been dismissed as unbiblical, but it expresses well the combination we find in Scripture of the requirement that elders must have a personal desire and conviction to lead (1 Tim 3:1) and that this must be confirmed by the Church (1 Tim 5:22). This is the inward call, or God-given desire to lead, and the outward call, or formal recognition and appointment by the existing leadership of the Church.

Circumstances

Finally, Shepherds must also be in life circumstances that allow them to take up the responsibilities of shepherding God’s people. In the same letter to Timothy in which the apostle Paul speaks of appointing Overseer / Elders, he also commands that Christians have a basic responsibility to provide for their relatives (1 Tim 5.8), and recognises that some Christians are “under a yoke as slaves” (1 Tim 6.1). It is reasonable to surmise from these observations that some people, although otherwise qualified to be Shepherds, may find themselves in life circumstances that prevent them from taking up the responsibilities of leading, teaching, and praying for God’s people. There is no shame in this. On the contrary, it is good and right that we care for those whom God has entrusted to us, and discharge the responsibilities he has put before us. If God has placed someone in life-circumstances that make it impossible for them to take up leadership in the Church for a given period of time, or indefinitely, then we should encourage them to serve the Lord with the tasks he has given them, and not pressure them to also take up the burden of leadership in the church.



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Conclusion

The work of Shepherds is an important means by which the Lord Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, strengthens and feeds his people. Shepherds lead the church in its mission of proclaiming the gospel, and building the Church, to the ends of the earth. Since Shepherds serve the Lord in this crucial task, and are ultimately accountable to him, it is important that those appointed to the role are called by him through the Church, and meet the qualifications that the Lord lays down in his Word.



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Part 3. The Pastoral Charge: "Shepherd God's Flock!"

Introduction

In the business and mess of church life, it is easy for the church's leaders to get distracted from the main goal, and to lose focus on the gospel, which is at the heart of the church's mission. There are so many good things that can be done, and so many pressures from inside and outside the church, that it is easy for church leaders to lose their way. In his grace and kindness, however, the Lord Jesus has given clear direction to Shepherds in his word. It is no surprise that he charges those appointed to the Shepherd office to "shepherd God's Church"! The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia defines the role of elders as follows:

"elders occupy a pastoral office to which belongs the spiritual oversight of the Church. Under the Chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, elders shepherd and serve the church by sharing in its government, teaching the word of God, praying with and for God's people, and modelling life in Christ, according to their gifts." – GAA 2019 Min. 42(12).

In this Part, we unpack this statement by looking at the basic biblical charge given to elders, before outlining the four key biblical tasks that it involves.

The Primary Charge: Shepherd God's flock!

The Lord Jesus is the "Good," "Great" and "Chief Shepherd" (Jn 10.11, 14; Heb 13.20; 1 Pet 2.25: 5.4), who "shepherds" his people (Matt 2.6; Rev 2.27; 7.17; 12.5; 19.15). The Lord himself three times charges the apostle Peter to "feed" and "shepherd my sheep" (Jn 21.15-17). The apostle Paul employs the metaphor of "shepherding a flock" to describe his own work (1 Cor 9.7).

In this context, it is no surprise that the central charge that the apostles Paul and Peter both give directly to "the elders" is to "shepherd the church / flock of God" (Acts 20.28; 1 Pet 5.2). In both passages, the metaphor of Christ as Shepherd of his people provides the context for the charge to elders. In Acts 20.28-29 the metaphor of Christ as "shepherd" is implied by the parallel between the "church of God" and the "flock" and by the further reference to "fierce wolves ... not sparing the flock". In this context, Paul explains that the Holy Spirit has appointed the Ephesian elders as "overseers" for the purpose of "shepherding" God's church (Acts 20.28). In 1 Peter 5.1-4 the metaphor of God/Christ as "shepherd" is explicit in the reference to Christ as "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet 5.4), in the description of the Church as the "flock of God", and in the charge to elders to be "examples to the flock". In this context, the command "be shepherds" (5.2) functions as the main verb in the long sentence that runs from 5.1-4 and provides



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the main content of Peter's "exhortation" to the elders (5.1). For this reason, although the ordinary and perpetual office of elder / overseer / pastor is only once identified by the title "shepherd" or "pastor" (Eph 4.11), it is clear that the work of the elders / overseers / pastors is primarily conceived in terms of "shepherding" God's people.

The most basic calling of the Shepherds is to lovingly lead God's people. "Shepherding" is basically a leadership role. This emerges not only from the image itself, but from its application throughout the Scriptures to those who lead. That this leadership is to be expressed in loving, personal, proactive, sacrificial concern for those who are led is indicated by a host of passages in which the "shepherd" metaphor functions in this way.

Consider, for example:

1. Psalm 23.1: "The LORD is my shepherd" who proactively provides for and protects his people;
2. Ezekiel 34.1-16: shepherds are to feed the sheep, strengthen the weak, heal the sick, bind up the injured, bring back the strayed, seek the lost;
3. John 10: Jesus' ministry as the "Good Shepherd" is grounded in the fact that he "knows the sheep" (Jn 10.14; cf. 10.27), and is expressed in the way he "calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (Jn 10.3; cf. 10.16, 27), leads, cares for, and protects them (Jn 10.27-28), and ultimately "lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10.11; cf. 10.15);
4. Matthew 9.36 and Mark 6.34: Jesus "had compassion" for the crowd because they were "like sheep without a shepherd" and so he resolved to "feed" them by teaching them;
5. Revelation 2.27; 12.5; 19.15: the Lord Jesus, as shepherd, destroys the predatory foes of his people;
6. Revelation 7.17: "The Lamb" (= Jesus) will "shepherd" his people by guiding them to "springs of living water."

To "shepherd God's flock", then, means to lovingly and proactively lead and guide, teach and nourish, protect and prosper, God's people.

More specifically, however, when we examine the NT passages where the apostles give explicit directions to the elders / overseers / pastors, we find that the apostles give shape to the Shepherds' loving leadership of God's people by assigning to them four key functions. These functions are patterned after the loving leadership of "Good Shepherd," who presents himself in John 10 as the great Prophet, Priest, and King of his people. Under the "Good Shepherd", Shepherds are to (i). lead, (ii). teach and (iii). pray for God's people, while also (iv). modelling life in Christ for them. Each of these four key functions deserves brief comment.



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Four Key Tasks: Lead, teach, pray, and model life in Christ

Shepherds lead

First, just as the Lord Jesus, the "Good Shepherd," is the great "King," who lovingly rules over his people, leading them for their good, giving them life, protecting them from harm, and keeping them secure forever in his presence (Jn 10.3-4, 10-14, 28-30), so also the Shepherds are to lead God's people under him.

In Acts 20.29 Paul urges the Ephesian elders to "pay careful attention" to themselves and to all the flock, especially since the flock will need to be protected against "fierce wolves." In 1 Timothy 3 and 5, the apostle Paul charges Shepherds to "rule" the church (1 Tim 3.4-5; 5.17; cf. 1 Thess 5.12) and "take care" of God's people (1 Tim 3.5), as a father rules and takes care of his family. In 1 Peter 5, the apostle Peter commands Shepherds to "willingly" and "eagerly" "watch over" God's people, not "greedily" seeking personal gain, and not "lording it over" (cf. Lk 22.25) those "allotted" to them but, like Christ himself, providing a "pattern" or "model" of sacrificial service (1 Pet 5.2-3). These texts emphasize that Shepherd leadership is to be modelled on the leadership of a shepherd with his flock, a father in the household, and – ultimately – the Lord himself with his people.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the Lord has ordained that Shepherds should work in teams. For this reason, Shepherds exercise their leadership both corporately (as a "leadership team" in the session) and individually (as a "team of leaders"). The Lord has also ordained that Shepherds care for "the church of God" as well as for the individuals within it. For this reason, Shepherds direct their leadership both towards the church's common life, and the needs of particular individuals under their care. Given the Lord's revealed will for his Church, this implies that the Shepherds must aim to organise the church's common life, and to lead the people within it, so that: (i). God's chosen people outside the Church hear the gospel, are saved and join the Church; (ii). each and every member is equipped to serve according to their gifts (Eph 4.12, 16; 1 Cor 12.7; 1 Pet 4.10); (iii). individuals grow towards maturity in Christ, and; (iv). the whole church flourishes as a community in which God's grace abounds, and from which God's truth is proclaimed (1 Tim 3.15; cf. Eph 4.11-16; Col 1.28-29).

In our context, the fulfilment of this charge probably means that Shepherds should concentrate on leading a particular church in its life and mission by: (i). working together in the Session to provide biblical vision for the church and effective oversight of its common life; (ii). participating in and leading gathered worship (under the direction of the Minister); (iii). providing spiritual care and encouragement for the members of the particular church, including children, young people, the aged and the sick, so that they grow together towards maturity in Christ.

Module 6: "Leading God's People" provides some more detailed training in these important tasks.



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Shepherds preach and teach

Second, just as the Lord Jesus, the “Good Shepherd” is the great “Prophet,” who “calls his own sheep by name” so that they “hear” and “know his voice” (Jn 10.3-4; cf. 10.16, 27; Mk 6.34), so also the Shepherds are to faithfully relay the Good Shepherd’s voice as they proclaim the gospel, teach God’s people “the whole counsel of God” from the Scriptures, and refute those who oppose it (Acts 20.27-31; 1 Tim 3.2; Tit 1.9; cf. Heb 13.7; 1 Thess 5.12).

The Shepherds’ teaching ministry is modelled on that of Jesus, and of the apostles and apostolic delegates like Timothy. For this reason, it is fair to surmise that:

1. Shepherds are to devote themselves to the ministry of the Word, together with prayer (Acts 6.4; cf. 1 Tim 3.2; 5.17; Tit 1.9);
2. the Shepherds’ teaching ministry will take a range of forms, including:
 - a. proclaiming the gospel far and wide (e.g. Lk 4.43; Matt 28.18-20; Rom 15.20; Col 1.23; 1 Thess 2.9; 2 Tim 4.5);
 - b. public reading, preaching, and teaching from Scripture in gathered worship (under the direction of the Minister) (e.g. Lk 4.16-22; 1 Tim 4.13);
 - c. faithfully administering the sacraments as the “signs and seals” of God’s grace in Christ (under the direction of the Minister) (Matt 28.19; 1 Cor 11.20-28; cf. WCF 27.1);
 - d. private and personal instruction, encouragement, admonition and rebuke, of adults and children, in appropriate ways, in small group Bible studies, Youth Groups, Sunday schools, one to one ministry, and the like (e.g. Acts 5.42; 20.20, 31; Col 1.28; 1 Thess 2.7-8, 11-12);
 - e. training and equipping of God’s people for works of service (Eph 4.11-12);
 - f. correcting errors and refuting false teachers (e.g. Matt 23.1-36; Acts 20.17-31; Tit 1.9), and;
 - g. working together as a team of elders (session) to exercise right discipline by applying God’s word, first in private admonishment, and then – if needed – in public censure and exclusion from the sacraments, with the goals of glorifying God, protecting church members, and regaining those who wander (Matt 16.19; 18.15-20; 1 Cor 5.1-13; cf. WCF 30.1-4).

By all of these means the Lord himself works through his appointed under-shepherds to “gather and perfect the saints” (cf. WCF 25.3), that is, to save his chosen people through the ministry of the gospel, and to equip them for works of service in the church and the world, so that the body of Christ might grow to maturity, for God’s glory (Eph 4.11-16; Col 1.28; 2 Tim 3.14-17).

In our context, the fulfilment of this charge probably means that Shepherds should concentrate on: (i). preaching and teaching from the Scriptures, as well as correcting false teaching; (ii). training and equipping others for Christian service; (iii). sharing the love of Christ and the message of the gospel beyond the particular church.

This teaching ministry will, of course, take a different shape for each elder depending on their particular gifts and life situation. Those who are particularly set apart to “labour in the word and teaching” (1 Tim 5.17-18), whom we refer to in the PCA as “Ministers” or “Teaching Elders”, rightly have responsibility for gathered worship and public



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preaching and will, in most cases, provide the lion's share of the public preaching and teaching ministry in the local church. There is nothing in the biblical commands that requires each and every elder to "preach". Nevertheless, those elders who are gifted in preaching may well take a supporting role in that ministry, when invited to do so by the Minister, and all of the elders, each in their own way, will play a part in the wide ranging and holistic ministry of the word in the local church, whether that means leading a small group, teaching Sunday school, discipling others one to one, leading the church in evangelism or apologetics, or contributing to the church's teaching ministry in other ways.

Module 7: "Teaching God's People" provides more detailed training and practical guidance for these important tasks.

Shepherds pray

Third, just as the Lord Jesus, the "Good Shepherd" is the great "Priest," who offers himself as the sacrifice which cleanses his people from sin (Jn 10.11, 15), who prays with and for the people he leads, who teaches them to pray, and who now continues to intercede for them (Jn 17.1-26; cf. Rom 8.34; Heb 7.25), so also the Shepherds perform this priest-like function of prayer. The priestly function of offering sacrifice is, of course, fulfilled in the Lord Jesus and his perfect sacrifice of himself on the cross for our sins. Shepherds, therefore, do not offer sacrifice! Nevertheless, an important part of their role is praying with and for God's people (Jas 5.14), and leading others to approach the throne of grace with confidence in the name of the one Great Priest and on the basis of his perfect sacrifice (cf. Heb 10.19-25). Indeed, since their ministry is modelled on that of the Lord Jesus himself, and that of the apostles, it is fair to surmise that the Shepherds must "devote themselves to prayer" (Acts 6.4).

In our context, the fulfilment of this charge probably means that Shepherds should concentrate on: (i). private prayer for the particular church, its life, its mission, its individual members, and for those outside the church who do not yet profess faith in Christ; (ii). prayer with individuals and small groups, including teaching others how to pray; (iii). public prayer in gathered worship under the direction of the Minister.

Shepherds model life in Christ

Finally, just as the Lord Jesus, the "Good Shepherd," "goes before" his people and "leads them out" (Jn 10.3-4), so the Shepherds are to model life in Christ for God's people. By their confession of Christ as Lord, by their lives patterned after Jesus' death and resurrection, and by their exemplary Christ-like character – including the ongoing confession of their sins and repentance from them – the Shepherds provide an "example for the flock" (1 Pet 5.3; 1 Tim 3.1-8; 5.22; Tit 1.5-9; cf. Heb 13.7; 1 Jn 1.5-10).

It is not enough for Shepherds to diligently lead and faithfully teach and fervently pray; they must also show, by the very shape of their daily lives, what it means to live in Christ. For this reason, in the final analysis, while Shepherds must be "able to rule" and "apt to teach" and "devoted to prayer," the primary qualification for the Shepherding role is not charisma, but character, not giftedness, but godliness, not a "flair for leadership," but a love for Christ's flock, expressed in Christ-like living among them for their sake.



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More particularly, this aspect of Shepherding leadership requires that Shepherds personally know, and are known by, the people they seek to lead. The Lord Jesus is distinguished as the “Good Shepherd” in part by the fact that he “knows” and is known by his sheep (Jn 10.14). The apostles provided a further example here by their determination to share with the people they led “not only the gospel of God” but also their “own selves” (1 Thess 2.8), and by the way they taught not only in public but also “from house to house” (Acts 5.42; 20.20, 31), exhorting “each one” as a mother with her nursing infant and a father with his children (1 Thess 2.7, 11-12).

Consistent with their own example of personally-engaged ministry, the apostles charge Shepherds with knowing the specific people for whom they have been given responsibility. The apostle Peter charges the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, not domineering over “the lots” (1 Peter 5.2-3). Quite likely, Peter’s reference to “the lots” here implies the delegation of pastoral responsibility for particular church members to particular elders. In the same way, the apostle Paul charges the Ephesian elders to “pay careful attention to all the flock” (Acts 20.28). The writer to the Hebrews also charges church leaders to be faithful in “keeping watch over ... (the) souls” of those in their care, since they “will have to give an account” (Heb 13.17; cf. 1 Thess 5.12).

Taken together, these commands indicate that elders are expected to have significant “life on life” contact with the people they lead. In sharp contrast to many hierarchical models of church government, in which senior leaders are far removed from the people they lead, the apostles everywhere assume that the Shepherds are embedded within – rather than extracted from – the life of the particular church for which they take responsibility. The apostolic vision of Shepherd leadership involves loving, proactive, and sacrificial service in the context of personal relationships.

In our context, the fulfilment of this charge probably means that Shepherds should seek to know, and be known by, a discrete group of people, with whom they share their lives, and for whom they can meaningfully model life in Christ. Sessions need to work together to establish a proactive plan for the pastoral care of each and every member of the Church. The goal, again, is that those outside the Church who do not yet know the Lord might come to saving faith in Christ, and that each and every member of the church is strengthened by God’s grace in their faith in Christ, and built up towards maturity in him.

Module 5: “Caring for God’s People” provides more detailed training and practical guidance for this important task.

Conclusion

The pastoral charge given to elders is to “shepherd God’s flock”. This fundamentally involves loving, proactive leadership, expressed particularly in the four key tasks of leading the church, proclaiming the gospel and teaching the whole counsel of God from the Bible, praying with and for God’s people, and modelling life in Christ for them.

There are many things that claim the attention of church leaders. The Lord, however, provides crystal clear direction to his under-Shepherds. He calls them to remain focussed on the gospel-centred mission of the Church, and to enable the whole church to play its part in God’s mission to the world.



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Parts 2 and 3: Discussion Questions

1. Consider each of the six C's required of elders: Confession, Character, Competence, Conviction, Calling, Circumstances. Why is each of these qualifications important? Are some more important than others? Why or why not? What problems might arise if one or more of these qualifications is missing from the life of an elder?
2. What does it mean that elders must be "above reproach"? How is this different from "sinless perfection"?
3. Why is it important that elders must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2; cf. Tit 1:9)? How is this requirement both similar and different to Paul's encouragement to all believers to "speak the truth in love" (Eph 4:15) to each other?
4. How does the biblical image of "shepherding" or "pastoring" give shape to the role of elders?
5. Consider the four primary tasks of elders: (i). lead, (ii). preach and teach, (iii). pray, (iv). model life in Christ. How does each of these tasks flow out of the elders role as a pastor?



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Elders in Christ's Church: Further Resources

Video Summary

There are two five-minute videos. These summarize the Discussion and Notes, and introduce the group discussions:

- Video 1: The Biblical Basis for Eldership (summarizing Part 1 of Discussion Notes and introducing the first group discussion)
 - Youtube Link: <https://youtu.be/B5qb6FoYR9M>
- Video 2: The Biblical Qualifications and Functions of Elders (summarizing Parts 2 and 3 of Discussion Notes and introducing the second group discussion)
 - Youtube Link: <https://youtu.be/Ctb6MjDBSwQ>

Audio Podcast

The podcast asks and answers four common questions about Elders in Christ's Church.

- Soundcloud Link (Audio-Only Version): <https://soundcloud.com/christcollegesydney/slt-module-a-elders-in-christs-church-panel-discussion/s-PNFVzf8YyU6>
- Youtube Recording (Video Recording): <https://youtu.be/cpJCSKxAc48>

Recommended Reading

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Merkle, B. L. *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008.

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Merkle, B. L. "Are the Qualifications for Elders or Overseers Negotiable?". *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171.682 (2014): 172-88.

* Rinne, J. *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*. 9Marks Building Healthy Churches. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014.

Smith, M. J. "Shepherds and Servants: The Two Offices Christ appointed in his Church." *Haddington House Journal* (2018): 179-200. Available at: <http://eldersanddeacons.weebly.com/other-articles--talks.html>



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Thune, R. *Gospel Eldership*. New Growth Press, 2016.

Waters, G. P. *How Jesus Runs the Church*. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2011.

Witmer, T. Z. *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in your Church*. Phillipsburg: P & R, 2010.

Feedback

We'd love to hear what you thought about this module.
One of our staff will send you a link closer towards the end of the term.

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