

READ Acts 14:21-28

I'm really excited for the next term of classes that begins on May 2nd because we will begin studying through the book of the Acts of the Apostles in our adult auditorium class. I believe a good study of this particular part of our New Testaments is extremely important because Acts lays out a very detailed blueprint for what Jesus's churches looked like at the very beginning. If we make it our aim to simply be the 1st century church in the 21st century, then we would do well to give careful consideration to what those churches looked like and how they operated.

One very important aspects of the structure and operation of 1st century churches is found within this text, and it is that Paul and Barnabas made it their mission and goal to go about appointing elders within every church they visited within these cities. Establishing these men as leaders within these churches was integral to the growth and maturing of these churches. This is certainly the conclusion we must come to when we consider what Paul writes in **Ephesians 4:11-13**:

11 *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, **12** to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, **13** *until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness.**

The church was structured from the beginning in such a way that the saints who made up each individual local church would have the best opportunity to grow in their ability to serve and minister in various areas. The working together of the local church leaders with the members would allow for each group to be built up and strengthened in faith and knowledge to the point of achieving spiritual maturity. The presence and effective work of pastors or shepherds or elders or overseers, or whatever term we might use, were key factors in the early successes of the churches of Christ.

With these things in mind, I believe it to be a wise practice of churches to from time to time to see how they might grow or strengthen the elderships that exist within them. This church has been blessed to have had elders serve it from almost its inception over ten years ago, and constant evaluation and consideration for the future is vital for continued success. As we begin the process of considering whether or not there are additional men who are willing and capable of serving in such an important role, we will use our time of study this morning to think upon the role of the shepherds who are the leaders of God's flock here in Jackson at Pleasant Plains.

In order to refresh our understanding of what the role entails, we will be examining the man who is capable of taking on such a tremendous responsibility. It truly is a tremendous responsibility because we see the truths all around that *"Everything rises and falls on leadership."* John C. Maxwell is quoted as saying such, and this can even be seen as true within the Bible. I think specifically of the prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah who both spoke very harsh words to the leaders of Israel who are described as failed shepherds in **Ezekiel 34:1-10 & Jeremiah 23:1-4**. Both Prophets speak of the failings of those who were charged with leading God's people, and their failures led the people into exile. Such disastrous consequences are possible even still today if leaders are not wisely appointed and held to the lofty standards and expectations found in the New Testament, but there are also tremendous blessings to be had when capable men step up and serve God's people in this way. Let's think upon the man capable of shepherding and then finish up with some questions that need to be asked and answered by those men who might be nominating or aspiring to such a position within this church.

Examining The Capable Man**A. His titles & descriptions detail the work.**

1. elder/presbyter: This term is first found referring to the elders of a local church in **Acts 11:30**.

A great famine was predicted and took place throughout the land of Judea, and disciples in

Antioch send aid to their brothers and sisters by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. From that point on, the elders of local churches are spoken of over 20 times. The word itself (*presbuteros*) means “older” and gives the implication that a man serving in this role would be a spiritually mature and experienced man. The age and experience of these men would give them ample opportunity to grow in knowledge, wisdom, and sound judgment. However, this role is not new to the church of the New Testament for such a role of mature leadership was even present within the history of Israel. Remember the traditions of the elders that are mentioned on a number of occasions within the Gospel accounts.

2. **bishop/overseer:** This term “*episkopos*” is translated six times from Acts onward. Five of those times the word is used to refer to men who serve in this position of leadership with local churches, and the last time is found in reference to Jesus who is the “*Shepherd and Overseer*” of our souls (**I Peter 2:25**). This term, as indicated with the English translating “overseer” gives the idea of oversight and management. A bishop or overseer is responsible for making sure the church is operating smoothly and effectively in the work she is doing.
3. **shepherd/pastor:** Lastly, my personal preferred term for this position of leadership is shepherd. This is from the term “*poimēn*” which means exactly what we would expect for a shepherd to be involved in: caring for, feeding, nurturing, and leading sheep. It is found within the New Testament as both a noun (describing the man) and a verb (describing what the man does in this position). As mentioned a moment ago, this term, along with Overseer, is used in reference to Jesus and what He does for us.
4. All of these terms together paint the picture of an experienced and mature man who is capable over overseeing the spiritual well-being of a group of individuals who have submitted themselves to his care, nurturing, and leading. Again, this is a tremendous responsibility, and we would be remiss to not recognize that such responsibility does bring about the possibility of men letting such influence get to their heads which is why we must be reminded of what ought to be the motivation for why a man should pursue such a position in the first place!

B. He loves people, not power. (I Peter 5:1-4)

1. We have noted time and time again throughout our studies in Mark that the Apostles had a nasty habit of allowing themselves to become filled with personal pride to the extent that they would often argue over who was most important, most influential, and potentially who would have the most power alongside Jesus. However, Jesus continually emphasized the need for humility in the way they carried themselves. They were in great need of caring and being concerned for the good of others above themselves. With this being continually emphasized by Jesus, we should not be surprised with Jesus’s conversation with Peter that we see taking place in **John 21:15-17**:

“15 When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John,^[a] do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.” “Feed my lambs,” he told him. 16 A second time he asked him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” “Yes, Lord,” he said to him, “you know that I love you.” “Shepherd my sheep,” he told him. 17 He asked him the third time, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Peter was grieved that he asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” “Feed my sheep,” Jesus said.”

2. As I read this text, I can't help but think about the continued teaching Jesus had offered up to these men, including Peter, concerning that need for humility and consideration of others. For Peter, who would serve as a shepherd himself (**I Peter 5:1**), he needed for his love of Christ to

be defined by his love for Christ's sheep. His love would be shown in the way he would feed and shepherd those who belonged to Jesus. Peter's life wasn't to be about power, authority, or status...it was to be about serving the sheep.

3. This truth in Peter's life must also be true of those who serve as shepherds in local churches today, and Peter acknowledges this himself in **I Peter 5:1-4**. He encourages those who are fellow elders to make sure they are shepherding and overseeing God's flock among them willingly and not simply out of compulsion. Those who do so are in danger of not putting their full heart into the work. He admonishes them to not be that the position simply for money (yes, elders can be paid per **I Timothy 5:17,18!**). They are to be servants in the truest sense of the word and not ones who lord their authority over others. Just as real shepherds must love their sheep and desire what is best for them regardless of the sacrifices it demands of them, so must shepherds of God's churches operate in the same way. Yet, we also see at the end of this text that they are to be examples for the rest of the flock. Let's see how so...

C. He is an example of faithfulness (I Timothy 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9):

1. As we consider the two text that deal directly with what a shepherd ought to look like, I will suggest to you that the picture painted can be broken down into four areas in which the shepherd of a church of the Lord ought to be the shining standard and example.
 2. as a father
 - a) Each list gives mention to the way this man ought to have carried himself as a father. Now, there is much debate as to exactly what each of those text mean, but we simply do not have time to get into that discussion this morning, However, I will be writing on this issue and the next issue over the next two Sundays, so I hope you'll take the time to read those articles if you're curious concerning the varying views and/or what I myself think about them (although my thoughts don't carry anymore weight than others).
 - b) Be that as it may, the reasoning for why the raising of his children matters is given to us within Paul's writing to Timothy, and that reasoning even ties into the titles we discussed earlier with the responsibilities implied within them. Paul writes to Timothy stating that the man who serves in this position needs to have shown his ability to manage people through the way he has managed his own household. "*If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God's church?*" (**I Timothy 3:5**) The man who is capable of serving the church as a shepherd is the man who has shown himself an example in managing his children well. In doing so, he is shown capable of managing others and can give advice and guidance to others who are seeking to do the same. Of that, we can all agree even if we might not see eye to eye on what it means to have managed his children or lead them to be "*faithful*" as is written in **Titus 1:6**. Again, please check out the bulletin next Sunday for further thoughts.
 3. as a husband
 - a) Further, the man capable of serving as a shepherd is to be "*the husband of one wife.*" Both of Paul's writings to Timothy and Titus read the same way on this trait, so at least we have that going for us. Yet again, there is abounding debate on exactly what this means. I'll be addressing this more in depth in the bulletin on the first Sunday in May.
 - b) Sufficed to say at the moment, a man's ability to love and nurture his wife and remain wholly faithful to her can go a long way in judging his ability to love, nurture, and remain loyal to those put within his care. If a man is harsh, disconnected, and disloyal to his spouse, then surely we can imagine the type of harm and damage that can cause toward his work of shepherding a flock of God's people within the church he is a part of. Practically

speaking, there are few resources more valuable within the church for those who are growing in their marriages than a loving, nurturing, and faithful husband and his wife. I believe we can clearly see the wisdom in this type of man being put into such a position of influence among God's people in a local church.

4. in his knowledge

- a) That wisdom is also seen in making sure those who serve in these positions are men who are very knowledgeable of and capable with the Scriptures. Both texts give the necessity for a knowledge and ability to teach the Scriptures. Paul's words to Timothy are brief, but his writings to Titus give us greater insight into the need for knowledge of the Scriptures and the ability to teach them.
- b) Paul tells Titus that those serving in this role need to be *"holding to the faithful message taught, so that they will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it."* Ephesus wasn't exactly a shining light of morality, but Crete was an especially morally depraved place during the time Titus would have been there, and the following text block of **Titus 1:10-16** shows that to have been his reality. Historically speaking, Polybius is noted as having written, *"almost impossible to find...personal conduct more treacherous or public policy more unjust than in Crete"* (Histories, 6.47). Cicero is also noted as having stated, *"More principles are so divergent that the Cretans... consider highway robber honorable."* (Republic 3.9.15)
- c) If this was the type environment Christians were subjected to in Crete then we can understand the dire need for strong teaching ability from the eldership! Yet, this was true of all churches as is evidenced from Paul's strong admonitions given to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:17-38**. Specifically we can note the need to be ready to handle the wolves who would come in seeking to tear the church apart through standing of the truth and proclaiming it strongly. The need for examples of knowledge isn't for pride's sake, but it is very practical in nature in making sure the church's doctrine and teaching are kept pure.

5. in his character

- a) Finally, the overall character of a man desiring to serve as a shepherd needs to be "above reproach" and "blameless." These two phrases are the beginning point of describing the character of the man desiring to serve as a shepherd, and I don't believe that is pure coincidence. These must be men who others look up to and respect as strong example of godliness. In fact, we might sum such character up as being righteous and holy, but there are more specific traits that are listed in these texts.
- b) As I look at these traits, I see more and more the practicality of them when it comes to the work that is done by shepherds. Men serving in these positions are not to keep themselves cooped up in some backroom simply making rulings and decisions, but they need to truly be like shepherds and smell like sheep, and these traits help them to do so! These are traits that paint the picture of a man who is a strong people person. He is a man who is able to handle himself well in high-stress situations where souls hang in the balance! He needs to be able to handle disagreements between himself and his fellow elders. Surely being self-controlled, sensible, not an excessive drinker, not a bully, not quarrelsome, not arrogant, not hot-tempered, etc are all traits that will aid every man serving in these roles to handle themselves in the best way possible in the tough situations that will surely be experienced during his time serving the local church.
- c) Lastly, let's remind ourselves that being above reproach doesn't mean we are above approach. Again, if shepherds are to be people people then the people ought to feel all

the comfort in the world approaching an elder to discuss any and everything without reservation. Any request for advice, suggestion, or even admonishment should be received by a shepherd humbly and honestly. Failure to do so will only alienate the sheep and cause them to not hear the voices of their shepherds, and certainly we would all say that such is not beneficial to the church. May our shepherds and those aspiring to serve seek to have this lofty example of proven Christ-like mature character. These are the type of men we ought to be looking for and desiring to serve this church and any church we might find ourselves a part of within our lives.

Questions For Those Aspiring/Considered:

A. Do I love these people or do I simply want power & authority?

1. As we have noted from the example of Peter, his writings, and also throwing in what Paul says in **I Timothy 3:1** about being an overseer as a noble work, serving as a shepherd is not about achieving a certain level of status, being able to make the church exactly as I want it to be, or lording my authority over others and forcing them to either comply or get out. No, taking on the responsibility of being a shepherd within a local church really is work. It is service in every sense of the word.
2. Those who serve in such a role will only find true success and fulfillment in the work when the motivation for such is purely a love for God and His people. If I'm motivated by power, authority, or status then I will find myself frustrated more often than not. I won't respond well when someone offers a different viewpoint. I won't handle it well when people don't simply roll over to my every whim and wish. I must be willing to reason for the good of the sheep and not my own desires and pride...this means I must be ready to sacrifice much of myself in doing such a work as shepherding...am I willing to do so?

B. Am I willing to sacrifice greatly of myself for this spiritual family?

1. Again, if my motivations for serving are selfish in nature then of course I'm not going to be willing to sacrifice! I got into this role to achieve my goals and desires, and failure to achieve such things will only result in further frustrations and poor feelings.
2. If I am aspiring to serve in this role or if I am among those nominated, then I must dig deep within myself to examine my motives for what might move me to work in this role. Do I really love people or do I love status? If I love people then I'm going to be willing to give of myself or their well-being. Yet, if I am truly only about myself then the work will be a disaster for all involved, and I need to recognize it simply isn't for me. That might sound harsh to say, but the reality is that not everyone is cut out for this role, and this includes those without positive influence within the church.

C. Do I have positive influence with this group of God's people?

1. If I am nominated or if I aspire to serve in this role, do I truly believe that I will be set up for success by already having positive influence within the church? If we go back to **John 10** and consider the fact that Jesus's sheep hear, know His voice, and react positively to it, then I need to realize that the same needs to be true of me if I want to work in this role effectively. I can't expect to simply throw my authority around and win hearts and minds.
2. Therefore, do I see myself as already being in a position where the hearts and minds of others are willing to follow me as I lead? If this isn't the case then maybe I need to find out why. There will be a point in this process where the church will be able to speak to any men who have been nominated to discuss any questions or issues that might be present concerning their ability to serve. It is in those conversations where I would find out whether my influence within the church is negative or positive. If it is negative then I hope the conversations are

productive to the point where that influence might be bettered and improved, but if it is something that truly hinders the ability to serve then I hope all involved will be able to peacefully move on in whatever way leads to continued peace.

D. Have I prepared myself for this role?

1. Finally, if I am among those who are nominated for this role, then I need to first and foremost figure out if I am capable of fulfilling this role. This means that I need to ask myself very pointedly whether or not I have been preparing myself for this role because this is not a role that one achieves to accidentally. This is a role that demands decades of training and disciplining. It is a role reserved for those who have set God as the focal point in their lives and not wavered. This isn't to say that these men are perfect...they are not. But they have achieved a level of maturity and spirituality that such is evident to those around them.
2. Yet, let's say that maybe I'm not there yet. Maybe I'm still at the point in my life where I have the time to develop myself into the type of man who can serve in that capacity...I need to get to work! I need to prepare myself to serve in such a role because such service if needed. Our current shepherds aren't getting any younger, and the next generation of servants needs to be preparing themselves to serve because that time is coming faster than we might think. We need men ready, willing, and capable of serving God's people in this and every place.

Main Point/Conclusion: *The church's shepherds must love God, must love His people, and must be capable of serving and leading the flock closer to God and all the way home to be with the Lord.*

Considering and appointing men to serve as shepherds can either be an exciting or excruciating time within a church family. It is my hope and prayer that we will all consider our motives, desire the best for the church, and seek the Lord's guidance as we engage in such an endeavor. May we seek His favor and realize that He has been with us all along the way shepherding us in our faiths. He is faithful, and I have full confidence that He will continue to provide for our every need here in this place.