

# The Church

## Elders - Biblical Word Pictures / Metaphors of Elders - Part 8

### Introduction

When God spoke to the ancient Israelites through the prophets, He often used parables or metaphors. For instance, there is the parable/metaphor of the trees making a king (Jud. 9:7-15); the vineyard producing wild grapes (Isa. 5:1-6); or the seething pot (Ezek. 24:3-5). The Lord also used metaphors when He spoke of the prodigal son and his brother (Lk. 15:11-32), or the parable of the various grounds (Matt. 13:4-8). When speaking of the local or corporate church, God continued to use metaphors. Therefore, it is not surprising that He uses the same method of instruction for elders.

### The God-given Word Pictures For Elders

Due to the importance of the work of being an elder, the Holy Spirit has given nine word pictures (of which I am aware) which convey the responsibilities of an elder. They are: Shepherd, Steward, Watchers/Sentinels, Pillar, Guide, Government/Pilot, Laborer, Servant, and Physician. Because "Shepherd" is the principle picture and reveals so many aspects of shepherding, more space will be given to it, but all are important.

#### 1) Shepherd

- a) One of the ways God revealed His loving care to Israel in ancient days was presenting Himself as a Shepherd (Psa. 80:1; Jer. 31:10). The Lord is presented by the picture but in three different contexts. He is the "Good Shepherd" (Jn. 10:11); "Chief Shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:4); and "Great Shepherd" (Heb. 13:20).

There were three prophets in particular whom God uses to portray pictures of the Shepherding of God. They are Aaron (called a prophet in Ex. 7:1), Isaiah, and Ezekiel.

##### i) Aaron

1. The shepherd bears and carries the flock. Four times over we read of Aaron "bearing" all in Ex. 28. It is written: "Aaron shall bear their names before the LORD" (Ex. 28:12); "Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment" (Ex. 28:29); "Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually" (Ex. 28:30); "Aaron may bear the iniquity of the holy things" (Ex. 28:38).

##### ii) Isaiah

1. When speaking to Israel through the prophet Isaiah He says: "He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young" (Isa. 40:11); "And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you." (Isa. 46:4)

##### iii) Ezekiel

1. In Ezekiel 34 God is setting before the shepherds of Israel three matters:
  - (a) Where they have failed: They have been guilty of indulgence (Ezek. 34:3); neglect (v. 4, 5, 6); cruelty (v. 4); scattering the flock (vv. 5-6); and misrule (v. 8).
  - (b) The effect their behavior has had on the flock: The sheep partake of the same characteristics as the shepherds and damage each other. Selfishness becomes the characteristic (Ezek. 34:18); inconsideration (v. 18); intolerance (v. 21); and victimize (v. 21).
  - (c) What a true shepherd does: Their work was to restore them to unity (Ezek. 34:11-13); feed them in good pastures (v. 14; Jn. 10:9; 21:15-17; Psa. 23:2-3); causes them to lie down and be nourished (v. 15); seeks the lost, heal the wounded, and strengthens the sick (v. 16).

- b) Of course the Lord is the supreme example of a Shepherd. John, Peter, and the writer to the Hebrews each record about the Lord as a shepherd.

- i) John will present Him in several ways, but the major emphasized truth is the Lord “laying down” (Jn. 10:18), yet before there is any mention of His “laying down”, John informs the readers that the shepherd must “come through the door”, he must have the qualifications to come in (Jn. 10:2). An unqualified man could not come through the door.
- ii) The Greek word “tithemi” is translated “giveth” (Jn. 10:11); “lay down” (Jn. 10:15; 17); “lay it down” (Jn. 10:18). To be a shepherd of the sheep, an elder must be willing to lay down his life for the sheep. This he does in several ways. He does it:
  1. Of his own volition (“I lay it down of myself” Jn. 10:18)
  2. Vicariously (“I lay down my life for the sheep” Jn. 10:15)
- iii) The true shepherd:
  1. Knows his sheep (Jn. 10:3; 1 Thess. 5:14-15 (recognizing their weaknesses, etc.); Protect them from enemies (Jn. 10:8, 10-11; Acts 20:29; Titus 1:9). Compare 2 Cor. 11:13-15; 2 Pet. 2:1; 2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-9; Jer. 23:1-4; Zech. 11:15-17; knows personal sacrifice (Jn. 10:11; Phil. 2:30).
  2. There are two other credentials which are vital for any elder, confidentially and love.

## 2) A Steward

- a) The work of an elder does not end when he relinquishes to others due to age or infirmity and he cannot function as once he did. At the Judgment Seat of Christ he must give account of how he built the saints up and stayed faithful to the Word, but also how I, as a sheep under him, responded to his leadership (Titus 1:9; Heb. 13:17). In Israel the Gershonites, Kohathites, and Merarites were given the responsibility of the tabernacle and it’s furnishings (Num. 3:25-37). It would have been exceedingly serious and without a doubt would have incurred the judgment of God had they failed in taking their charge and responsibility seriously! However, in the lowest level, the tabernacle was only made of earthly things, wood, gold, rams skins dyed red (Ex. 25:3-7), but the stewardship an elder has is living people.
- b) The charge given to them is serious because that which they are to care for is not their own but God’s. That group of saints is called “the flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2); “God’s heritage” (1 Pet. 5:3); the “church of God” (Acts 20:28).
- c) Faithfulness is a necessity (1 Cor. 4:2). Moses was faithful in God’s house (Num. 12:7) as was David (1 Sam. 22:14), and the treasurers who worked with Nehemiah (Neh. 13:13). With such a responsibility elders cannot do that which they want with the saints. Tragically, so many saints have been damaged because men in leadership only knew about God intellectually. God was abstract, theoretical, so they do not obey God, but do as they want. When the master of the House rises to assess their tasks, it will be dreadfully solemn.

## 3) Watchers or Sentinels

- a) There are two words translated “watch” regarding elders. In Acts 20:31 it is “gregoreuo” which is translated “arise” and indicates to rise up (Matt. 2:14) and be vigilant. Due to the difficulty and unrelenting care needed, an individual can get exhausted and let things slip. Despite peer pressure, secular ideology, or saints too stubborn to submit to the Word of God, the elder must stand unwavering, but all correction and dealing with individuals must be done in love for two reasons: Love for the Word of God (Psa. 119:40), not man made rules and traditions; and love for the individual (Rom. 12:10). The saints must be treated with the honour of those who belong to the Lord and as a loved part of one’s own body (1 Cor. 12:12), caring for each other (1 Cor. 12:25-27).
- b) The word “watch” in Hebrews 13:17 is “grupneo”, which means “to chase away sleep”. It is used four times in the New Testament (Mk. 13:33; Lk. 21:36; Eph. 6:18; Heb. 13:17) and means to be attentive to a situation. In Heb. 13:17 it is the description of a responsibility placed on the elders. To them the Lord says “watch”, pay close attention to your own spiritual condition and avoid anything

which would destabilize your faith. Furthermore, they are to watch each saint physically and spiritually. Are they at the Lord's Supper, Bible reading, prayer meeting? If not, why not? Let's not assume the saints are not interested, but if such is the case, contact them immediately. If at one time they took part and now they don't, find out what the problem is. At times folk stay away because the speaker can be an utter bore or have nothing to say. Food must be made suitable to the individual and makes the individual excited about coming to the table, the meeting. If they are staying away from the food there is something wrong. Spiritual elders will be watchful.

- c) They will also watch who is brought on the oversight and who is permitted to minister and speak to the saints. Paul told the elders of Ephesus: "of your own selves shall men arise" (Acts 20:30). Many an church has been brought to ruin by unqualified men put in the place of leadership because of being someone's relative, having money, or being someone's buddy.
- d) The elders is to always be at his post, standing as a sentinel, and cognizant of all that happens in the church.

#### 4) **A Pillar**

- a) When writing to the saints at Galatia Paul spoke of "James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars" (Gal. 2:9)
- b) At was at the quayside Paul told the elders to "support the weak (Acts 20:35). The word translated "support" indicates to stand beside, to give strength to, much like when a sapling is planted, sometimes there will be set beside it a strong piece of wood which is "to support the weak". That is what an elder must do. The same expression is used in 1 Thess. 5:14 but it is a different word, it means "to hold firmly". Thus, the elder is seen as one who not only stands beside the weak but spiritually holds them, shielding them from falling.
- c) To do this the elder himself must be stable and this is another reason why he cannot be a novice, one saved only a few years, or who has grown little.

#### 5) **A Guide**

- a) One of the most beautiful expressions in the scriptures is "He leadeth me" (Psa. 23:2, 3). When speaking about Moses it says: "He led the flock" (Ex. 3:1). As the good shepherd it is said concerning the Lord: "He goeth before them, and the sheep follow Him" (Jn. 10:4). Paul told the saints at Corinth: "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). Elders are to be "ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). The word "ensamples" is to be a "type, an example to be imitated". What is the example an elder ought to be for the saints to see? A man of humility, not self-willed and arrogant (1 Pet. 5:3, 5); who speaks the word of God and not tradition (Heb. 13:7); men concerned about the spiritual welfare of the saints (Heb. 13:17). Such a man is beautiful in character; tender hearted, but not easily pushed around; a man of convictions and not convenience. That is the sort of man the saints will admire.

#### 6) **Government**

- a) Among the various gifts and works Paul mentions to the Corinthians is that of "governments" (1 Cor. 12:28). It is the word "kubernesis" which comes from the Latin and means "to steer". The word for "master" (Acts 27:11) who was the navigator of the ship Paul was on has the same Latin origin. One thing we learn from Acts 27 is that the master of the ship did not listen to Paul (Acts 27:11). He did not listen to the voice of God but that of reason and appearance (Acts 27:12-13) and it ended in loss and disaster (Acts 27:14, 18-20, 40-41). The elders must be attuned to the voice of God as found in the scriptures, and not to the reasonings of humanity and appearances.

# The Church

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- b) The elder is to “steer” the church, mindful of the unseen dangers, and not only steer the church into spiritual truths but also watch for any mutiny within the church regarding New Testament church principles and doctrinal truths.

### 7) Laborers

- a) The Greek word means, “to work hard, to be wearied”. This was an experience Paul knew about for in writing to the Corinthians he reminded them of his “labours” (2 Cor. 6:5). He did the same concerning the Thessalonians, reminding them that when with them he would not be chargeable to them, “Ye remember brethren, our labour and trivial” (1 Thess. 2:9). Sheep need constant care and are always in danger of wandering. When a sheep (a believer) seldom meets with the saints, and is more interested in speaking about sports than the Lord, it is a sign that they are at a distance from the Shepherd. The wandering away of a sheep is not a sudden happening but the end of a distancing that has been progressing for some time. When elders see the saints not at the meetings, or only the old faithful and know others could be there but have no interest, there is a need to discover why. There is the need for constant seeking to make the word of God more precious to the saints, and a greater blessing comes by meeting with the saints and studying the Word. Through the years and in communication with others I often hear, “I get nothing from the meetings”; “No spiritual stimulus; just a group of men discussing verses but void of any life principles and how it effects me today”. Elders are to labour to provide the best of food for the people of God.

### 8) A Servant

- a) “The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men” (2 Tim. 2:24). This is the character of a true elder. He is the complete opposite to the man of whom Peter wrote, who lords it over the saints (1 Pet. 5:3) and of Diotrephes who loveth to have the preeminence (3 Jn. 9).
- b) This man knows the Lord (not just about the Lord) and has, by musing on the Lord, now reflects His character. This characteristic is manifested in humbling oneself (Phil. 2:7); full devotion to the will of God, the One who sent him (Jn. 6:38); only speaks that which God has given him (Jn. 3:34); and only does the works of the one who sent him (Jn. 5:36). Such an elder will be an elder worthy of respect and remembrance.

### 9) Physician

- a) One of the pictures the Spirit used to describe the local church is a “hospital” and the elder as a physician. The scriptures teach: “For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care (a medical term) of the church of God?” (1 Tim. 3:5). This word “take care” is the same Greek word as the Lord used in the parable of the good Samaritan, who seeing the wounded man “took care” of him (Lk. 10:34) and then told the inn keeper to do the same (Lk. 10:35). He must deal with those who have a “seared conscience” (1 Tim. 4:2); have a canker, gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17); are feeble minded and sick (1 Thess. 5:14), or weak and sickly (1 Cor. 11:30); those who are proud (1 Tim. 6:4); or have itching ears (2 Tim. 4:3); are blind and cannot see afar off (2 Pet. 1:9). He must be able to restore to activity (Gal. 6:1); and be able to give sound (healthy) doctrine (Titus 1:9; 2:1) to correct the errorists.

### Summary

Being an elder, a leader of the saints of God, is much more than looking after the money, arranging speakers, and deciding which books to study in the Bible readings. Such ought to be their fitness that they will not only study the passages but at a moments notice be fully capable of opening the passage. It is a 24/7/365 work, which is the priority of life after ones family.

He cannot leave the sheep unless there are others who are able to know and deal with situations which arise. David left the sheep with others and it is a great example to follow (1 Sam. 17:20).

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.  
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia