



HEALTHY BODY ⇄ HEALTHY ELDER

WEEK 8: Biblically Qualified and Above Reproach

A church is well on its way to becoming a healthy body when its members are growing by God's grace to exhibit the marks we have discussed together. This week, we turn our attention to the shepherds that God has placed in his congregations to lead, teach, and care for the flock. Paul writes to Titus,

"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." (Titus 1:5)

Titus was sent back to all of churches Paul had planted to appoint *elders*. He then gives a strict warning that allowing the wrong kind of men to lead can draw many astray and even destroy healthy churches.

But what is an *elder*? Where have you seen *elders*?

When churches are fuzzy on the job description of an elder, they tend to fall back on what they know from experience in other organizations. We can assume "eldering" is basically the same as:

- Administering a school
- Running a corporation
- Overseeing subcontractors
- Managing a project
- Directing operations
- Serving on a board of trustees

But what if this isn't a guessing game? What if the Bible tells exactly what an elder is and exactly what sort of person ought to be an elder? Good news: It does.

MARK 1: BIBLICALLY QUALIFIED

Elder. Pastor. Overseer. Shepherd. Bishop. To begin with, it's important for us to realize that the Bible uses these different terms to refer to the *same* office. Depending on your denominational traditions, you may favor one term more than the other. Often, churches will referred to *paid* elders as "pastors" and the unpaid, lay elders as "elders".

"I love Jesus, have a seminary degree, and can preach decently. What more could be necessary?"

"I've been a member for 35 years. I've served on committees, even taught Sunday School. What more could be necessary?"

"I've given substantially to keep this church afloat. I run three successful businesses with strong leadership. What more could be necessary?"

While the above three examples are all missing the mark as far as qualifications for eldership go, they all actually fulfill the first criteria: they want to be an elder. Paul writes, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Timothy 3:1).

Paul continues in 1 Timothy 3 to elaborate with a very clear, specific list of qualifications for the office of overseer. In Titus 1, Paul reiterates the same qualifications as Titus goes about appointing elders.

Must Exemplify Godly Character

"You might assume that the most important characteristic for an elder would be skill in running an organization...the New Testament writers put far greater emphasis on holy character. Jesus's under-shepherds must reflect Jesus's character" (20). Consider these virtues Paul requires:

"Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money." (1 Timothy 3:2-3)

"For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined." (Titus 1:7-8)

Let's consider a few of the qualities in more detail. Paul uses the words sober-minded, not quick-tempered, and disciplined to emphasize the importance of *self-control*. Interestingly, in both lists, he singles out a particular manifestation of a lack of self-control: not a *drunkard*.

Additionally, an elder must be *humble* and *gentle*. Paul himself sought to imitate the humility and meekness of Christ (2 Cor. 10:1), and so should

pastors: “Egotistical, domineering, argumentative, pushy, gruff, hotheaded, explosive overseers crush church members” (22).

Paul also says elders must not be “greedy for gain.” It is wrong for men to enter the ministry to get rich. Period. Furthermore, “When money-loving men lead a church, spending toward the poor, church planting, and global evangelism dries up” (23).

Must Be Able to Teach the Word

Jesus’s primary means of shepherding the people was through his teaching. It is the same for those who shepherd the church. Paul explains to Titus:

“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9)

In churches with multiple elders, not every elder can preach every Sunday. However, healthy pastors can accurately and clearly communicate biblical truth in a way that edifies the members of the church.

Must Lead His Family Well

“In the family of God, an elder’s home life matters immensely. In fact, marriage and parenting act as a proving ground for elder fitness” (25). A man’s dysfunctional home life foreshadows the dysfunction that will fill a church if he is made an elder:

“He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Timothy 3:4-5)

The first people to ask about the qualifications of a potential elder are his wife and children. Here’s an interesting question to ask: “If your house were a church, would your dinner guests want to come back for another visit?” (27).

Must Be an Established Believer

With age comes wisdom, and pastors need to be seasoned in the faith in order to shepherd the flock well. Additionally, Paul warns churches of the danger of too quickly ordaining a man as an elder:

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“He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” (1 Tim. 3:6)

It is actually a very loving thing for a church to hold off ordaining an elder before he is ready. Rushing to lay hands on a man because of his immense gifting or desire for the office when he does not have the integrity to bear it only sets him up for a great fall.

MARK 2: ABOVE REPROACH

In his instructions to Timothy and Titus, Paul’s first qualification for any overseer, pastor, or elder is that he be “above reproach” (1 Tim. 3:2; Ti. 1:7).

Why is this mark such a priority to the apostle Paul? What is the danger of pastors with sordid or even questionable reputations?

There is a reason why Satan targets prominent preachers of the gospel. The great fall of well-known pastors brings greater reproach upon the gospel they preach. This is why Paul instructed Timothy:

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.” (1 Tim. 4:16)

An ordained elder is set apart to defend the gospel with his life and his teaching. He will be held to a higher standard of accountability. James writes,

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1).

A church would do well to examine an elder candidate before he is scrutinized by the world around him. Can he stand the heat? Or will his crumbling reputation endanger the very truth of the gospel?

Consider this question: Would a man’s co-workers, boss, or friends chuckle at the thought of a particular man being ordained as pastor of a church? When a church’s pastors are above reproach, this is the result:

“...the people held them in high esteem. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.” (Acts 4:13b-14)



HEALTHY BODY ⇔ HEALTHY ELDER'S

WEEK 9: Sound in Doctrine and Able to Teach

This person has charisma out the wazoo. Listeners hang on their every word. Their words are simple, profound, and emotionally-moving. There's only one problem: She's Theresa Caputo—the *Long Island Medium* on TLC.

What possible danger is there in having extremely gifted teachers in the church who are not held to a doctrinal standard?

As we consider Marks 3 and 4 for healthy elders, they come in logical order: First a man must be sound in doctrine, then he must be able to teach.

MARK 3: SOUND IN DOCTRINE

It is bad enough to have even one member fall into false doctrine or unbelief. Imagine the impact, then, of the lead teachers in the church disseminating every week from the pulpit, in counseling sessions, and small group settings, beliefs that are contrary to Scripture. It would destroy a church! This is why Paul commands:

"He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it." (Titus 1:9)

The Apostle Paul describes a man who understands it is not his job to reinvent the faith or to help Christian doctrine evolve for the next generation. Rather, he is simply to receive and pass along the sound doctrine of the apostles:

"Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." (2 Timothy 1:13-14)

Churches evaluate the doctrine of their pastoral candidates using various means. This is an important function of denominational and historic confessions and church statements of faith. A healthy church will expect prospective pastors to be able to articulate, explain, and defend the sound doctrines that have been passed down in the church.

In what ways have you seen pastoral candidates screened or tested for sound doctrine?

Paul warned the elders at Ephesus that "fierce wolves" would arise in the midst of the churches. How do we identify these men? Paul says they would teach deviant doctrines, "speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). If we are to heed Paul's instruction, then we must "Be alert!" (Acts 20:31), which means testing those who would be ordained teachers in the church to make sure what they teach accords with the truths of Scripture.

Healthy pastors realize what is at stake. Teaching unsound doctrine is not only the difference between a healthy church and an unhealthy one. It is the difference between eternal salvation and damnation:

"Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers." (1 Timothy 4:16)

Healthy elders will constantly evaluate their teaching against the Scriptures. They will read Christian authors from the past and present, measuring their interpretations of Scripture against other faithful teachers.

Jeramie Rinnes writes, "Be particularly aware of gospel distortions active among churches around you, or even in your own church. These might be anything from the prosperity gospel to open theism to legalism to theological liberalism. Are local charismatic personalities winning followers to gospel-lite or gospel-counterfeit teachings? All these teaching can harm your sheep" (52).

It is important for teachers in the church to realize that faithfulness to the "old, old story" is to be prized over innovation. The elders in the church are entering into a long chain of faithfulness to sound doctrine that dates back to the days of Paul:

"And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." (2 Timothy 2:2)

Sound doctrine will determine whether a new shepherd will be feeding the sheep the words of eternal life—the words of Jesus Christ—or not.

MARK 4: ABLE TO TEACH

There are two ordained positions in the church, pastor and deacon, and in the list of qualifications for these two offices, there is only one difference:

Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach..." (1 Timothy 3:2)

Why is teaching required of an elder? Can't an elder faithfully lead the church without teaching? The problem with this very understandable line of thinking is a misunderstanding of the role of a pastor in the church. Shepherds shepherd by and through teaching. An elder or pastor who is unable to teach is fundamentally unable to perform his primary duty in the church.

Shepherding as Teaching

Consider the central role that teaching played in Jesus's ministry as the Good Shepherd. The Gospel of Mark tells us,

"When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And he began to teach them many things." (Mark 6:34)

Jesus then entrusted these shepherding duties to his own disciples when he commanded them, saying,

"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 28:19-20)

The presence and authority of Jesus Christ are present in the church as men faithfully shepherd the church by teaching his disciples how to obey the words of our Savior and Lord. Men who clearly communicate the Word of God and exhort and encourage believers to live out Christ's commands are a gift to the church:

"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ..." (Ephesians 4:11-12)

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What does teaching look like?

Jeramie Rinne writes, "Elders must *participate* in the teaching ministry of the church...Yet elders often shy away from teaching...It happens for a number of reasons, with the most common being a sense of inadequacy. Lay elders compare their own natural ability, teaching experience, and theological training to that of their paid pastor(s), and sometimes discouragement ensues" (48).

Both elders and church members have a role to play in growing the teaching of the church. First, elders must realize in moments of doubt that they were ordained to the office of elder because members recognized their spiritual gift of teaching. They *are* a teacher: "Be encouraged and execute your calling to the best of your ability and resources" (48).

Teaching is not always formal or from a pulpit. It happens in Sunday School rooms, small groups, one-on-one counseling sessions, informal men's breakfasts, on camping trips, and over the dinner table. In short, elders are men who have the right word for the right moment. Jesus's command to Peter stands for all his under-shepherds: "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17).

However, church members must also seek to be teachable—especially with regards to the unpaid elders in the church. Dr. Harold Best reminds us, "A mature Christian is easily edified." We will have our favorite preachers and teachers, but it is important that we seek to encourage all of the elders of our churches by being eager listeners and doers of what we are taught.

Not all elders are equally gifted in teaching. However, church members strengthen an elder's trust in the Lord as they show an eagerness for his teaching despite his weaknesses.

What is more, elders have a responsibility to grow. "God calls his teachers to show progress, not perfection" (50).

"Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have..." (1 Timothy 4:13-14)



HEALTHY BODY ⇄ HEALTHY ELDERS

WEEK 10: Shepherd Hearted and Humble Leader

What is a pastor anyway? Most of us live in a non-pastoral culture these days, so we do not connect the dots. The Greek word translated *pastor* is the word for someone who “tends the flock”—a *shepherd*. The New Testament unapologetically and intentionally uses the word *pastor* and the activities of a shepherd “to describe *elders and their work*”(33).

How do you picture a shepherd? What activities does he do on a daily basis?

It’s important at this juncture to be reminded that in the New Testament, Elder = Pastor. Paul commanded the elders of the church in Ephesus:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:28)

Speaking to elders, Paul says they are made overseers (bishops) to shepherd (pastor) the church. Every term regularly used for this office in our churches is laced together in this verse.

MARK 5: SHEPHERD HEARTED

“A friend of mine who served as a lay elder told me, ‘One of the hardest things about being an elder was believing I was a *real* pastor.’ But the Bible couldn’t be clearer. If you are an elder in your church, you are a genuine pastor, just as much as, well, the paid pastor” (35). You might compare lay elders to volunteer firefighters. Just because they are volunteer doesn’t mean they don’t go out and fight the same flames as paid firefighters.

In his first epistle, Peter calls for elders to be shepherd-hearted:

“So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:1-4)

What exactly does it look like to shepherd *people*? To begin with, shepherds ought to smell like sheep.

While we may picture different things when we think “shepherd,” the one thing common in all of our pictures is the shepherd standing in the midst of the sheep. For elders, this means engaging in and building relationships with church members.

It isn’t necessary for elders who function as “church trustees” or a “board of directors” to actually spend time with the people of the church. This is why pastors and elders are not trustees; they are shepherds who love the sheep.

Shepherd Duties

Whatever you picture a literal shepherd doing is what spiritual shepherds should be doing in the local church. Shepherds feed the sheep. So do pastors. Jesus commanded Peter: “Feed my sheep” (John 21:17). The apostles in Jerusalem said:

“But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” (Acts 6:4)

Faithful pastors seek to be men who have the right Word for the right moment. In counseling situations, conversations, preaching, discipleship classes, or hospital rooms, healthy elders feed the word to the sheep. It’s important to realize that elders are not commissioned to feed their opinions and personal ideas to the sheep. Instead, theirs is a ministry of the capital “W” Word—the Word of Christ the Good Shepherd.

Secondly, shepherd-hearted elders work toward maturity in the sheep. A good shepherd helps young sheep become strong healthy full-grown sheep. Paul describes his ministry in this way:

“Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” (Colossians 1:28)

Believe it or not, for a flock to grow, the sheep have to reproduce—not the shepherd. While elders and pastors are sheep themselves in the flock of God, they also can discern the growth of the sheep by how well they are reproducing.

Lastly, shepherd-hearted shepherds work to make sure the flock will never be left without a shepherd.

This means training up the next generation of elders and being ready to pass the mantle:

“And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

MARK 6: HUMBLE LEADER

There are two essential elements to this mark. Pastors must be humble. But pastors and elders must also be leaders. Unfortunately, especially in Baptist churches, there can be a tendency for members to “play along” with the leadership “so long as the elders guide the church in a direction the member likes” (72).

What practical ways are elders and pastors supposed to lead?

Consider the terms the Bible uses for this office:

- **Elder:** This term implies wisdom and experience. You go to an elder for counsel and guidance. Elders have moral authority; when they talk, people listen.
- **Pastor/Shepherd:** Shepherds have charge over the flocks, and they lead sheep from place to place. Can you imagine a shepherd who didn't care which way the flock wandered?
- **Overseer:** This term describes someone who watches over things and people.

It's quite clear that a certain amount of authority must be invested in the pastors of a church in order for them to carry out their God-given responsibilities in the church:

“For if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care for God's church?” (1 Timothy 3:5)

“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” (1 Timothy 5:17)

“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)

Pastors cannot be like Saul, hiding among the luggage (1 Samuel 10:22). The Lord has appointed

and the church has ordained the elders to lead his people in following Jesus.

No Power-Tripping

Pastors must be leaders, but they must be *humble* leaders. When proud men are given authority, it quickly becomes a ripe situation for abusive leadership, bringing shame on the name of Jesus and hurting his sheep.

Peter writes to elders:

“Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; [3] not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:2-3)

It's quite possible that ringing in Peter's ear are the instructions he was given by the Chief Shepherd himself, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel:

“But Jesus called them to him and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’” (Matthew 20:25-28)

Churches would do well to make sure the men they appoint as elders are “gentle, not quarrelsome” (1 Tim. 3:3) and “not arrogant, not hot-tempered” (Titus 1:7).

What ways can elders seek to remain humble leaders?

Humble elders will not be afraid to delegate responsibilities to able deacons and other faithful servants in the church. After all, an elder's job is not to do all the work of the ministry, but to equip the saints to do the work.

Humble pastors must submit to accountability for their life and doctrine under the Word of God (1 Tim. 5:19-20). Additionally, they will seek to raise up more elders, and trust the congregation to be led by the Spirit.

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WEEK 11: Accountable and Prayer Warrior

In 2012, I moved to South Carolina to begin my first pastorate. That year it was the state with the most forced terminations among Southern Baptist churches in the nation—75 pastors! SBC churches in our state consistently give the same number one reason for firing their leadership: control issues, i.e., "who's going to run the church."

What are good reasons for a church to remove a pastor for any reason?

I once heard a member say a church should be able to fire a pastor if they don't like the way he brushes his teeth. If we were to check the governing documents in many of our churches that may technically be true!

Typically, this suffocating grip around the necks of leadership is found in smaller churches. Mega-churches tend to falter on the other end, allowing a visionary, strong-willed head pastor operate as a virtual pope. On both ends of the spectrum, the struggle is with a misunderstanding of healthy accountability.

MARK 7: ACCOUNTABLE

Healthy elders are accountable elders. Unfortunately, many church members and pastors are not on the same page when it comes to defining *accountability*.

How do you define accountability? What does it look like practically?

How many problems between pastors and the congregation stem from the church not doing due diligence to make sure an elder candidate is *biblically qualified* (remember Mark 1?) before he is elected as pastor? Essentially, accountability is the act of holding an elder to the same standard on Day 3,000 as on Day 1.

Accountability asks, "Is this pastor *still* biblically qualified?" This doesn't sound anything like the fickle "fire for any reason" mentality in many of our churches. In fact, unless a pastor voluntarily steps down from leadership (e.g., retirement or call to another ministry post) or a pastor and congregation

reach a mutual agreement, there is only one proper way to remove a pastor:

"Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear." (1 Timothy 5:19-20)

Paul lays out accountability that is both restrained and sobering. Leaders are primary targets for malcontents, and Paul encourages churches to protect the reputation of their pastors from unfounded gossip, slander, or baseless complaining. However, in the event of a disqualifying sin—in *life* or *doctrine*—the public nature of eldership requires public rebuke. It may mean removal in the event of serious or persistent sin.

Churches that refuse to confront an erring elder actually bring shame on the office of pastor itself. In the case of verifiable charges, churches promote the health and respect of the pastorate by removing a man who is not fit for the office any longer.

A Case Study in Accountability

Curious what this kind of accountability looks like? Paul practiced what he preached:

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Galatians 2:11-14)

It was Paul's jealousy for the gospel that led him to confront Peter. When Peter began to act in a way that denied the truth, it led others astray. Thus, it was necessary for Paul to rebuke Peter publically, not to humiliate him but to protect the gospel.

Can you think of a reason a pastor would need to be publicly rebuked? Does all rebuke lead to removal?

MARK 8: PRAYER WARRIOR

In his book *Church Elders*, Jeramie Rinne writes, "We could...say that elders are called to *shepherd local churches like Jesus*...Shepherding like Jesus means praying like Jesus" (109).

"But now even more the report about him went abroad, and great crowds gathered to hear him and to be healed of their infirmities. But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray." (Luke 5:15-16)

Consistently, the Good Shepherd's ministry was sustained by faithfulness in prayer with his Father. Interestingly, Jesus's disciples never asked him to teach them how to preach, how to lead, how to cast out demons, or how to heal:

"Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.'" (Luke 11:1)

These same men, when they became the first pastors of the church in Acts understood that they had two Christ-given priorities:

"But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:4)

When you picture a faithful pastor, do you imagine a man managing ministry programs and staff, engaging the community, and speaking in multiple venues a week all with herculean ability? Or do you picture a man on his knees? Just as healthy church members are prayer warriors, healthy elders shepherd the flock faithfully through prayer. This begins by first shepherding their own souls toward a deeper relationship with the Lord.

Living on a Prayer

Pastoring brings men to their knees: "The work can be grueling. Teaching, mentoring, confronting, pursuing, and leading people takes significant time and can be soul-wearying. And no matter how much pastoring one does, there is always more that could be done" (111). In fact, God has called elders into a task that God alone can accomplish:

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"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." (1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

Rinne continues, "[Pastors'] spiritual inability should drive us to call out for God's power to bring growth to our congregations. Like Elijah, we can repair the altar and prepare the sacrifice, but God must send down the fore of his Spirit into people's hearts and lives (1 Kings 18:30-39)."

In response to a question about his schedule, Martin Luther is famously quoted as saying, "I have so much to do, I shall spend the first three hours in prayer." Luther's response gets at the priority of prayer in lives of busy pastors. What is the point of laboring all day in man-sized power to accomplish God-sized tasks?

Practicing Prayer

What does a prayer-soaked elder ministry look like practically? "Try not to think of prayer as an extra activity tossed onto your already overloaded schedule. Rather, think of it as the operating system on which all of the elder apps run. As Paul said, 'Pray constantly' (1 Thess. 5:17)." Elders can practice prayer in four basic ways:

- **Public prayer: Pastors should be prayer opportunists. Any chance is a good chance to pray. Pastors are teaching even as they pray, because they show members what they should pray for, how they should pray, and a proper attitude of humility and love for God.**
- **Presbyter prayer: When the elders of a church gather, they should spend a significant portion of time praying for the flock: "Pray systematically through your church's membership list together" (116).**
- **Personal prayer: Pastors should never let themselves say, "I'll be praying for you." Instead, they should be known to drop everything and pray with others in the moment.**
- **Private prayer: "It is imperative that [pastors] block out time for private intercession and communion with God" (119).**

Here's the good news: Jesus our Shepherd never ceases to pray for us (Romans 8:34; Heb. 7:25).



HEALTHY BODY ⇄ HEALTHY ELDERS

WEEK 12: PLURALITY

We've made it to the final mark of healthy elders, and it's actually something a pastor cannot exhibit on his own. It takes more than one. Healthy elders are *elders*—as in, plural. Jeramie Rinne explains, "Shepherding [a church] is possible because it is supposed to be a team sport" (86).

Have you ever been in a church with more than one pastor? What did that look like?

But how on earth could we afford to *pay* another minister? One of the stumbling blocks to establishing a healthy *plurality* of elders in a smaller church is the misconception that all pastors must be paid staff in order to carry the authority and responsibilities of pastoring. Both the congregation and qualified men in the church need to begin to realize this: God may be calling them to start pastoring—and still keep their day job.

MARK 9: PLURALITY

Let's take a quick survey of the churches in the New Testament. You will be hard-pressed to find a *singular* elder. That's because they always appear in groups:

"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." (Acts 14:23)

"Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him." (Acts 20:17)

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:" (Philippians 1:1)

"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—" (Titus 1:5)

"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed...Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders." (1 Peter 5:1,5)

"Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." (James 5:14)

"Do you see the pattern? Again and again we find elders (plural) in each church (singular). Each congregation had its own pastoral squad. It's an elementary observation, but it makes all the difference when you put it into action. Elder plurality is extremely significant for sustainable shepherding" (88).

In many churches, it would be unthinkable to have only one deacon, yet most small churches only have one pastor. Why is that?

Beyond the fact that it is the clear pattern of Paul when planting churches throughout the inhabited world, there are practical reasons why multiple shepherds will make for healthy pastors.

Sharing the Load

"Start with the obvious: having multiple elders spreads out the pastoral workload" (88).

Jeramie Rinne shares a poignant illustration from his own pastoral ministry:

"A member of our church once asked me how she could pray for me. I shared about the growing burden of the ministry. Our church membership had been increasing at that time, and the pastoral needs had multiplied. I asked her somewhat rhetorically, 'How do I minister effectively to a growing flock?' She didn't take my question rhetorically. I'll never forget her answer. She smiled, shrugged, and simply said, 'More shepherds.'" (88)

One man was not meant to bear the weekly responsibilities of preaching, shepherding, counseling, evangelism, administrating, etc. As Moses himself realized, "I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me" (Numbers 11:14). Only one man can carry the church on his own: Jesus Christ. In answer to Moses's desperate plea, this was God's solution: elders (Numbers 11:16-30).

Every single-pastor church that is not pleading with the Lord for more elders is either confused about the identity of their pastor—that he is not Jesus—or they simply don't realize or don't care that he is being burned out by responsibilities that are too great for one man.

A team of elders can divide up the shepherding duties of the church. They can keep closer watch over smaller groups of members. They can divide up the preaching schedule and teaching responsibilities. They can take turns visiting saints and overseeing particular ministries in the church.

Swiss Army Elders

However, there are more benefits than mere division of labor. A church that trains, equips, examines, and ordains elders year after year will have a treasury of gifted men to shepherd. A singular pastor may be gifted in certain ways, but where he lacks gifting, the church will suffer. However, a church with multiple elders will have men with different gifts who complement one another and supply what is lacking in the other elders.

“Although all elders bear the same responsibilities, they bring an assortment of talents and experiences to the mix” (90).

For instance, you may have an elder who is extremely gifted in preaching and exposition of the Scriptures. However, he may be relatively unseasoned in handling difficult cases of sin or need with wisdom. An older, experienced elder would bring helpful balance to the church in counseling the members. An elder board is like a Swiss army knife, filled with various gifts for each occasion.

What is more, a church that recognizes an elder-qualified man and ordains him to pastor enables him to fully obey Peter’s instruction:

**“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”
(1 Peter 4:10)**

How many churches are neglecting gifts of preaching, teaching, and shepherding that the Spirit has given to men in the church because they never give those men the authority to exercise and use those gifts to build up the church?

Shepherding the Shepherds

It’s important for pastors and church members to remember that pastors are sheep, too. They belong to the flock of Jesus and need to be shepherded as well. But in a church with only one pastor, who will shepherd the pastor?

“Here again plurality provides an answer. The shepherds must shepherd the shepherds. Congregational oversight is sustainable because the elders, in plurality, act as pastors to one another” (91).

It is extremely difficult for a pastor to have no peers in his local church. A corollary to this: it is extremely difficult for a pastor’s wife to have no peers in her local church. A plurality of elders gives a pastor men—and gives a pastor’s wife women—who can understand exactly the stress of pastoring. They are men who can know him intimately and pray him through crises and trials.

Iron Sharpening Iron

Have you ever considered that God intends for your pastor to become a better pastor? Have you ever considered that your pastor wants to become a better pastor? Part of this means praying and endeavoring to see God surround your pastor with other faithful pastors.

“When elders are practicing a healthy plurality, it’s harder for one man’s views or tendencies to dominate, because the elders offset one another...Even more to the point, plurality creates a structure for elders to call one another out when one of them gets off track” (93). A lone pastor is in constant danger of going off-track because he was meant to be surrounded by other Spirit-filled shepherds.

Even more, pastors can learn from one another how to preach better, evangelize better, counsel better, organize and administer better, and more.

“You need elders (plural). That is Jesus’s plan for sustainable, effective shepherding in his churches” (95).

¹This study is indebted to two resources from 9Marks Ministries: *What is a Healthy Church Member?* by Thabiti Anyabwile (Crossway, 2008) and *Church Elders* by Jeramie Rinne (Crossway, 2014). This study is in no way meant to replace these books but is best taught in conjunction with these resources.