

UNDERSTANDING THE SHEPHERD'S GIFT

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Scripture tells us to be aware of the times and seasons in which we live. Nearly every Christian has some sense that we are approaching the greatest harvest the world has ever seen. The current prayer movement is unsurpassed in Church history; we are preparing the net to pull in the catch, so to speak. The Lord told us to pray for laborers for the harvest, for the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, [Matt 9:37]. Many are talking about raising up laborers, and writing articles and preaching from Eph. 4:11, 12, [NAS] "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;". But we may have fooled ourselves into thinking that because we know this passage, that we are applying it correctly. If we are witnessing the restoration of all the ministry gifts in verse 11, then we should be accomplishing the dictate given in verse 12. We should be equipping God's people to do the works of ministry. We should be equipping everyone, not just those in full time ministry or among the clergy. When we do this we will see hidden and neglected gifts come back into use and strengthen the Church.

As we are beginning to understand the gifts of the apostle and prophet, we also are redefining the others. My purpose here is to define the office of the pastor and look at the shepherd's gift. In the New Testament, the word 'pastor' is not found at all. The plural form, 'pastors', is found only once, in Eph 4:11. The Greek word from which this is translated is *poimen* which literally means one who feeds, or a feeder. Since the context lets us know that sheep are what are being fed, the translation into shepherd seems appropriate. Note that there is no one named in the New Testament who is identified as a shepherd, other than the Lord Jesus himself. This is not true of the other four ministry gifts listed in Eph. 4. Many people are identified by name and recognized as functioning in one or another of the other gifts. Yet the modern Church is dominated by the office which we call a 'pastor'. I would like to look closer at this position in order to better understand all ministry gifts.

First of all, it is important to recognize that Eph 4:11 says these ministries are gifts. The Lord gave them after he ascended into the heavenlies and sat down at the right hand of the Father [Eph 4:10]. That is why these five gifts are often called "ascension gifts", or the "five-fold gifts of the Holy Spirit". Being gifts, there is nothing we can humanly do to earn them. We are either given a gift or we are not. If we are given a gift it is ours to use and steward in accordance with the wishes of the giver. Since there are responsibilities which come with giftings, there is also always the potential for abuse, or misuse.

We have no difficulty understanding this in the gifts of apostle or prophet, for instance. We know someone can not earn the gift of a prophet or an apostle. A person can not go to school to become a prophet. If a person is called as a prophet he or she may become a better one by learning and impartation, but no amount of study or desire will make a person a prophet who is not given by the Lord to be one. Yet when we come to the office called a pastor we are inconsistent. People who desire to serve the Lord in overseeing a church, will train for that job, and then be ordained as a pastor. We would never say a person earns the gift of a pastor, but practically speaking this is to a large extent what is occurring.

I believe there is a logical reason for this inconsistency. It is found in our misunderstanding of the passages we use to define the office we title 'pastor': 1 Tim 3:1-13, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. These list requirements needed before coming into leadership over the Church. However, these all come under the category of works and not giftings. As we see in 1 Tim 3:1 [NAS] "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." The KJV reads "he desireth a good work." Now there is a world of difference between a fine or good work and a gift which is received. Clearly the office of an overseer, which we inaccurately call a pastor, is something we can desire and attain. No matter how noble this task may be it is still not a gift. Now this is not to say we will not use our giftings while in the office, but they are not one and the same. A persons gift is their purpose within the Church, and purpose must not be confused with position. Because we have made the Biblical office of an overseer synonymous with the gift of a shepherd, we have allowed inconsistencies into the practical application of Church government at the foundation. We need to go back to basics to redefine 'elder', 'overseer', 'bishop', and 'pastor' if we are going to unravel the cloud obscuring a true understanding of the shepherd's gift.

There are two Greek words translated into the three English words bishop, elder, and overseer. The Greek word episkope, from which we derive the English word episcopal, is translated bishop or overseer in different translations. The Greek word presbuteros, from which we derive the English word presbyter, is translated into the English word elder. The first word was used in the Greek community in bible times and gives honor to the position or name of the office. The second word was used in Jewish synagogues, and emphasizes the respectability of the person holding the position. The two Greek words are two different names for the same office; both are overseers, both are the same function or position. The Greek word poimen, discussed earlier, was not used interchangeably with the other two, but biblically referred to a gift rather than a position. Jesus made this distinction in the parable of the shepherd and the sheep in John 10 in which he separates the shepherd of the sheep and the gate keeper. [NLT] John 10:1 "I assure you, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! 2 For a shepherd enters through the gate. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out." Throughout the Bible the doorkeepers or gatekeepers were the elders. The name referred to the position of authority held, and not to the gift exercised by the individual serving in the position.

Once while gathered with the pastors of my city for our weekly meeting, God revealed an insight into the office in which we were functioning. I said, "Do you all realize that there is not one example of a pastor in the Bible?" Of course I wondered at the wisdom of saying such a thing in a room full of pastors, but I continued: "Biblically we see elders, bishops, overseers, always in the plural. And, along with that, we never see an example of what we have come to call a "local church", but we see the church in the city of Rome, or the church in the city of Thessalonica, or in Philippi, but never a church of this or that particular belief. So if we take these things and apply them to ourselves, then we should perceive ourselves as each being the elder or overseer over our particular congregation and see this gathering as the 'elders of the church of Missoula'". This was quite a mouthful at the time, and I was pleased that all agreed this was the biblical way to describe the Church and elder ship over the Church.

But what is a biblical pastor and is it synonymous with the gift of a shepherd? It helps to look into why we currently title 'elders', 'bishops', and 'overseers' as synonymous with 'pastors'. In order to do this we must again look at the passages used to define church leadership. In 1 Peter 5:1 & 2 Peter exhorts the "elders...shepherd (feed) the flock of God." The question that we must answer then, is whether or not Peter is exhorting the elders to have the gift of a shepherd in operation, or simply to do the job. One might ask a similar question concerning that of a teacher. In 1 Tim 3:2 we see that an overseer must be able to teach. These two attributes of the overseer-elder are often used to prove that the individual must be a shepherd and teacher, or a pastor-teacher. Some teachers on this subject do not even separate the two, but consider that only four gifts are listed in Eph 4:11, the pastor and teacher being described as one gift. The same verse requires that a leader be given to hospitality, but if that were requiring the gift of hospitality a lot fewer of us would be qualified for leadership, I assure you. When Paul instructed Timothy to do the work of an evangelist in 2 Tim 4:5 was he telling him to have the gift of an evangelist, or to do the works of an evangelist? It is not apparent from the scriptures whether or not Timothy was an evangelist but it is quite apparent that Paul was instructing him to do the works of one. Likewise we all can evangelize, but not all are gifted as evangelists. Likewise overseers find themselves needing to teach, and to feed the people of God, but we need not all be gifted as teachers or feeders of the flock in order to function as an overseer. Perhaps this is one reason why in the Bible the overseer, or elder, is never called a Pastor. Make no mistake, there is a gift of shepherding, just as there is a gift of evangelist, and apostle, but it is not a requirement for the office of an elder or overseer. Since this is the case, then it is possible that the Biblical office of an elder or overseer can be filled by a person holding any one of the five ministry gifts. But because we have mistakenly named the office of overseeing a church with the title "pastor", we confuse the good work of an overseer with the gift of a shepherd. We confuse a good work with a gift.

So what is a Biblical shepherd's gift, and what are its attributes? We have come to perceive the gift as some one who stands behind a pulpit, preaches and teaches, and so "feeds the flock". The pastor will organize and administrate, and often need to handle physical jobs around the church. Since there are no New Testament descriptions of a shepherd we must look to the Old Testament. In Isaiah chapter 40:11, the shepherd is

instructed to [KJV] "... 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". Biblically, to feed the flock is to take the flock to be fed rather than to supply the food. Yet we sometimes see the shepherd as the only one who supplies the food rather than the one who also leads or carries to the pasture, which is more a description of the gift of a shepherd. A gift is not contingent upon a position in order to be manifested, whereas elder ship over a church is a position in which the person is called to use their gift. A teacher will teach regardless of position, an evangelist will evangelize regardless of position, likewise a person with the shepherd's gift will guide and carry regardless of position. Let me give you an example.

Recently while privately addressing a group of about fifteen men who were attending a large conference together, there was a man among them whom I perceived to have the shepherd's gift. I said to them that if what I was saying was true than he most likely had a direct influence upon steering and encouraging many of the men to attend the conference. After some discussion we found that about three quarters of the men came because of this shepherd's influence. Now this shepherd is in private business and is not called to full time ministry, yet he has the gift of being able to direct Christians to the place where they will be fed. He has the ability to guide and gather. This is the gift of a shepherd and it is not in the least contingent upon a person's position in the church, but as with any gift, it will belong to the person everywhere the Lord sends him to serve.

In bible times, the flocks of sheep were usually tended by more than one shepherd, and these shepherds were not usually owners of the flock. These shepherds were shepherding the flocks belonging to their father, or their father-in-law. Often shepherds within our churches become too possessive because we forget we are to guide our Father's sheep and not lord it over them as if we owned them, (they are entrusted to us but we do not own them). When there are many shepherds working together this is much easier to remember. But there are other benefits for plurality among shepherds. As I have mentioned earlier, with the exception of the Lord Jesus, who is the Good Shepherd, there is no example of a person named in the New Testament as being a shepherd, singular. At a recent early morning prayer meeting a prophetic word was spoken which said: "The Lord is doing a new thing in our days, and greater than in days of old. Even on the day of Pentecost was the great work of birthing a Church performed. But in these days He will do a greater work and birth one Church out of many." Two hours later at the city pastor's prayer time, one of the pastors made an announcement that three pastors of separate denominational churches in our city had felt called to merge together to make one new congregation. This was quite remarkable, and we all were able to rejoice in the Lord as I shared the prophetic word which had so recently been spoken. As all of the pastors gathered to ask God's blessing upon this great working of the Spirit, I was given an insight into the heart of the Lord which is difficult to put into words. However, the portion concerning the gift of a shepherd would best be put something like this: There are named examples of Apostles such as Paul and Barnabas, and the twelve; there is Apollos the great teacher, and Philip the evangelist; Agabus, Silas, and Judas are identified as New Testament Prophets; but no one person is identified as a shepherd because, unlike the other gifts, the Lord will never fully energize this gift to a person who chooses to

work alone. Implied within this message was the understanding that the Lord would also anoint a person to do the work of a shepherd even if they had a different gifting, so long as they were working as part of a team for the good of the flock of God. Therefore, when elders or overseers of congregations come together for the good of the Church, they will be energized as shepherds regardless of their individual gifts.

Distinguishing the gifts from the positions is actually more difficult in application than it might seem, due to strongholds which we carry. At one point in my own church I decided to identify my position by the position name rather than by reference to a gift, thus changing the title 'pastor' to 'chief elder'. However, when I gave my business card to someone, or identified myself with that title, I would be asked "Oh, who is your pastor"? It was difficult to explain that I was the overseer of the church without using the title of pastor, or senior pastor. Presently a number of apostolic churches use the title "Set man" to signify the person who God has set over the church. These churches are more likely to understand that the person overseeing a church will lead using whichever gifting he may have, and allow others in the flock with the gift of shepherd to be used. 1 Cor 12:28 says God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers. The individual who is set to lead the church will lead using which ever gifting the Lord has granted him. Ephesians 4 shows that there are five main ministries and it is necessary to understand that God may set any one of them over a church according to His will. Due to our misunderstanding on this important point as I travel and teach among many Christian groups of different backgrounds, I must explain that when I use the term 'pastor' I am referring to the position of a biblical elder or overseer, and when I am referring to the gift I will use the word 'shepherd'. By separating the gift from the government or position within a church, I believe the Church will discover that gifts have been given to all kinds of people, and some of these people are out in the congregation. Unfortunately we have assumed, perhaps without thinking, that only people with official positions have these gifts, and in addition to this we have limited the head leadership position to only one of the five gifts. We further limit this gift when we attempt to function independently of other leaders. With these assumptions we allow two weaknesses within our congregations. First we overlook the gifted people who do not hold or aspire to hold positions, and secondly we limit our chief positions to only one of the five gifts the Lord has supplied us. We have left untapped the power to release the saints of God to do works of service within the Church.

Not too many months ago I was explaining these things to a friend who oversees an important international ministry. When he grasped the point, as he put it, that "any elder may be five-fold, but not all five-fold will be elders", he became elated. In his travels my friend had seen examples in churches of women ordained and working in their gifts, yet not serving in the government of the church. He gave the example of women ordained as shepherds serving as cell leaders, yet not participating in the oversight of the church. Like so many of us he had thought the two were one and the same. I believe it will become a great revolution in the Church as a whole when we are able to release all of the people of God into their God given gifts to the Church, and not necessarily require a governmental position. A true understanding of the shepherds gift, and its need within the Church will have a major positive impact by not only releasing the saints to their service within the

Church, but also by allowing those of us who do function as overseers to be more effective, and to more effectively put to use all the gifts in our churches.

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