

# **AS THOSE WHO WOULD GIVE ACCOUNT**

*A responsible shepherding style for New Testament Church Elders*  
James W. Garrett

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# **AS THOSE WHO WOULD GIVE ACCOUNT**

## *A responsible shepherding style for New Testament Church Elders*

### James W. Garrett

The second phrase of Hebrews 13:17, *for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give account*, haunts the heart of every God-ordained elder. Not only must elders answer to God for their own lives, but they also must give account of their stewardship of the local church. How are elders to function in this stewardship for which they will give account? What are God's expectations?

### **THE USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE**

The consistent figure used in the New Testament to communicate this responsibility is that of the shepherd.

Paul used this figure in his charge to the elders of Ephesus:

*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert... (Acts 20:28-31a)*

Peter used the same figure when he wrote to the elders of the many churches of the dispersion:

*Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." (I Peter 5:1-5)*

One of the primary rules of Bible interpretation is that figures cannot be used to *determine* doctrine or truth. Figures are used to *illustrate* doctrine or truth. Therefore, when a figure is used, the Bible student must ask "In this passage, what is the truth being illustrated by this figure?"

Some have forgotten this rule and have developed inappropriate concepts concerning the role of elders and the church. For example, some have concluded that since sheep are absolutely

dependent upon a shepherd, then elders are essential to the life of every believer. As a result, they have not taught the sheep to depend upon God, but have taught them to depend upon elders.

In this study we will explore attitudes and activities that are descriptive of an elder's shepherding role in the New Testament Church. We will seek to be faithful to biblical statements made on this topic. Not only will we explore the two passages cited above (Acts 20 and I Peter 5), but we will listen to other passages that relate to our quest.

### ACTS 20:28-31

What point is Paul making in his figurative use of shepherd and flock as it relates to elders? Clearly, he uses the figure to alert them to the need to watch out for "wolves":

*I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert.*

Paul is echoing the warning of Jesus, uttered in the Sermon on the Mount:

*Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes, nor figs from thistles, are they?...So then, you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" And then I will declare to them, "I never know you; Depart from Me you who practice lawlessness." (Matthew 7:15-16, 20-23)*

In verse 20 of this passage, the Greek enclitic, *ge* (γέ) occurs. The sense of this verse, therefore, becomes, *at least by their fruits, if by no other means, you shall know them.*<sup>1</sup> This implies that it is difficult to identify a false prophet. He has so much to show and to say for himself - devils cast out, souls saved, miracles done, all in Jesus' Name. What better fruit would one have? Is doctrine or a moral life the test? Is the false prophet always a false teacher or an immoral man? Often, but not always so. What he always is, however, is a self-seeking man. The context of this passage is the Sermon on the Mount. The main theme of this sermon is that those who are acceptable to God are those who care supremely for truth, righteousness, and others; not at all for themselves.

Even so, doctrinal purity must be a concern. Paul warned that men would arise who would teach perverse things and that the guardianship of the church involved being alert to squelch such things. In Titus 1:9-11, Paul states that one of the qualifications for eldership is to know and hold fast to the truth, so that the elder can refute false teachers. In the Titus passage Paul states that many false teachers practice their profession in order to get money.

One of the most painful situations that an eldership can face occurs when one of the elders becomes a wolf, drawing people after himself. Although such a thing seems unthinkable, anyone who has much experience in church leadership can cite numerous examples of this happening.<sup>2</sup>

Causing division in a church is one of the most serious sins that a person can commit. Paul commented on the gravity of such sin in I Corinthians 3. In this chapter, he addressed the division that had developed in the Corinthian church. Various parties in the church were elevating different leaders. Paul concluded his warning by calling the local church the temple of God and then closed with these ominous words:

*Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.*  
(I Corinthians 3:16-17)

These words should give serious pause to anyone who causes division in a local church. It also puts great responsibility on elders to guard against allowing such divisive activity in the local church.

Thus, Paul uses the shepherd/flock figure to exhort the Ephesian elders to stand against false teachers who bring heresy into the flock or who use their gifts and talents to divide the congregation.

Nothing in Paul's statement to the Ephesian elders refers to ministry to individuals. The common understanding of spiritual shepherding, (pastoring) is not displayed in this passage.

## **I PETER 5:1-5**

Peter equates shepherding with "oversight," using the shepherd/flock figure in addressing the type of heart that is appropriate for elders. Under the umbrella of oversight, he mentions only one activity that spiritual shepherds are to undertake in behalf of the flock, *to be examples to the flock*. Note that the emphasis is on the importance of modeling humility and a willing heart.

Peter addresses the elders as a "fellow elder." He then describes himself as one who witnessed the sufferings of Christ and a partaker of the glory that is to be revealed. If anyone had reason to be called a "senior elder," or a "chief elder," it was Peter. Yet, he used collegial language, a "fellow elder."

Peter also addressed the "elders among you." He did not address the "elders who are over you" (Note that Paul used the same terminology, "among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers" - Acts 20:28). Elders are on the same level as anyone else in the flock. Taking oversight, as urged by Peter, does not mean elevation, or even separation. Shepherding,

according to both Paul and Peter, is something that is done from within the Body as a part of the Body .

Three cautions are given by Peter. The first is the need for a willing heart. Shepherding is to be done willingly, not because one is forced to do the work. We are reminded of Paul's statement about giving, that it is not to be done, "grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver" (I Cor. 9:7). Such a cheerful willing heart, as one gives himself to the work, is characteristic of a true elder. A man who constantly complains about the work is not the sort of shepherd that God would choose. The sheep need to see the willing heart of their shepherds.

The second caution is that elders should not shepherd in order to receive a salary. This does not negate Paul's statement that elders should receive financial support so that they can do the work of ministry (I Timothy 5:17-18). However, a true elder will do the work of shepherding whether he is remunerated or not.

The third caution speaks to the style of leadership that God accepts in His flock. Jesus said,

*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and who ever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave (Matthew 20:25-27).*

An important point to be made is this - *God is not looking for leaders who will be servants; God is looking for servants who will serve as leaders.*

In harmony with Jesus' standards, Peter urges the shepherds not to do their work as "lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock...God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Peter continues to urge the elders to view themselves as among the flock, not above it. He emphasizes this by being somewhat redundant, exhorting the "elders who are among you" to "shepherd the flock of God among you."

The result of observing these three cautions is a sense of individual worth for the believer. When the elder's behaviour expresses, "I am eager to be your servant; I serve you willingly, it is the passion of my life; you and I look at one another horizontally, not vertically," then the believer views himself as important and loved both by God and God's under-shepherd.

The one statement concerning specific shepherding activity in this passage is "be examples to the flock." So, Peter urges the elders to shepherd by displaying God-approved character and behaviour. Thus, the flock will see modeled before them what the Chief Shepherd desires them to be.

There is an interesting term in verse 3, that indicates a shepherding structure that is assumed by Peter. The term is *kleros*, (κληρος) translated "those allotted to your charge," in the NAS; "those entrusted to you" in the NIV. This term literally means, "lots." It is the term used to indicate something given to a specific individual. It is used for the pebble, small stick, etc., in

casting lots; it is used for a share assigned to someone; it is used for one's fate or destiny. Thus, the term refers to the portion of the flock that is assigned to specific elders<sup>3</sup>. Peter assumes that the local congregation is divided into portions with an elder responsible for his assigned portion. Thus, each elder is to live an exemplary life of humility before his assigned portion of the flock. Since example is the most effective means of training, this relational element of shepherding is important.

As in Paul's statement to the Ephesians, Peter does not mention any of the activities that have come to be attached to the term, *pastor*. No personal or individual ministry is spoken of. Instead, the focus is on leadership and oversight.

### JOHN 10:11-13

Any discussion of spiritual shepherding must include Jesus' statements recorded in John 10. Especially impacting the subject of shepherding style are verses 11-13.

*I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep.*

Jesus, of course, is speaking of Himself and making a particular point. However, the statements made here do have limited application to all spiritual shepherds. True shepherds have a sense of ownership responsibility. This harks back to the I Peter 5:3 reference to "those allotted to you."

The hireling does not care for the sheep, but is the same self-seeking person whom we have already met in our previous discussions. He is called a *wolf* by Paul (Acts 20:28ff), and in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus called him, *false prophet* (Matthew 7:15ff). Exactly how a shepherd lays down his life for the sheep will vary. Whatever the specifics of the case may be, no true shepherd is a self-seeking person, but he puts the welfare of the flock above his own welfare.

In Jesus' case, this was done by going to the cross to achieve the flock's salvation. An elder may sacrifice his reputation or place of comfort to protect and save the sheep from marauders.

However, once again we do not see any intimation of the personal ministry that has come to be attached to the term, *pastor*. This passage, as in Paul's exhortation to the Ephesians and Peter's letter to the church at large, speaks of the shepherd's responsibility for the corporate flock.

## EZEKIEL 34:1-4

These opening verses of Ezekiel 34 provide a convenient framework for the next portion of our study. We accommodate this passage to our discussion with the caveat that this section of Scripture in no manner refers to the Church. This section of Ezekiel is essentially a prophecy of salvation for Israel. The threat against the shepherds is simply a foil for that promise. The shepherds addressed are the rulers of the nation (Jeremiah uses the same figure to castigate the rulers in Jeremiah 23:1-8). This is hyperbolic language. Certainly, no king was expected to bind the wounds of individual citizens, etc. However, the abuse of authority and heavy taxation produced the social conditions that were analogous to unhealthy sheep. This section is addressed to a scattered nation in the time of exile.

Before we get into this section, it should be stated that the concept of, "pastor," as intimate sustainer of individual sheep, as a primary role, is of rather recent origin. Formerly, church leadership was concerned with the ministry of the word and prayer, even when caring for individual sheep. It has been my lot to live through the era in which that emphasis changed. The advent of modern psychology and the counseling profession became a challenge to the Church. I well remember the Fifties when the emphasis of Christian ministry began to change. All of us rushed to become "counselors." Denominational seminaries began produce graduates more qualified as counselors than preachers. This fit the liberal theology of the period, which devalued Scripture, but elevated human experience. Thus, as society set the agenda for church leadership, inner healing, inner peace, how to be happy, and "reaching one's potential," became more important than truth, God's Will, and the purpose of existence.

Having said this, we must also state that there is appropriate ministry to individuals. To this end, we appropriate this passage in Ezekiel because it provides a convenient framework for the following discussion.

*And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.*

The rebuke in this section matches what we already have encountered above, i.e., self-seeking shepherds have not cared for the sheep, but have used the sheep for their own benefit. The value of this passage to our study is the distinction that it makes between different conditions among the sheep and the particular care appropriate for each condition. Four conditions needing attention are described:

1. the diseased
2. the sick
3. the broken
4. the scattered

Each of these described conditions is analogous to the spiritual state of individuals in our churches. It is important that we recognize the different states and what sort of ministry is appropriate for each one.

First listed are the *diseased*. Kiel and Delitzsch point out the difference between the Hebrew terms translated, "diseased," and "sick."<sup>4</sup> The "diseased," are weak in themselves, whereas the sick are weak because of an illness. There are some sheep that are inherently weak, they never can be as strong as the other sheep.

There always will be some *diseased* sheep in our flocks. These have inherent weaknesses that will require some degree of lifetime care. This does not mean that progress is impossible, but these sheep never will be able to cope with life without some help. Believers in this category may be born with some sort of mental disorder or lifetime dysfunctional condition. Perhaps years of drug abuse or alcoholism has robbed them of certain faculties. Short of a genuine miracle, progress for these dear people is limited. In the world, they experience rejection, and in some cases, ridicule. The constant message to them is that they are of little worth. It must be otherwise in the Church. A true shepherd will love these inherently weak sheep and view them as what they truly are - beings made in the image of God.

The *sick* have a condition that requires curative ministry. Goals can be set for sick sheep. The goal is to bring them back to health. The sick need personal attention in order to diagnose the disease and give appropriate care. What is appropriate for one will not be appropriate for others. Temperament, life experience, and other factors will enter into the treatment process. Prayer, counseling, accountability, and prescribed disciplines may be a part of the treatment.

The *broken* are those sheep who normally are strong, but through some accident or circumstance they have broken a leg. The responsibility of the shepherd is to set the bone, and perhaps even to carry, temporarily the broken sheep. Time will be the healer, if someone properly sets the break, applies a splint, and relieves the sheep of the need to put weight on the broken limb. Perhaps a recent death of a loved one; perhaps a severe wound has been received in spiritual warfare; perhaps the individual is in a time of "burn out." The broken need a lifting of burdens and time to heal. Although there may be some temporary, "carrying," these are best left alone to heal. Affirmation and a sabbatical may be the best therapy. The elder may need to find someone to assume some of the responsibilities that the broken Christian normally carries.

The *scattered* are those who for some reason have strayed from the flock. They may have been drawn away by some succulent forage; something may have startled them and they fled. Whatever the reason for their absence, they are lost and need to be returned to the fold. Scripture is clear that any Christian who habitually absents himself from church meetings is in spiritual danger:



*...let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near. For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment...(Hebrews 10:24-27a).*

Elders should make an effort to determine why someone is an habitual absentee. Having determined that, he will know whether continual pursuit, rebuke, or secret prayer is the best means of bringing this one back into the church gatherings.

The goal of pastoral care is to plant each Christian's life firmly upon the foundation of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, inappropriate pastoral care often produces the opposite result. Some elders become enablers, even as the wife of an alcoholic may protect and coddle her husband, thus enabling him to continue in his addiction. Elders, by their merciful "always on call" attitude, can contribute to a believer's remaining in an infantile spiritual condition. When the sick are treated like the diseased, rarely is progress is made toward their healing.

In caring for needy sheep, elders must ask "Am I creating a dependency upon elders, or am I moving this person toward dependency upon Christ?" Each Christian should learn how to hear from God for himself, how to study the Bible, how to pray for his needs, how to win in spiritual warfare, and how to rely upon the power of the Holy Spirit.

Some elders gain a sense of self-worth from occupying an essential role in people's lives. When this condition exists, symbiotic relationships develop that are far from healthy.

Elders must remember that their primary responsibility to individuals is to place each one in his appropriate place of ministry. Healthy, fully functioning members should be the goal of all pastoral care.

### **THE PURPOSE OF ASCENSION GIFT MEN**

*But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men." ... He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.) 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; (Ephesians 4:7-8, 10-12)*

*Why did Christ give ascension gift men to the Church? Ephesians 4:12 tells us that Christ gave these men,*

*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;*

The term, *katartizo*, translated *equipping* (NAS), *perfecting* (KJV) *to prepare* (NIV), reveals the function of *ascension gift men*. The goal of their activity is *building up of the Body of Christ*. In classical Greek, *katartizo* carried the idea of putting things in order or of repairing something in a manner that involved some sort of order. Thus, it was the term used for refitting a ship for a new or different service. As a medical term, it was used to refer to setting a broken bone.

The word is used in a variety of New Testament settings, all consistent with the classical Greek meaning. Here are some illustrative examples:

1. Hebrews 11:3 - describes the creation, in which the worlds *were framed* by the Word of God;
2. Matthew 4:21 & Mark 1:19 - the term is used for *mending* nets.
3. In Romans 9:22, Paul uses the term for those who are *fitted for destruction*.
4. In Galatians 6:1, the church is urged to *restore* (or put back in place) a brother who has fallen into sin.

Both in classical and New Testament Greek, the word has many uses, all of which reflect an underlying concept of orderly arrangement. Thus, the task of the *ascension gift men*, including the elders council, is to make certain that each believer is in his place in the Church and is functioning harmoniously within the Body. This *katartismos* work of *ascension gift men* elders has three aspects:

1. FUNCTIONAL GROWTH - helping each member to grow in his ability to hear from God and to minister in the grace that God has bestowed.
2. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT - overseeing the discipling of each member in Godly living.
3. PUTTING IN ORDER - attempting to place every person where he will function best in the Body of Christ.

Charismatic churches have tended toward emphasis of the first aspect, but tended to neglect the second. The Church at large, historically, has committed the opposite error. Almost all churches have tended to neglect the third aspect, helping people to find their place in the Body.

The task of guiding people into their functional place in the church is one of the major tasks ascribed to leadership. The work of an orchestra conductor is an illustration of this dimension of *katartismos*. Before a concert begins, in order to warm up and tune up, each musician plays randomly on his instrument. Anyone who has attended a symphony concert cannot forget this disordered cacophony. However, as soon as the conductor ascends the podium and raises his baton, there is order. Through his direction, beautiful music is produced.

In similar fashion, the varied gifts of the church members come together in the local body. One of the tasks of *ascension gift men*, especially elders, is to place these where they belong and to

oversee the harmonious interplay between the gifts resident in the members. Before leaders can do a good job of *katartismos*, they must become acquainted with the members of the congregation. Only then can each member be helped to find his functional place in the body.

*Katartismos* is *discipleship* in the true sense of the term. The goal is to see every member fulfill his potential and to fill the sphere that God has ordained for him. Elders are not called to be concerned about building big churches or institutionally strong churches. Instead, they are to be concerned about building the lives and ministry of each individual member of the body. This emphasis will produce the kind of church that God desires.

## CONCLUSION

Even though we accommodated Ezekiel 34 as a framework for discussing different spiritual pathologies, we do not find any New Testament Scriptures that describe a ministry of elders to individual believers, other than James 5:14. In this passage, James exhorts physically sick believers to summon the elders to come and pray for healing. Other than this, there is no scriptural authority for assigning to elders the role of ministry to individuals - any more than is assigned to every other believer. Paul's injunction in Romans, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep,"<sup>5</sup> is for all believers. The same is true for his words to the Thessalonians, "And we urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all men."<sup>6</sup>

For some the term, *pastor*, has come to mean the CEO/Front man of a mega church, one who does very little related to the biblical job description of shepherds. For others, *pastor*, has come to mean someone who exists to hold people's hands and be at their beck and call for sympathy. A commonly heard comment about someone who is merciful, tender, and sympathetic (one description - "a feely, touchy, kind of guy"), is, "Well, he is a pastor." However, such an elder is no more of a pastor than one who says, "Here is the direction that we will go," or, "...is a wolf and we must withstand him," or, "this teaching is heresy and we must declare it to be a lie." As a matter of fact, based on the biblical exhortations to shepherds, "feely, touchy, kind of guys" probably are less shepherds than the others.

One of the best solutions to the problem of misunderstanding the pastoral role may be the elimination of the term, "pastor." After all, "pastor" has come to mean something that is not biblical. The Greek term so translated is *poimeen*, "shepherd." In 1611, when the King James was translated, words of Latin derivation were common in English. *Pastor* is one of these. *Pastor* is the Latin word for *shepherd*. No one in our era would see a person tending sheep and call him a *pastor* - we call him a *shepherd*. Thus, the term in our day has become a religious term: either a professional title, the description of a person with a particular temperament, or a role that is not biblically authentic. Why not call church leaders, "shepherds," or the more biblically correct term, "elders"?

Elder/shepherds are responsible to Christ, not to the flock, for how they lead and care for the local church. If one were to prioritize an elder/shepherd's activities on the basis of biblical

emphasis, it would seem that the first responsibility and most routine activity is teaching the Word. In some order following this would be listed the various things that fall under the umbrella of "oversight":

- A. Development and placement of members in their place of service;
- B. Praying for the sick;
- C. Making decisions concerning the life and direction of the congregation;
- D. Always being alert for wolves.

While giving themselves to these matters, elders always will be compassionate caring brothers who demonstrate Romans 12:15 and I Thessalonians 5:14 in a manner that will be an example to the flock - who, following their example, will be inclined to do the same thing.

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#### END NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bruce, Alexander Balmain, "The Synoptic Gospels," in *The Expositors Greek New Testament*, Volume I, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B.Eerdmans Publishing Company) 1976, p. 134

<sup>2</sup> A very common excruciating situation in which wolfish behaviour occurs is encountered when a retired elder, one who no longer functions in leadership, remains in the church. Having difficulty in surrendering the reins to younger men, he draws people to himself and thus causes disunity. Because of his ego needs, he destroys the flock that he has spent years helping to develop.

<sup>3</sup>Bauer, Walter, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* trans. William F.Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957) p.436, notation (2) on κληρος

Thayer, Joseph *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Nashville, Broadman Press 1977) entry 2819, note (2)

<sup>4</sup>Keil, C.F. and F. Delitzsch, "Ezekiel," Volume 9 in *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson Publishers) 1989 p.84

<sup>5</sup>Romans 12:15

<sup>6</sup>I Thessalonians 5:14