

What Are the Pastors' Roles In the Church?

Jesse Barrington | illbehonest.com

Well, good evening to you all. It is a privilege to be with you all again. I just want to begin by going to the Lord in prayer and just asking Him for His grace over our time now as we come to the Word. I know we've prayed. I just want to ask that we pray again. So, let's pray.

Father, it's in the name of Jesus that we come. Father, thank You. Thank You for saving us. God, I often wonder where we would be when we're gathered, had You not saved us. And here we are, Lord, gathered together to worship You, to open Your Word, to grow, to praise You, to be transformed. God, thank You for changing us that we desire these things; Lord, that people would take time out of their schedule to gather. Lord, we pray that You would grant much grace now. God, that this wouldn't be mere men speaking. It would be the Spirit coming and opening the Word to us. In my own heart, I pray, God, that You would work. Lord, help me. Teach me. God, and we do pray that this is more than just information, God. That it is a transforming work of the Holy Spirit. So help, as we sang a few moments ago, Lord, do speak to us now through Your Word. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

If you'll open your Bibles to the book of Acts, chapter 14. We'll begin in chapter 14 and then move over to Acts 20. But before we look at Acts 14, I just want to share a little bit to kind of set the stage of where we're going tonight if you will. I can tell you as a Christian and as a pastor that I have a great burden for the local church. And I'm sure all of you do sitting here as well. As we read through the New Testament, we see Scripture assumes something. The Scriptures assume that we as Christians are committed to a local body of believers. It assumes that you're in and committed to a local church. The notion that some people have - what may have been referred to as "lone ranger Christianity," where you have believers who are not committed to a local church is unheard of in Scripture. The local church is one of God's essential means of growth for Christians. Knowing this, beloved, it's important that we all understand what the Scriptures then have to say about our local church. And specifically, what does the Scripture have to teach us about our roles in our local church? Our responsibilities in our local church? And then how do we relate to one another in our local churches?

I will tell you that I keep seeing an issue arising again and again. And that issue is this: it's Christians who know Scripture in the sense of theology. They have an understanding of theology and doctrine, but they really seem to have a struggle as it pertains to how they should function and what their role is in their local church. And that's what I want to preach on today. And tomorrow. How are we to behave in the household of God? I want to preach tonight specifically on pastors, elders. What is their role? What is their responsibility to the congregation? And then tomorrow, Lord willing, I'll preach on what is the congregation's role and responsibility and how do they relate to the pastor or the elders. My hope this evening is to bring a reminder and an exhortation to those of you in here who are pastors - myself being one. I want to remind us of what our role is, what our responsibility is. I also hope that if some of you I've talked to in the past maybe that are discerning a calling in your life maybe to a pastoral call -

to be an elder in a church. And I want to help bring distinction and clarity to what that role and responsibility is. And then, finally, to all of us as members of local churches, I want to help us better understand what is the pastor's role and responsibility? And how should he relate to us? And then tomorrow after we see that role and responsibility, how should we relate to our pastors knowing their role and responsibility?

Beloved, the more we understand God's Word in these areas, the better we can function as God has intended us to and have healthy, biblical local churches. My overarching goal then is this: The glory of God in the local church. The glory of God in the local church. My co-pastor preached on these two subjects in our church. It's something that we are striving to regularly put before our people because you may have a knowledge of these things, but very often, having a knowledge of them is different than living in light of them as you function in your local churches. So it's important that we keep putting these things before ourselves and before our people. I'm tackling a broad topic - no doubt. So, this will not be an exhaustive study. There will be some things that I do leave out. And I've prayed and studied numerous passages, but we'll be focusing in on one particular passage each hour together.

Before we look at Acts 14, I'm going to read to you 1 Timothy 3. If you just want to write that reference down. 1 Timothy 3:14-15. Listen to what Paul says to Timothy. "I hope to come to you, but I'm writing these things to you so that if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of truth." I wanted to read that to help you see this: Scripture speaks to how we are to behave in the household of God. It speaks a lot. And it speaks explicitly on how we are to behave in the household of God.

Now let's look at Acts 14. A little bit of context here, we have Paul and Barnabas. And they're out preaching the Gospel to people and they want to fulfill the Great Commission. They want to make disciples. And Paul knew that if he's going to be faithful in the making of disciples, that there needs to be a healthy church there. Let's look at v. 21-23 here. "When they had preached the Gospel to that city and had made disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium at Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples and encouraging them to continue in the faith and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." Note here v. 23 then. "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." You had Christians - converts, born again, regenerate people - coming together and meeting. Paul wanted to strengthen them. And one of the things he felt he needed to have done was the appointing of elders in local churches. Why? Because Christians gathering together without oversight of pastors or elders is not in order. It's not in order. I get that wording from Titus 1:5. Just listen to this. He says something very similar to Titus. "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained in order and appoint elders in every town I directed to you." Paul looked at genuine, born again Christians coming together without the oversight of elders and said that's not in order. So he goes with Barnabas and they appoint elders. He writes to Timothy. He writes to Titus. Hey, I want you to go and appoint elders because why? Because without elders, things are not in order. Christians gathering together in an organic way may seem very romantic. It has a romanticism to it. Kind of this: hey, we're just getting together. We're just doing our own little thing here. But I want you to know according to Scripture, that's not in order. And God is

concerned about that. Now, listen, beloved, I know some of you don't have biblical churches near you. And many of you are praying that God would do just that - that He would raise up elders in the local churches where you're at. And I just want to encourage you, keep praying. Remain steadfast in those prayers that God would raise up elders in the churches that you're at. Others of you, you just may need to move to be in a local church. If there's not a local church in your area, I can't think of a better reason to move than to be a part of a local church with biblical oversight through pastors.

But just to be clear again, the notion of Christians gathering together unorganized, without the oversight of elders, to Paul says that's not right. Now we live in the providence of God. In other words, if we don't have elders, we don't say, well, we need them. Let's just throw men in there. We don't do that. This takes time. And we want to be patient upon the Lord. But we should be working towards this end and praying towards this end. I hope we can see, beloved, we need to be a part of local churches. We need to have elders.

Let's turn now to Acts 20 as we look at what is the role and responsibility of elders. Let's start in v. 17 and then we're going to focus in on v. 28-31. V. 17 tells us though, "Now Miletus, he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church to come to him." So Paul says go get the elders and bring them here. He has a lot to say to them, but I'm going to zero in now on v. 28-31 just because of our time. So if you'll read along with me there. To the elders Paul says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to care for (or shepherd) the church of God which He obtained with His own blood. I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years, I did not cease night and day to admonish everyone with tears." Let me first note for you here this: Elders, overseers, and pastors are one and the same person or people. Elders, overseers, pastors are one and the same person. Look again, v. 17, to the elders. V. 28, "whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." To shepherd, care for, pastor. That's the verb form of the word "pastor" that we use there. And I want to point that out to you to understand elders are pastors. Pastors are overseers. Overseers are elders. It's describing the same office. That's important for us to note first and foremost. If you want to see that again for further study, you can look at 1 Peter 5 where Peter exhorts the elders. And again, he uses all three words that we use for the office of elder in one clear thought there. He writes to the elders about their oversight, and he calls them to pastor or shepherd the flock. Elders, overseers, pastors.

Notice also too in v. 17 this: every place in Scripture where we see elders or pastors addressed, it's written in the plural form. Meaning what? That the Scriptures look to having a plurality - more than one elder in the church. More than one pastor. And again, I understand that we live in the providence of God. What do I mean by that? That God may have raised up a pastor, an elder in your church, or He's going to. And although, no, we don't have two yet which is what Scripture directs us towards, we should be working and praying towards the raising up of more men to become elders. A plurality of elders. We don't just say we've got one pastor. Let's find another one so we can be obedient to Scripture and have a plurality. These men need to be qualified according to Scripture. 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1. So that qualifying, that discerning of

calling and discerning of the gift of teaching, it takes time. And so we want to be patient, but we need to be working towards a plurality of qualified elders, pastors, overseers.

Notice this too. Within a plurality of elders, they are co-equals. Elders and pastors are co-equals. It is true that they have unique giftings within the plurality. And so you might find in some scenarios where an individual pastor or elder is given to the preaching and teaching of the Word. We know the qualifications teach us that all elders must be able to teach. But Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 5:17, some of them may be given or set aside for the preaching and teaching of the Word. And so, these plurality of elders that are qualified according to Scripture, they collectively shepherd the flock of God together. One of them may be given to the preaching and teaching of the Word. And we're going to get into that text tomorrow, so I'll leave that there for us.

Now, let's look at this. What's the first admonition starting in v. 28 that Paul gives to these elders here in Ephesus? Look at v. 28. The first admonition is this: "Pay careful attention to yourselves." Pay careful attention to yourselves. Pastors, elders here - myself included - your number one responsibility is to guard and nurture your own soul. That is the most important thing. You need to pay careful attention to yourselves. My heart breaks as I keep reading about pastors falling into grievous sin and disqualifying themselves. They need to be paying careful attention to themselves. We noted that elders must be qualified, but notice this when you look at the qualifications in Scripture, all of the qualifications are in the present tense. And what that means is they must be qualified, but they must remain qualified. How do they do that? By paying careful attention to themselves. As the proverbs tell us, "above all else, guard your heart." Pastors sitting here today, I want to warn you in something: Don't get too busy where you stop looking after your own soul; where you stop paying careful attention to your own soul. Pastoring is a busy work. It is a hard work. But you must pay careful attention to yourself. We need to look no further than Jesus Christ as our example. If you remember back in Mark 1, He's teaching in the synagogue. He begins to heal and He goes to Peter's home. It tells us that the whole city came to Him and He healed and cast out demons starting at sunset. Needless to say, this seemed to go on into the evening. But what do we read right after that? Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, He went away to a desolate place and He prayed. Pastors, don't get so busy with pastoral work that you stop guarding and nurturing your own soul. Pay careful attention to yourselves.

Pastors are called to lead by example. Paul tells Timothy in 1 Timothy 4, set for the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. What is the first responsibility of all believers and pastors as well? To pay careful attention to your soul. To watch out your own soul. Saints, can I encourage you in something here? You pray for your pastor's soul. You pray that your pastor would pay careful attention to his own soul. You pray for his marriage that he would remain pure. You pray for his heart to be inflamed as he studies the Word and as he seeks God privately in prayer.

Well, it goes on in v. 28. They're not only to pay careful attention to themselves, but they're to pay careful attention to what? To all the flock. To all of the flock. Pastors are to pay careful attention to all of the flock. Paul uses shepherd language here because that's what pastors are. They're shepherds. They look after the flock that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of. Think of this. Who is that pastor responsible to pay careful attention to? This is

another verse that clearly demonstrates the Bible assumes you are committed to a local assembly overseen by elders. If someone walks by today and I meet them on the street and they're a Christian, I don't go, well, I'm a pastor, I must oversee and pay careful attention to your soul. There are ones under my care that God has entrusted to me and my co-pastors. And so it assumes that you are in an assembly under the oversight of pastors who pay careful attention to your soul.

Pastors, let me exhort you in this. Paying careful attention to the souls of sheep is not just a corporate thing done; it's an individual thing done. Just like you look after your own soul individually - you want to know, where am I at? You're looking also individually at the sheep entrusted to your care. Pastors have concerns over things like this: Are they truly saved? Are they genuinely converted? Are they savoring Jesus Christ above everything else? Are they growing in conformity to the image of Christ? Are they abounding in love? Pastors, we've got to know our sheep to know these things. So as we pay careful attention to our own soul, we do this proactively - not just reactively when we see one of the sheep begin to wander. Yes, we leave the 99 like Christ and go after the one, but we need to be proactive in our pastoring, praying for them and knowing them and tending to them, paying careful attention to their souls. How this is fleshed out in each church under the plurality of elders will look a little bit different in each church. But know this, you're called to pay careful attention to all of the flock.

Next, we see what? V. 28 again, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." It is the Holy Spirit that makes men pastors. There's no program that can make a man a pastor. There's no seminary that a man can be put through and out pops a pastor in the end. Those places are good. They have their place. They train men how to study the Bible, how to put together sermons, how to preach, how to organize, but know this for sure, it is the work of the Holy Spirit that men are made pastors. It's a work of God. They are gifted by the Spirit in the area of teaching and they are given a shepherd's heart, a love for the church. One of the things we always are looking for as we're seeking and praying for more elders to be raised up - not only their life and their character as it talks about in 1 Timothy 3; not only their gifting and their ability to teach - but do they have a burden and a love for the local church and the souls of the sheep in the local church? That is a defining mark of the Holy Spirit pulling someone in to become a pastor.

And what do they do? What do they oversee? They oversee the affairs of the church and the sheep. You think of that word: they oversee it. Elders oversee. Peter gave a very similar admonition in 1 Peter 5:3. He says that they're not to be domineering over those "in your charge, but being examples." Beloved, listen to this. Pastors oversee. They are in charge of the affairs in the local church. Yes, they are to be servant leaders like Christ is a servant leader. They are to be humble as Christ was humble. But don't mistake this: They are to oversee. And you can't be passive when you're overseeing the affairs of the church and the sheep. Sometimes I think we get that confused. Aren't they supposed to be servants? Yes, they are to be servants. But know this, in the overseeing of the church, and as Peter says here, for those "in your charge," - they have charge over you. When you have charge over people, notice this, you have to make decisions. And Peter and Paul put that responsibility to the elders to make decisions, to have charge over these things. Passive people don't like to make decisions. And I want you to know this: pastorally, you are thrust into situations that are very difficult all the time.

And pastors, you need to make decisions. Prayerfully, carefully. And you do get input and talk with the congregation, but at the end of the day, it is those that Peter says and Paul says are overseeing or in charge that do make these decisions. We'll talk about more of this tomorrow, but I want us to know this. When someone does make decisions, there are always people who don't like those decisions. There are always people who don't agree with those decisions. And that doesn't mean your pastors are not doing what they're supposed to do. They are to oversee the affairs of the church.

Pastors, let me exhort you in this. Your job is not to please everyone in the congregation. The job of the pastor is not to please everyone in the congregation. The job of the pastor is to look to the Word of God, pray for the grace of God, and make decisions for the edification of the church and the glory of God. And those are hard decisions to make sometimes.

So elders are to pay careful attention to themselves. They're to pay careful attention to all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. They are to care for (v. 28) or shepherd the church. That word is the word we translate in Ephesians 4 as "pastor." The NASB renders it "shepherd." Overseers, shepherd - pastor the church. They must know the sheep. We saw that earlier. They must lead the sheep by example watching over their own souls. And they must feed the sheep or pastor or shepherd the sheep.

What do we feed the sheep as pastors? We feed them the full counsel of God's Word. And yes, a lot of that comes through what we do right here - standing up and preaching the Word of God. But it goes beyond the pulpit. It goes into lives. It goes into conversations across tables with each other where we are caring and shepherding and sharing truth with each other face to face. Can I encourage all of us in something here that will really help pastors fulfill this call to shepherd the church? Deacons. Deacons are vital and essential to the local church functioning properly. What deacons do is they free the elders from that responsibility so that they can give themselves to the ministry of the Word and prayer. A deacon is a high calling. It's an important calling. And another thing that you should be praying for God to raise up in your local churches, because inevitably when there aren't deacons, those responsibilities fall to your elders, and what it does is it takes them away from the ministry of the Word and prayer. Pray that God would raise up qualified deacons for the church so the elders and pastors may be freed in their responsibility of preaching.

Pastors know this: Shepherding a flock is a wearisome task. We could bring up any pastor in this room right now and he could share testimony after testimony of how wearying it is to faithfully and biblically shepherd the sheep. We look at these responsibilities and we often say to ourselves who is sufficient for these things? You find yourselves growing tired and weak and weary. Oftentimes, being tempted to have a pity party. But I want you to remember this what Paul says next. Paul says something very important. He says that the sheep were purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ. Pastors - and I'm speaking to myself here - this isn't really about us. This is about Him. This is a calling that we have, but these aren't our sheep ultimately. They've been entrusted to our care. They're His. And they were purchased with His blood. And because He is worthy, they are worthy. So don't look, pastors, within the congregation to find worth within them. Just like all of us at times, we're unkind. The notion of sheep is not a compliment in Scripture. It's hard at times.

So, what do you do to motivate yourself? To get up again the next day and serve again? You remember that their value is tied to their union with Jesus Christ. They were purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ and there is nothing of more value on the earth than Jesus Christ. This is His church. 1 Peter 5 tells us that there's one Chief Shepherd - the Lord Jesus Christ. And pastors are under-shepherds. And they've been entrusted with the care of His flock that was purchased with His blood. Remember this too: Jesus Christ identifies Himself with His church. He says what you do unto the least of these, you do unto Me. So pastors, know this, your love for Jesus Christ will be revealed in your love for the church. When you grow weary and tired, remember Christ. Remember His worth. Remember their worth in their union to Jesus Christ. May God help pastors remain faithful to the end in this calling that they have before them.

Well, pastors here, we've seen are to know the sheep. They're to intimately know the sheep. They're to lead the sheep by example. They're to pastor or shepherd or feed the sheep the Word of God. And then, finally this, they are to protect the sheep. Look at v. 29. "I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years, I did not cease night and day to admonish everyone with tears." In our church, we're working through the Gospel of John. You remember in chapter 10 where Jesus says that, "I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." Pastors, I want to exhort you to lay down your life for the sheep. In John 10, when Jesus says that, He is contrasting Himself with the Pharisees. He calls them hirelings. He says that when the hirelings see the wolves come, they walk away, because they don't care for the sheep. Guarding the church against wolves is not fun. It's very hard. But we are to follow the example of Jesus Christ to lay down our lives; to lay down our comfort; to lay down our reputations, and defend the church from wolves.

I was sharing with Mack and Tim earlier today, when I was thinking of the Lord's calling in pastoral ministry, I thought about the responsibility to protect the church. But I always had in my mind that this protecting of the church would be from outside coming in. I thought, yes, we'll protect against heresy from coming in. We'll protect against the cults from trying to break in. We'll be protecting the church from all that's trying to get into the church. But if you paid attention here to what Paul said here, he said, "fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock and from your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw disciples away after them. Therefore, be alert." Yes, pastors, we must equip our people and protect them from outside assaults of the enemy and untruth and heresy. But I would say even more pointedly you must protect the church from wolves within, infiltrating the assembly, teaching twisted things - sometimes outright heresy and sometimes by magnifying something else above Jesus Christ and the Gospel as the centrality of the church.

Again, I think I could bring every pastor in this room up and they could give example, after example, after example of having to deal with this in the local church. I'll tell you that these wolves typically come into the church very passionate people, speaking a lot openly with seeming joy about the Word of God. They're often very vocal. And another characteristic of them is they're often very likable. And the reason why is they draw people unto themselves. But it's not too long before they begin to teach twisted things to the sheep. And I want to exhort myself and all the pastors here: be on the alert. You guard the flock from within.

Look at Paul's love for the church in v. 31. He says, "For three years, I did not cease night and day to admonish everyone with tears." You want to get a picture of what that looked like? Look back at v. 20. He says, "how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, teaching you in public and from house to house." It's beyond the pulpit ministry. Admonishing with tears. It is often night and day. It is often repeated admonitions. But just as Christ, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, may pastors be faithful for the glory of God and the joy set before them to endure the cross. Beloved, our love for Jesus Christ is revealed in our love for the church.

So here's the summary again of what we've seen so far. The pastor, the elder, the overseer is one office. It must be a biblically qualified person. They must remain qualified. There should be a working and praying towards a plurality of elders who collectively shepherd/pastor the church together. The elders must know the sheep. They must feed the sheep. They must lead the sheep. And they must protect the sheep. And we think about those things and we say again, who is sufficient for these things? But by the grace of God, He gives the grace for us to do these things. Only by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit can these things be done.

In closing, I want to take you to one more passage of Scripture that we'll be in again tomorrow. But I want to look at it from the pastoral perspective tonight. That's Hebrews 13 if you'll turn there. We'll end on this. If I had to choose one verse in the Bible to summarize the role of elders or pastors or overseers - one verse in the Bible - this would be the verse. It says, "obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. And let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." One summary statement for what pastors or elders are: They are soul watchers. They watch over the souls of the sheep. And then the closing, loving, reminding exhortation. "...As those who will give an account." Men, we will give an account for these. But we are not intermediaries. We don't stand in between the sheep and Jesus Christ. You all have intimate, personal relationships there. But God has entrusted to under-shepherds to watch over the souls of the sheep which He purchased with His own blood. And that keeps me up many nights thinking about that. This is the most serious calling in the world. And I pray that we as pastors, we heed this calling carefully. I pray you as saints, you see the high calling that has been put before your pastors. And tomorrow when we come back, now that you understand that pastor's role is to oversee and shepherd the flock, I'm going to help you understand then, well, how do I relate to them? And what is my responsibility back to them? So, let's close in prayer and pray that God would raise up biblically qualified pastors and that we would be faithful to our calling.

Heavenly Father, we come to You in the name of Jesus. Father, it's maybe impossible to grasp the full extent of the value of the church purchased with the blood of Christ. But Lord, I pray that You would do what we have been speaking of - You would raise up biblically qualified men who are servant leaders, but who heed the call to oversee, to shepherd, to pastor this flock that Christ has purchased. God, that You help the men in this room who are considering that calling, that they would take it seriously. That You'd give wisdom to the churches as they discern these matters and wisdom to the elders in the raising up of other elders. And that God, You'd help us as pastors to be faithful to this calling of which we will give an account. Help us, O God.

Help us in these things to grow in the understanding. Grant us the grace of Your Spirit to be faithful to the end, for the glory of Christ and the edification of the body, we pray and ask these things, in the name of Jesus, Amen.