

# JBTS

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF  
BIBLICAL AND  
THEOLOGICAL  
STUDIES



**Elder as Shepherd: Implicit Use of the  
Shepherd Metaphor by the Apostle Paul**

*Josh Branum*

## ***Elder as Shepherd: Implicit Use of the Shepherd Metaphor by the Apostle Paul***

**JOSH BRANUM**

Josh Branum (PhD in Applied Theology, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary) serves as the Family Pastor at Faithbridge Church in Jacksonville, FL.

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the Pauline qualifications for eldership considering the shepherd metaphor. In this analysis, the author argues that Paul presents qualified elders as “good shepherds,” those of the utmost integrity, who are able to manage the flock of God well. The shepherd metaphor is utilized throughout both the Old and New Testaments, by various authors, and in a variety of contexts. From a New Testament perspective, the shepherd metaphor is used most frequently in reference to Jesus, but is later applied to elders. While one might expect the Apostle Paul, the author of the so-called “Pastoral Epistles,” to make much use of this metaphor, he only explicitly uses the shepherd metaphor on two occasions. This seeming omission has led some to dismiss it as a central aspect of his teaching. However, Paul demonstrates a heavy reliance on the shepherd metaphor implicitly, particularly in the qualifications for eldership in the books of 1 Timothy and Titus.

**Key Words:** eldership, shepherding, leadership, ministry

### **Introduction**

In church life, the presence of effective leadership determines the effectiveness of everything that follows. Whether it is ministry programming, vision casting, or simply day-to-day operations, everything within the church hinges on the effectiveness of its leadership. In surveying the biblical texts, one discovers several themes and principles related to leadership. One of the most prominent themes is the metaphor of the leader as shepherd. The use of the shepherd metaphor finds its beginning in the Pentateuch, although not as explicitly as one might expect. The imagery presented is not overly metaphorical, but after being examined by later biblical authors, one discovers the latent symbolism throughout the first five books of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Primarily, this imagery is applied to God, as he is the one who leads his nation, Israel, through the wilderness. The remaining books of the Old Testament, while replete with examples of human shepherd leaders, continue to present God as the true shepherd of Israel. In like

1. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006), 78.

manner, the New Testament establishes Jesus as the Good Shepherd. He is the one who cares for the sheep and leads them because they know his voice (Jn 10:3). As was God's habit in the Old Testament, human agents were appointed to shepherd God's flock following Jesus' resurrection (Jn 21:15–17).

With the flock of God growing in a new body called the "church," it became evident that new leaders must emerge to shepherd the people. Mark Dever notes, "As with any gathered body of people, the church must be led."<sup>2</sup> Paul's habit became to install leadership in each of the churches he planted as soon as possible.<sup>3</sup> As early church history progressed, these church leaders evolved into New Testament eldership. In discussing eldership, while one might expect the Apostle Paul, the author of the so-called "Pastoral Epistles," to make much use of this metaphor, he only explicitly uses the shepherd metaphor on two occasions. This seeming omission has led some to dismiss it as a central aspect of his teaching. However, Paul demonstrates a heavy reliance on the shepherd metaphor implicitly, particularly in the qualifications for eldership in the books of 1 Timothy and Titus. In the sections that follow, the shepherd metaphor will be examined specifically from the passages that pertain to eldership. The most important texts are Acts 20:28–31; Eph 4:11–16; and 1 Pet 5:1–4, as they relate to pastoral calling, competency, and character.

### **Pastoral Calling (Acts 20:28–31)**

In Acts 20, Paul addresses a group of Ephesian pastors regarding their role as leaders within the church. This speech is important because it captures the only speech given in the Bible by the Apostle Paul to a group of people that are already Christians.<sup>4</sup> Proper church leadership was of the utmost importance in early church, as it still is today. The reasons for its significance are many, all stemming from the shepherding role delegated to elders. First, the flock of God, newly manifested as the church in the book of Acts, required constant oversight and protection. In Acts 20:28, Paul states, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The verses that follow clarify the need for such careful oversight: "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" (Acts 20:29–30). The toxin of false teaching will have disastrous consequences on the flock, making the prevention of it a top priority for the

2. Mark E. Dever, "The Church," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 796.

3. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 159.

4. Conrad Gempf, "Acts," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), Acts 20:13.

shepherd. John Hammett indicates that solid biblical teaching is the means by which the shepherd provides this protection.<sup>5</sup>

Second, the church is the flock of God, implying that ownership does not belong to its human agents, but to Jesus Christ. He is the one who “obtained [it] with his own blood” (Acts 20:28b). Leaders are called by God to shepherd his people, indicating that the authority for their position rest in him. The most capable leader is simply unqualified if he is not first called by God to serve. For the Ephesian elders, Paul taught clearly that their shepherding role was only second to the role of Christ Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, he is the one who guides the church in appointing them and who calls them to this task.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, as followers of Jesus, elders must see themselves as sheep primary, exercising authority on behalf of their Shepherd. Laniak maintains, “Authority is a feature of the shepherd’s role, but one comprehensively qualified by the reminder that elders are caring for the flock of God... Humility [must be] the distinguishing mark of their service.”<sup>7</sup> Humble service generates from the understanding that the flock of God is the flock of God, not man.

One final aspect of the necessity for proper leadership in this passage is the requirement that leaders be on constant guard. In Acts 20:31, Paul exhorts, “Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears.” Paul had such concern for the Ephesian church that he had warned them continually of false teaching for three years. His love for them is demonstrated in the fact that his admonition had often come with tears. Truly, love for the flock will demand constant oversight. As Gary Bredfeldt notes, “Leaders cannot be lulled into a sense of complacency. They must be aware that they are engaged in a battle for the truth.”<sup>8</sup> Compassion and love define the mission of the shepherd. Constant battling of false teaching proceeds from this type of heart. With Christ as the model, elders shepherd the flock of God with an understanding of what is at stake, that is, the souls of men (Heb 13:17).

### **Pastoral Competency (Eph 4:11–16)**

Paul presents several roles of leadership within the church, assuming that each is a gift from God. In Ephesians 4:11, he presents the following roles: “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” This verse connects the role of shepherd with the role of teacher, indicating the overlap of both

5. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 163.

6. Malcolm B. Yarnell III, *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), 617.

7. Laniak, *Shepherds after My Own Heart*, 233–34.

8. Gary Bredfeldt, *Great Leader, Great Teacher: Recovering the Biblical Vision for Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), 59.

roles.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, in many churches, the two roles have been distinguished as not relating to one another. Instead, shepherding has been isolated to areas of pastoral care, such as “pastoral visitation, personal counseling, and ministry in times of sickness (see esp. James 5:14) and grief.”<sup>10</sup> However, “[p]astoral care, though encompassing more than teaching only, is *predominately* a matter of teaching.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, while critical areas of ministry, these matters do not coincide with Paul’s rationale for church leaders. Rather, the verses that follow indicate the teaching purpose for these leadership roles.

Church leaders were given by God “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12–13). Implicit within this passage is the need for competent leadership. If church leaders are to “equip the saints for the work of ministry,” then they must be capable of doing so. This responsibility connects the aspects of calling and competency, since those called of God are also gifted by God to lead.

Since verse 12 speaks of “building up the body”—that is, the church—it is likely that the verses that follow refer only to work done by shepherd-teachers.<sup>12</sup> Through the ministry of teaching, church leaders equip believers to possess a unified biblical worldview and knowledge leading to sanctification.<sup>13</sup> The work of the church leaders connects vitally to the spiritual growth of believers. Turner reminds us that “[w]hile the imagery so far could almost suggest that the church grows towards an independent manhood *like* Christ’s, the switch of imagery at the end of v 15 reminds the reader that Jesus is Lord (*head*) of the whole process, and the church is intended to grow into more intimate union with him.”<sup>14</sup> Shepherds serve the flock of God, which exist for his glory and by his power (Col 1:15–20).

### **Pastoral Character (1 Pet 5:1–4)**

Outside of Paul, the most explicit link between eldership and the shepherd metaphor occurs in the book of 1 Peter. Thus far, Paul has presented the connection between oversight, teaching, and shepherding. Peter continues in this vein. In 1 Pet 5:1–4, he states,

9. William W. Klein, “Ephesians.” in *Ephesians-Philemon of The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12:115–16.

10. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 163–64.

11. Bredfeldt, *Great Leader, Great Teacher*, 59.

12. Klein, *EBC* 12:115.

13. *Ibid*, 12:120.

14. Max Turner, “Ephesians,” in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), Eph 4:17.

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: 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.

This passage contains many similarities with the previous two discussed. For example, both Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet 5:1 indicate Christ's death on the cross as foundational to the shepherding task. Peter and Paul understood that the gospel must influence the manner of leadership within the church. Contrary to the corrupt false shepherds described in the Old Testament, these shepherds must realize that their ultimate service is to the chief Shepherd, and their final reward will come from him.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, several qualifications are given in this passage, outlining character traits that shepherds must possess. First, shepherds must serve willingly, "not under compulsion" (1 Pet 5:2). This willingness speaks to the motivation of the shepherd, whether he is truly able to serve in the way he is called. The only motivation acceptable is a desire to serve the chief Shepherd in advancing the gospel and building up his church.<sup>16</sup> Second, Peter writes that elders must not approach shepherding for "shameful gain," or from the perspective of how they might benefit personally from the sheep. This type of motivation would tempt elders to exploit the flock to secure greater profit for themselves. Rather than feeding the flock through the word of God, these shepherds would feed themselves from the flock.<sup>17</sup> As Laniak observes, "Feeding on the flock is a sign of predators, not shepherds."<sup>18</sup> The gospel motivates shepherds to lay down everything for the sake of the flock.

### **The Shepherd Metaphor and the Pauline Qualifications for Eldership**

With the above foundation, it is now possible to examine the implicit use of the shepherd metaphor in the Pauline qualifications for eldership specifically. Paul presents two separate lists of qualifications, one in 1 Tim 3:1–7 and the other in Tit 1:5–9. Notably, these two passages represent the primary texts on qualifications for eldership in the New Testament, with a much more succinct list in 1 Pet 5:2–4,

15. David H. Wheaton, "1 Peter," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 1 Pet 5:1.

16. Roger M. Raymer, "1 Peter" of *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord et al. (Wheaton: Victor, 1985), 2:855.

17. Cf. Ezek 34:7.

18. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 233.

as discussed above. Since the role of elder is often described using the shepherd metaphor, these passages should be examined from that perspective.

Paul presents qualified elders as “good shepherds,” those of the utmost integrity who can manage God’s flock well. The implicit use of the metaphor is clear throughout these passages. For example, the term “overseer” in itself is analogous to a shepherd tending his flock. He is the one who cares for the flock, watches over the flock, and is ultimately responsible for its protection and wellbeing. This concept is reinforced in the qualification to “manage his own household well” (1 Tim 3:4). Furthermore, the various qualifications related to character emphasize the need for personal holiness in the life of the elder. Personal holiness distinguishes true shepherds from false ones. Those shepherds who do not hold to the character traits listed by Paul might use their position to abuse and take advantage of the church, behavior that is stringently rebuked throughout Scripture using the shepherd metaphor. Elders that do maintain these standards will also have credibility in their teaching ministry, a unique responsibility attached to the position. Teaching is how the elder “feeds” the flock of God, providing nourishment through the truths of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Each of these areas will be discussed below, emphasizing the crucial link between shepherding and eldership.

### **The Role of Oversight in Shepherding**

As shepherds, elders are responsible for the flock of God entrusted to their care. This responsibility demands elders to be competent in oversight. It is clear from Acts 20:28–31 that Paul understood the connection between shepherding and oversight. In both 1 Timothy and Titus, the term *ἐπισκοπος* (*episkopos* or “overseer”) is used for elders, demonstrating the importance of this area of leadership. Related to shepherding, the concept of watching or overseeing is often used throughout Scripture to speak comprehensively about the many roles of the shepherd.<sup>20</sup> Whether by protection, nurturing, or guidance, the shepherd maintains responsibility for the wellbeing of the flock. Several areas of qualifications relate directly to oversight, namely managing one’s household well and serving as God’s steward.

Oversight of one’s household is a primary indicator as to whether one is ready to serve as an elder or not. Truly, before one can aspire to shepherd the larger flock of God, he must be able to shepherd the smaller flock of his family. This qualification is unfortunately not the case for many elders. J. Oswald Sanders, noted author on spiritual leadership, observes that the “[f]ailure to keep home in order has kept many ministers and missionaries from their fullest potential.”<sup>21</sup> Understanding this vital link between shepherding at home and shepherding within the church, Paul broke

19. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 163.

20. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, 233.

21. J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 43.

with the standard practice of his day by holding leaders accountable for their personal lives. There must be no distinction between church and personal life for those who shepherd the flock of God.<sup>22</sup>

The second aspect of oversight is the ability of the elder to serve as God's steward. This qualification appears only in Titus and is clearly linked with oversight. In Tit 1:7, Paul contends, "For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach." The term translated "God's steward" is οἰκονόμος (*oikonomos*), which denotes a servant who manages the household on behalf of his master.<sup>23</sup> Given the wealth of responsibility that such a servant would have, it is of the utmost importance that the master have full confidence in his loyalty as a subject.<sup>24</sup> Overseers of the flock of God must demonstrate absolute faithfulness to the Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, Lea and Griffin note, "The conjunction ["For"] (*gar*) which begins v. 7 indicates that Paul was continuing his thought from v. 6 and actually making a logical connection between his statements on the elder's home life and the church."<sup>25</sup> This observation validates the connection between oversight and shepherding. Bredfeldt also speaks to a connection between oversight and shepherding, "In a real sense, biblical shepherds—that is, the pastor-teachers of Ephesians 4:11—are stewards of the flock of God. As such, biblical leaders have a sacred trust for which they will give an account."<sup>26</sup> Before one can serve as a manager for God's household, he must first learn to "manage his own household well" (1 Tim 3:4).

### **The Role of Personal Holiness in Shepherding**

Understanding the importance of oversight in the life of the shepherd, Paul established other qualifications for the type of man that the shepherd must be. Bredfeldt explains, "These leaders were to be selected primarily on their virtuous character, because godly character is the surest outward indicator of the work of the Spirit of God in a leader's life."<sup>27</sup> Godly character manifests itself in the personal holiness of a shepherd. Paul outlines several qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus related to the area of personal holiness.

Concerning one's example, Paul indicates that elders must live lives "above reproach" and "blameless" (1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6). These two qualities serve as summaries, providing a broad framework that includes a variety of elements. For example, Paul lists that an elder must be "sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable," all qualities

22. Andreas Köstenberger, "1 Timothy" in *Ephesians-Philemon of The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12:526.

23. Cf. Luke 12:42.

24. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 164.

25. Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, "1 Timothy" in *1, 2 Timothy, Titus of The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery et al. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 282.

26. Bredfeldt, *Great Leader, Great Teacher*, 58.

27. *Ibid.*, 97.



that would allow the shepherd to serve the chief Shepherd well. The elder must have a reputation that matches the position to which he is called, that models the example of the one who called him. Moreover, a man of high character would serve as a worthy example for his sheep, while at the same time being “well thought of by outsiders” (1 Tim 3:7).<sup>28</sup> Sanders comments, “The character of the elder should command the respect of the unbeliever, inspire his confidence, and arouse his aspiration. Example is much more potent than precept.”<sup>29</sup> More than anything else, the elder must be filled with the gospel to the extent that it is visible by those around him.<sup>30</sup>

Paul declares in 1 Tim 3:3 that the elder is “not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.” These negative statements present things that would be detrimental in the life of the elder, thus harmful to the sheep as well. Paul states that an elder must not be addicted to alcohol, as it may lead to other issues as well. Without question, “[a] leader cannot allow a secret indulgence that would undermine public witness.”<sup>31</sup> Though not because of drunkenness, David’s “secret indulgence” demonstrates the principle behind it through its devastating effects on his shepherd leadership. Shepherds are called to higher standard, one that honors Jesus Christ and serves his flock well.

Moreover, it is interesting that a love for money is “a distinguishing feature of the false teachers in Ephesus (1 Tim 6:5–10).”<sup>32</sup> False teachers would not maintain the same standard as true ones. Their lack of personal holiness illustrates the importance of morality in shepherding. In combating such heresy, “[f]or a Christian leader to have the same spiritual disease would be a fatal sickness for spreading the truth.”<sup>33</sup> As illustrated in the lives of many Old Testament shepherds, the desire for personal gain perverts the role of the shepherd. These false shepherds prey on the flock they are called to lead and protect. Elders must instead follow the example of Christ, who gave himself for the flock. In other words, selflessness is a hallmark quality for New Testament eldership. Only from this perspective can an elder truly be called a shepherd.

## **The Role of Teaching in Shepherding**

Since elders are called to “shepherd the flock of God,” part of their responsibility involves feeding the flock with healthy food. For Christians, this food comes in the form of solid biblical teaching, which in turn, can be used to dismiss false teaching.<sup>34</sup> The qualification of being “able to teach” is unique to the role of elder, distinguishing

28. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 167.

29. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 41.

30. Dever, “The Church,” 797.

31. Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, 41.

32. Lea and Griffin, *NAC* 34:111.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 163.

it from other areas of church leadership, such as the role of deacon. Köstenberger observes that this distinction “indicates that teaching—and the commensurate authority—is to be a special prerogative and responsibility of overseers.”<sup>35</sup> This trait also corresponds to Paul’s connection of teaching with shepherding in other areas. In Acts 20:28–31, Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to oversee the flock of God with the utmost care, being aware of the effects of false teaching. The qualification in 1 Tim 3:2, as well as Paul’s exhortation in Acts 20, “shows that an overseer needed the ability both to explain Christian doctrine and to refute or oppose error.”<sup>36</sup> Paul later confirms this perspective in his letter 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” (Tit 1:9). Elders must possess a solid biblical foundation so that they might properly provide nourishment for the flock of God.

It must be noted that the teaching role has more to do with shepherding than simply provision. Teaching is also how the shepherd leads the flock.<sup>37</sup> With the prevalence of false teaching, “[t]eachers lead when they teach in such a way as to free learners by the power of the truth.”<sup>38</sup> Moreover, this aspect of teaching should be supported by the elder’s personal holiness. Following the shepherd requires trust on behalf of the sheep (Jn 10:3–5). The flock must know that their shepherd is not only teaching biblical truth, but is being personally affected by it as well.

## Conclusion

Shepherding as a metaphor has manifested itself throughout Scripture in many different ways, relating to both God and his chosen human agents. New Testament elders modeled their leadership after Jesus, who himself is the Good Shepherd. Paul illustrated this model by the requirements he included for eldership in 1 Timothy and Titus. Elders are to serve as overseers, watching over the flock of God and providing for its needs. The responsibility is primarily one of teaching, as that is how the shepherd both feeds and leads the flock with the word of God. Personal holiness undergirds this responsibility, creating trust for the flock through the elder’s high character.

Paul’s implicit use of the shepherd metaphor is highly evident in the qualifications listed above. All the standards Paul presents are manifested in the positive shepherds in the Old Testament and are perfectly modeled by Jesus. Men who met these standards would be worthy of serving as an undershepherd to the Good Shepherd. Moreover, Paul commanded that the elder “must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim 3:7). While

35. Köstenberger, *EBC* 12:526.

36. Lea and Griffin, *NAC* 34:111.

37. Bredfeldt, *Great Leader, Great Teacher*, 48.

38. *Ibid.*, 64.

not explicitly using the shepherd metaphor in this passage, his use of the metaphor elsewhere helps explain the significance of the qualifications. Rather than presenting an arbitrary list of qualifications, Paul outlines a comprehensive description of what good shepherds would be like. Elders are shepherds, and only those who maintain the principles of these qualifications can be said to reflect the Good Shepherd.