



The Elder Selection Committee met for the first time last Sunday after church. They have taken your nominations and prayerfully decided to move to the next phase of applications and interviews. By mid-September we should have one or more elders to submit to you for your consideration and then the members will vote on the elder or elders at the October 16th Congregational Meeting.

This whole process may feel foreign to some of you and boring to others. You may think that it is just more church politics and you believe you have as much influence on the outcome as you do on the presidential election. It's boring and irrelevant, so why bother? Regardless of how you feel about the process, choosing good elders is about the most important ministry task that we have ever done as a church.

On Thursday I get a phone call from the Director of Human Resources at the Free Church headquarters in Minneapolis. He wanted to know if I had accepted that new position or not. Ha, I am totally kidding! Our denomination has a habit of calling pastors every few years just to check in. The members of their top leadership team together call of the pastors in the US every few years. I had never met this man before but it turned out that he grew up in west Salem and served with Cru as a campus minister at Eau Claire. We talked for about 20 minutes and then he prayed for me. I really appreciated the effort that he made.

After we chatted for a bit, he asked me why I thought that the church was a basically healthy church. Can you guess what I told him? I told him that the key was the fact that from the inception of the church we have put a huge priority on choosing good, Godly leaders.

When Ray Olson was here for Ryan's installation service I mentioned that we are I a huddle with Ray and a few other men to improve our personal discipleship skills and goals. When we had lunch with Ray a few weeks ago, he asked me the same question. Why did Grace Church continue to thrive when so many other churches crumble? And again, my answer was the same—choosing good elders.

Now when I talk about the fact that we have done a good job choosing Godly leaders over the years, I in no way mean to imply that our elders are perfect or superior. In many ways, we are a group of bumbling goofballs who love this church and its people. We have never been cutting edge, but we strive to imitate the character and priorities of Jesus. Our elders will never be the CEO's of large companies, but we seek to love the Lord our God with our heart, soul and mind and love our neighbor as ourselves. We have always held to the statement that "character trumps giftedness" and it has served us well. We'd much rather take a raw recruit with good character and train him than a highly gifted man with questionable character. We're not perfect, but we are as careful and Biblical as we can be.

I certainly won't ask for a raise of hands, but I know that a good many of you have experienced a church split in your lifetime. Some of you have gone through three or four church splits just in our little town of Viroqua. If you haven't been through a church split, then you have witnessed serious church conflicts in your adult life. Out of all of those church splits and serious conflicts, what has been the common denominator? The common denominator is always the leadership at the church. Now I am not saying that the leadership always *causes* the issues but even if they do not directly cause the problem, the leadership will largely determine the outcome of the conflict. They can handle the conflict well or they can botch it up horribly. As I have been saying for almost fifteen years, as go the leaders, so goes the church. It really is as simple as that.

This is why it is so vital to learn from the Good Shepherd and model his care and protection.

1 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. 2 But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. 5 A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So Jesus again said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

11 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

The most intimate and loving act of the Good Shepherd is his sacrificial love.

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The most intimate and sacrificial kind of love is a love that offers up his life. This is what makes the Good Shepherd so good. We see this goodness all over Scripture. People have loved the 23rd Psalm for the past 3,000 years.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters
He restores my soul.

The Lord shows his shepherd care for his people in Ezekiel 34.

“For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 12 As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. 13 And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land.

The Good Shepherd cares for flock by searching for them and bringing them back into the fold. A hired hand would never do that. We can go back even further to Israel’s desert wandering to see the beginnings of the Good Shepherd theme.

Moses said to the Lord, “May the Lord, the God who gives breath to all living things, appoint someone over this community to go out and come in before them, one who will lead them out and bring them in, so the Lord’s people will not be like sheep without a shepherd.” So the Lord said to Moses, “Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit of leadership, and lay your hand on him (Numbers 27:15-18).

Moses was the first shepherd of Israel who literally led them out of the mouth of the lion and wolf in Egypt. But did you notice who replaced Moses? Joshua, or Yeshua, became the next shepherd. Yeshua is Jesus. Moses was the first shepherd of Israel but Yeshua was the first shepherd to bear the name of Jesus.

Finally, we see Jesus’ with the exact same heart of the shepherd.

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matthew 9:36). Why were they so harassed and helpless?

Because they had such bad shepherds. A bad shepherd is like no shepherd at all. In many ways, a bad shepherd is worse than no shepherd.

In this passage there are two enemies of the sheep—the thief and the hired hand. One might say that the thief and the hired hand work in collusion. If the thief comes to steal the sheep, the hired

hand would essentially let him steal the sheep. Just as the hired hand would run away from the wolf so will the hired hand run away from the thief—or perhaps just look the other way.

Who do the thief and hired represent here? Jesus said that the thief “comes only to steal and kill and destroy.” In chapter eight Jesus told the Pharisees that they were doing the work of their father the devil. And we know the devil only comes to seek, kill and destroy. So the thief could be both Satan and the Pharisees. The hired hand could also be the Pharisees in this passage. They are set over to watch the sheep of the house of Israel but they care nothing for the sheep. They are bad shepherds. Not only do they not care what happens to the sheep, but they actually make their living from being bad shepherds. Their livelihood and their social status come from being religious leaders. The masses look up to them but they are horrible at their job. One could even call them evil because they pretend to care but do not actually care.

The enemies of the sheep in Jesus’ day are still the enemies of the Lord’s sheep today—thieves and hired hands. Thieves come to steal, kill and destroy. Doctrinally speaking, sheep cannot be stolen. In other words, believers can’t lose their salvation so in that sense, they cannot be stolen out of the sheep fold. Just a few verses later in John 10, Jesus made this amazing promise. *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand* (John 10:28). The sheep are those who enter through the gate, and the gate is Jesus. All of those who enter the gate are given eternal life. So by Jesus’ own promise, sheep cannot be “stolen” from the sheep fold.

I am not saying that the thief poses no trouble. Satan still is active and his burning passion is to kill and destroy the sheep and the sheep fold. It’s all he cares about but for the rest of this message, I want to focus on the shepherds, both bad and good. There have been bad shepherds almost as long as there have been good ones, as Ezekiel records for us.

The word of the Lord came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them (Ezekiel 34:1-6).

When you think about it, one of Satan’s primary tools for harming the sheep are the hired hands. If God’s people are led by hired hands who care nothing for the sheep, then Satan’s job is that much easier.

A church leader, elder—whatever title you use, is a shepherd. I have showed you this from the New Testament on several occasions in the past but to remind you once again, here it is.
Elder = pastor = shepherd

Biblically, these words mean exactly the same thing. An elder is the same as a pastor is the same as a shepherd. Technically, the word “pastor” never appears in the Bible. In some translations it appears in Ephesians chapter four but the word is actually the word “shepherd.” Our English word pastor arose from the Latin word *pastorem* which means shepherd. Elders are everywhere instructed to do the work of a shepherd. You can’t really turn the word elder into a verb. Elders don’t elder people, they shepherd people. One of the great descriptions of this is 1 Peter 5.

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; 3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. 4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Notice that elders do the work of shepherding. An elder is their title but shepherding is their calling, their duty, their responsibility. And notice also to whom they are ultimately accountable? Elders are accountable to the Chief Shepherd. We are all accountable to the Chief Shepherd but elders are more so. The Lord laid much the blame for Israel’s wanderings on the shoulders of the bad shepherds, the hired hands.

And this is even more true today. Churches, movements and entire denominations stand or fall on the backs of their pastors, elders and leaders. As go the leaders, so goes the church. Which brings us back to the elder selection team. It’s not just another thing that we do or another set of meetings. It is the core of who we are. This is why we must have the best possible shepherds to lead us.

So you can see how this impacts the elders but what does this have to do with all of you? Let me offer several applications.

Pray

We would appreciate it if you pray even one time for the elder selection committee. This is something that everyone can do.

Be engaged in the process

It’s too late to offer nominations for this year but I would say that we received the least number of nominations ever—maybe 4 or 5 total. Nominations do not by themselves choose good elders but they are a helpful measure for the selection committee. If one man receives a dozen nominations, that is much more helpful than if he only received one or two.

Aspire to be an elder

This only applies to men but even then, it may sound strange to you. It seems that leadership is something that you shouldn’t desire too much, right? Why would you aspire to be an elder? Because the Bible says that we should. Here is the verse that most helped affirm my call to be a pastor, 1 Timothy 3:1. *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.* By the way, an overseer is an elder. It’s good to aspire to be an elder because it shows that you love people and want to lead them further in their faith. This verse was

incredibly helpful to me early on because it affirmed my foundational calling. The call to be a vocational pastor is first and foremost a call to be an overseer, a shepherd. I was only 19 years old when this verse was showed to me by a pastor but it affirmed my basic desire. I didn't need to know exactly what that would look like but I knew that the desire itself was a good thing.

And this word aspire is a strong word. It is used in Hebrews 11, the hall of faith chapter, for those Old Testament saints who were longing for Heaven. *But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one* (Hebrews 11:16). So we are told that we should desire to be an elder in the same way we desire to be with Christ in Heaven. The desire doesn't necessarily have to be as intense, but you get the picture. Desiring to be an elder is a noble task, a wonderful thing.

What follows immediately after this verse is the long list of qualifications for an elder. So if you desire to serve as an elder you must also desire to be fully qualified as an elder. And to pick up on what I said two weeks ago, a shepherd is someone who seeks to imitate the character and priorities of Jesus. So every man should aspire to the office of an overseer, even if you never become one.

I mentioned our LEAD class two weeks ago which is not only a place to training current and prospective elders but a discipleship incubator for the whole church. One of the goals of LEAD has been to make the job of the selection committee very difficult. In other words, we want to raise up so many qualified men that the selection committee has a really hard time deciding among all of them.

If you are a woman or a young girl, you may not aspire to be an elder but you can aspire to imitate the character and priorities of Jesus. And once again, LEAD will help you do that.

Hold us accountable

You hold us accountable first of all by being engaged in the process of elder selection. The choosing and voting process are the main ways to hold your elders accountable. But beyond that, you can ask questions at any time. You can attend elder meetings. They are open meetings. You can join us for all or part of the meeting. If we seem to go astray or be making a questionable decision, we need to know your opinion. And if there is serious sin, we need to be removed from being an elder.

We want to be good shepherds to you but since we are fellow sinners, we have failed and will fail you. I believe that we have avoided large scale failures so far but if this did happen, I want us to be like this church. For many years, their elders and even one pastor were largely hired hands. They had a toxic relationship with one another and with the congregation. This is a Free Church in Wisconsin, but I won't name the exact church. I'm not sure how they came to repentance, but I really appreciate their level of soul searching. Listen as I read their apology to the congregation that was sent by letter to every home.

- We have failed to love you as we should
- We have failed to make peace
- We have failed to hold each other accountable

- We have failed to resolve conflict appropriately
- We have failed to trust one another
- We have failed to confess sin
- We have failed to bear with one another

We know that through these shortcomings we have failed both God and you. We know because of our failure to protect and support you in your role at _____ Church, we have hurt you. We realize we can't go back and change anything. We are earnestly seeking to follow God better. We have sought his forgiveness and repented. Now we are sincerely apologizing and seeking your forgiveness.

This is humility. This is repentance. This is the kind of shepherds we want to be.

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