

Gleanings

'...the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people'
(1 Samuel 13:14)

'... whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all'
(Mark 43-44)

'We have different gifts, ... if it is leadership, let him govern diligently'
(Romans 12:6, 8)

'I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize'
(1 Corinthians 9:27)

'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.' (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Book Review

Like a Shepherd Lead Us (Vol.1) and Good Shepherds (Vol.2)

David Fleer & Charles Siburt (editors), Leafwood Publishers, 2006 & 2007

Biblically, the terms shepherd (pastor), overseer (bishop) and elder (presbyter) all describe different aspects of the same role within a local church. That role is for mature men to supervise the spiritual growth and welfare of each member of the congregation and the congregation as a whole.

In contrast, many denominations professionalise the preaching role, incorporating a pastoring function. It was inevitable that their paid preacher, regardless of the level of spiritual maturity, would be given the title 'pastor' and the role of elders marginalised. This has also happened to some extent among Churches of Christ, although we have so far avoided use of the term 'pastor' for preachers.

A lack of biblical leadership causes churches to suffer. As there are so few books on shepherding, Leafwood's publication of these two volumes is welcome. The editors lament the paucity of training and resources for shepherds, but in doing so perhaps over-value the academy (that has supported the professionalisation of preaching) and under-value the on-the-job training that maturing Christian men should experience.

Shepherds should be appointed within a church because they are recognised as such by their behaviour within the church. They should not be recognised as shepherds only because they are appointed. That said, developing shepherds is not easy. And existing shepherds should be encouraged to grow in the role. This is where Leafwood's two volumes are helpful.

The two volumes are a collection of essays by twelve authors who, for the most part, focus on practical aspects of shepherding. The first book's subtitle is 'Guidance for the gentle art of pastoring'. Most of the authors have academic connections with Abilene Christian University or Rochester College in the US; only three are elders. While this may be considered a weakness, it is evident from their writings that all have benefited from their experiences with elders and have keenly considered issues relevant to shepherding a church. Also, although their language is sometimes what you would expect from academics, it is accessible. To my knowledge, of the authors, only Randy Harris has visited Australia.

In the first volume, Randy Harris encourages elders to move from a state where they feel overwhelmed by busyness to spend more time becoming the 'deep people' he believes the church most needs. Mark Love makes practical suggestions about the role of prayer by shepherds in their care of souls. David Wray makes a theological case for the pastoral role of elders described in Ezekiel 34 over organisational oversight. Rubel Shelly uses the compassion of Jesus recorded in John 9 as a basis for the task of pastoring to the sick and dying. Jeff Childers offers advice about involving children in church life, training them for a baptised lifestyle that effectively prepares them for baptism. Randy Lowry provides guidelines for managing church conflict. Greg Stevenson concludes the volume by using Hebrews 4:11-12 as a basis to consider how church leaders can promote communication with a younger generation characterised by a media-saturated culture.

Carl Holladay begins the second volume by showing how Acts cultivates the church's senses of history, identity, mission, community, inquiry, adventure and risk. James Thompson shows how Paul's letters create a vision for spiritual formation that is measured by the abandonment of self-centredness and progress in loving one another. This provides a good foundation to look at some very difficult issues. Randy Harris and Jeff Childers return to further explore leaders' responses to diversity within a church. Virgil Fry and Paul Wilson then deal with shepherding those with a terminal illness, those who are grieving and those impacted by sexual abuse. The volume concludes with a vision of an effective elder from the perspective of a younger person.

Whilst we may not agree fully with each author, these books offer an eldership a resource they can read so that, together, they can discuss how they can grow in their role and better serve their congregation. ■

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