

EPISKOPOS: THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP IN HEALTHY FUNCTIONAL CHURCHES

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Much has been written in recent years about the importance of church leadership. Churches of all sizes, types, and situations need, and depend on, effective leadership. This is no surprise when one surveys the biblical texts on leadership. When Paul speaks with the church leaders from Ephesus (Acts 20), he reminds them of the important roles they have in the church. Timothy was in Ephesus when Paul wrote to him about church leadership (1 Timothy 3). This text is often used to identify qualifications (I prefer to call them qualities or characteristics) of church leaders, but it is also about what leaders do. When Paul later writes to the church at Ephesus (4:11-16), he explains even more about the importance and roles of church leaders. God put leaders in the church to equip the members of the church for ministry. Only when every member functions appropriately can the body become mature, avoiding the cultural challenges that destroy Christ-centered teaching, speaking the truth in love, harmonizing and connecting, building itself up, and growing.

Leadership is especially important in churches that are able to reverse downward trends and become strong again. Whether you call them breakout, comeback, or turnaround churches, these churches usually depend upon new, effective leadership. Effective leadership has the ability to re-envision and reframe the kind of catalytic activities or events that disable and destroy churches, and to enable such churches to be strong again. That is a function of leadership. The kind of leadership required is risk-taking, critical-thinking, and vision-casting. Most often, it comes when a new person with these characteristics enters the church system as a leader.

But the presence of a new leader or group of leaders is not a panacea unless the leadership model includes a team approach. No one person is the answer. The leadership team must learn to function together with the goal of helping the body function together. It is not easy. We have a model of church leadership today that has saluted the teaching of the Bible concerning leaders, but has mostly developed corporate boards over the past 50+ years. Our leaders spend most of their time making decisions. They have little time for program superintending or people shepherding.¹

¹ The tasks mentioned here reflect the three distinct words used to describe leaders in the church. All are used in the context of Acts 20. Elders, from the Greek *presbuteros*, may reflect the presence of elders in the Jewish community. Decision making is a vital and valid role of elders. Bishops, from the Greek *episkopos*, is literally overseers. Modern concepts which are roughly parallel include administration or superintending. Finally, the shepherds are those who feed the flock. While the noun form does not appear in Acts 20, the verb shows up in “to feed to flock...” Of course shepherds do more than nurture their flocks, but the use of a new verb—shepherding—to describe what these do may have distracted from the basic biblical concept in *poimaino*.

The purpose of this article is to explore some of the dynamics of church leadership from the overseeing perspective.

Leaders are those who have the ability to LOOK at the world through the eyes of God.

Leaders are driven by a vision. Leaders begin with the end in mind. From Ephesians 4:11-16, one can observe that leaders are aware of biblical teaching (teachers), the flock (pastors), and the work of the members (equippers). Because leaders are gifted by and dependent on God, they are risk-takers. They can evaluate the situation and effectively share the vision with those they lead. Leaders are lookers, visionaries, those who continually see the world in which the church functions.

Leaders must know how to OVERLOOK some things, and how to choose the right things to OVERLOOK.

Leaders take the lead in spiritual development within the local church. Spiritual leaders will be criticized, questioned, and doubted. Leaders must be secure enough in their relationship with God that they can overlook slights.

Without sanctioning sin, leaders are often called to overlook faults and forgive as God forgives. When church leaders set the example, the members can be forgiving enough to overlook one another. Leaders genuinely love those in their charge. They understand what it means to love one another—to love your brother or sister more than your own preferences or opinions.

This is a difficult aspect of leadership development. Leaders and their families who overlook others begin by overlooking themselves. This does not suggest they excuse themselves or fail to hold themselves accountable. It suggests that the first preferences and opinions they overlook are their own.

One little girl was asked by her Sunday Bible class teacher, “What do the elders do?” Her response was wise beyond her years. “They overlook the flock.” Leaders are overlookers.

Leaders must LOOK OVER the flock.

This is another way of saying that church overseers keep the flock in view. Leaders do not primarily keep programs in view; leaders primarily keep the people in view. They continually think about the flock. They know immediately of difficulties. Leaders must be committed enough and wise enough to look over the members. This suggests they intimately know the flock. They see the strengths and weaknesses; they know the habits and challenges, of the members. Leaders who are able to LOOK OVER the flock are able to use the Bible to manage conflict. They are able to get the facts in any situation and to handle false witnesses. Only when leaders are in the habit of regularly looking over the flock can they help the members through the troubled times of life. Only with this perspective can they know what to help to assist.

Leaders are charged to LOOK OUT FOR the flock.

Certainly the church must love enough to look out for and to care for one another. But church leaders are especially charged to LOOK OUT FOR the flock for which they are

accountable. In this sense, leaders are guides who direct and protect the flock as they live their life. Leaders are as concerned about the missteps of the flock as they are the misunderstandings of the flock. A church member who knows that the church leaders are looking out for him or her has a wonderful spiritual blessing.

Leaders are among the first to LOOK FOR the flock.

When the church assembles, and some members are noticeably absent, the leaders go look for them immediately. The parable of the Lost Sheep (in the parable sequence which includes the Prodigal Son in Luke 15) even suggests that the shepherd acts immediately. One group of church overseers took this so literally that two of the leadership team (there were seven overseers in this congregation) began contacts with absentees during the morning assembly. Leaders take the lead in LOOKING FOR the members when their situations, needs, or dangers are unknown.

Leaders also take the lead in LOOKING FOR those who are outside of Christ and in need of spiritual life. Certainly, the church must be compassionate enough to look for the lost, but the example of the church leaders is one of the primary motivations in local churches that are actively involved in evangelistic outreach.