

The Body: His Plan, Our Part Part Two: Pastoral Oversight

Hebrews 13:17-18; 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on March 17, 2024.

The Grumpy Golfer

Leadership expert Peter Drucker is quite quotable. Of his many quotes are such gems as “if you want something new, you have to stop doing something old,” and “results are obtained by exploiting opportunities, not by solving problems.” Of all of his quotes, one that is often cited is his saying, “The four hardest jobs in America are the president of the United States, a university president, a CEO of a hospital, and a pastor.”¹ Now, you can roll your eyes if you want to, but Drucker was one of the most influential leadership trainers of the 20th century, one who is not necessarily noted as being overwhelmingly Christian, and yet he lists pastor. Pastoring is not as easy as it looks.

Consider these questions my pastoral mentor once listed concerning the office of pastor. Do you know what it means to try to say something fresh and relevant and vital to a congregation, not once a week, but sometimes two or three times? Does your job keep one of your feet in the realm of death and dying, leading funerals for friend after friend after friend, stuffing your own grief so you can try to comfort a family in their grief?

Have you ever tried to lead an organization that runs primarily on volunteer power and is funded through uncoerced donations given by willing people? Does your family live in a fishbowl, knowing that people watch your lives intently, holding you to a higher standard, and if you move one toe off of the path, many call you a hypocrite, and others will want you fired? Have you ever invested so much time trying to help mend broken families that you put your own family’s health at risk?

Do you have to deal with being put on a pedestal that you do not want and then wrestle with the fact that people think you are a better man than you are? Do you ever worry in your line of work that you will get credit or glory that only belongs to God?

¹ Phillip Wise, “How My Mind Has Changed About the Pastorate,” *Christian Ethics Today* (Summer 2010), 7.

Do you regularly have people ask you life's most difficult questions, expect you to have definitive answers, and then are disappointed when you don't? Where you work, is eternity at stake? Do you often work for weeks at a time without a full day off?

Today we continue a series focusing on what the Scripture tells us is God's plan for the body of Christ, the church, and our role within that plan. This morning we consider God's plan for pastoral oversight of the church under the leadership of Jesus. I invite you to Hebrews 13:17-18. Like last week, we will consider several other texts in support. (read text)

Called to Minister

To be clear, all Christians are called to be ministers and servants. In that regard, there is equality before God for all believers, as all who are saved are God's children, heirs. But some, not all, are called by God to serve in this special role of leadership. This office is referenced in several places: *Hebrews 13:7* – “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith.”

Hebrews 13:17 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 – “Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to those who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and to regard them very highly in love because of their work.”

Acts 20:28 – (speaking to the elders of Ephesus), “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood.”

In the early church, these leaders were referred to by one of a few terms, pastor/elder/overseer.

Scanning the New Testament churches, pastoral leadership or eldership was universal, and there were typically more than one serving in a church. Consider the following texts that show how widespread that structure was: *Jerusalem: Acts 15:22* – “Then the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, decided to select men who were among them to send them to Antioch.”

Ephesus: Acts 20:17 – “Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and summoned the elders of the church.”

All the towns of Crete: Titus 1:5 – “The reason I [Paul] left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town.”

All the churches James wrote to when he said, “To the twelve tribes dispersed abroad” James 5:14 – “Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

All the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia that Peter wrote to in 1 Peter 5:1 – “I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed.”

Finally, all the churches Paul founded on his first missionary journey (and presumably the other journeys as well) Acts 14:23 – “When they had appointed elders for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

The universal extent of pastoral leadership in the church is more obvious when you realize that the term “pastor” is the same person designated by “bishop” or “overseer” (Titus 1:5,7; and Acts 20:17, 28). It is hard to escape the conclusion that God’s plan for the local church is to have pastors as its primary leaders.

Noble Calling

The Bible doesn’t speak volumes about the office of pastor/elder/shepherd/overseer (all words used to describe what we consider to be the office of pastor). But it does say plenty, especially in three letters written to the pastoral proteges of the Apostle Paul, Titus and Timothy. In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, he writes to Timothy about both the pastor’s character and his work.

Timothy was a younger man, installed by the Apostle Paul to oversee a network of house churches in the region of Ephesus.

Timothy had traveled with Paul and was left by the Apostle as the pastor in Ephesus. This was not an easy assignment, but what pastorate is? Timothy faced a lot of those “devil’s traps” in his assignment.

He was pastoring in a town that was the home of the beloved pagan goddess, Artemis.

Ephesus was a main commercial center in the Mediterranean Sea, a port city with paved roads as well as a massive waterway thoroughfare that led to a massive theatre, the largest of the ancient world. There pagan celebrations and emperor worship took place.

As if that wasn't difficult enough of a context in which to serve, Timothy's pastorate was also marked by issues within the church too. False teachers stirred up trouble, spreading lies about Jesus. Worship was a mess because unqualified people desired leadership. There was confusion in how to best care for widows. Timothy was drawing fire because of his age. Many felt he was too young to be the pastor of such a significant region. Greed was creeping into the church.

Not to mention the intimidation of leading a church loaded with a who's who of the early church. Paul himself planted the church on his second missionary journey and spent over two years there himself teaching. Tychicus pastored there as well. Priscilla and Aquila lived there. Apollos lived there. The Apostle John and Jesus's mother Mary lived there. So, such a young man leading so many impressive believers, could really be troubling to the young pastor. Paul's words helped Timothy and they help us too.

In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul says that being a pastor is "noble work." On the whole, the blessings of the office are supposed to outweigh the burdens. "This saying is trustworthy: 'If anyone aspires to be an overseer (pastor), he desires a noble work.'" It is an interesting concept that Paul shares here, to *aspire* to pastoral work. Paul normally appointed these men to the offices, just like Paul was appointed.

But the focus here is not on the person, rather it is on the office or the position. Paul wants us to understand that the position of pastor is such a significant matter, that it should be the type of work that a person would aspire to do. To study God's word, to preach and teach its message, to be invited into people's lives in their best and worst moments, mobilizing a church for the gospel, impacting eternity day by day – that IS noble work. It is worthy of aspiration. Sadly, statistics show us that fewer and fewer people are aspiring to this office.

You see that is the thing that Paul understands, and we should pick it up too. Pastors don't volunteer; God calls them.

According to the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus' twelve disciples didn't volunteer or show up for a job interview. Jesus looked at them and said, "Follow me." And they did. Paul never signed up to be the "apostle to the Gentiles." Jesus interrupted his plans on the road to Damascus and called him to that work, and Paul followed. Neither the twelve nor Paul "aspired" to be anything other than what they were already: fishermen, tax collectors, a persecuting Pharisee. The calling from Jesus changed all of that.

This calling is different than agreeing to hold a short-term, volunteer position. It is different from agreeing to help out in a pinch where there is a need for warm bodies. This was a life-altering change of trajectory that would have lasting implications for their families.

The Summer of '92

My story is similar. I had finished my junior year of high school and was preparing for that senior year. College loomed and the initial plan was "history teacher," with a degree from a state university.

Up until that year, ministry had never come up in any conversations with my family, the guidance counselor, or even the teachers that I really responded to strongly in school.

And then God used two Scriptures, two sisters, and two months to change everything. Through two passages of God's word, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament, God began to impress upon my heart the calling to the gospel ministry. The first is the standard youth ministry verse which comes later in 1 Timothy at 4:12: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, life, love, faith and purity." I memorized that and set about, as best as I could, in all that I said, in all that I did, and in all that I was, to be an example of Christ. Beginning around my sophomore year, I took that verse to heart.

The second passage burned a hole right through my chest. I was reading through the Old Testament, and this time had actually made it as far as Judges 2. In 2:10, we read, "That whole generation was also gathered to their ancestors.

After them, another generation rose up who did not know the Lord or the works he had done for Israel." An entire generation had no clue who God was and what He had done.

I would sit and wonder, who is supposed to tell younger people about Jesus? God married those verses together and lit a fire in my stomach to start inviting all of my friends to church and share, when I had the chance, the good news about Jesus.

And then God used two sisters who were college-aged and back to sponsor our summer camp that year. Both of them, independent of the other, mentioned that I would make a good youth minister. It was the first time that I had ever heard that option broached. I thought that pastors came from a select group of kids raised by, well, pastors. But then those two sisters and those two Scriptures would not let me rest.

So, I sat down with a friend whose dad was the pastor and asked him about doing something like his dad does. He said that, since his dad had not gone to camp with us, I should talk to him when I get home. So, I decided that since it was not convenient enough, there must not really be anything to it. And wouldn't you know what happened next and guess who won the pony?

Not five minutes after that conversation, the pastor walked in with a duffle bag. He told our camp leader that God wouldn't let him rest, and that he was supposed to be at camp with us that night. He drove over four hours to be obedient. His son shoved me over and ran over to his dad and said, "I know why you're here, dad. Come talk to Craig." I looked for a quick escape, but there was none to be had. I told him about those two verses and those two sisters and how God was working me over like a summer job with all of that. I did not aspire to that job. And yet, God called me to it.

Feeding and Leading

The function of the pastor is to feed and lead. To put it another way, pastors are responsible for teaching and governing the congregation. Pastoral leadership is guidance and direction to the church. As teachers and preachers, they oversee the life of the church and preserve its biblical faithfulness.

They preach the truth of God's word and handle Scripture with competency and reliability. Pastors wear a lot of hats.

Pastoral ministry requires a wide range of sophisticated skills – public speaking, intellectual ability, relational gifts, self-knowledge and awareness, emotional intelligence, verbal dexterity, management acumen,

floor sweeping, chair folding, pancake flipping, decoration hanging, and according to Paul's text, moral example. No wonder failure is always crouching at the door. The work is so broad.²

Straight to the Point

As we reflect back on our two verses in Hebrews, how did that strike you as you read it? The author doesn't mince words. "Obey your leaders and submit to them." When I read that, did it stiffen your neck a bit? Did it tilt your head? People LOVE the words *obey* and *submit*. For some, it stirs up our inner rebel a bit. I can be that way. I have some of that stubborn pride in me.

And yet the text is clear. Obey and submit. It is awkward enough to read this text, let alone talk about it. I don't want it to sound self-serving, but it might. It could sound prideful. I'm your pastor, not your dad.

Besides, I fall short in a lot of ways. I am sure some of you keep better track of my shortcomings than you do your own. I do find comfort that God calls broken people, imperfect people, into leadership. Several biblical characters would have a hard time getting called to pastoral leadership in many of today's churches.

Abraham was known to be a liar when he got in trouble. Even almost killed his own son. Moses stuttered and had a short fuse. Killed a guy. David had a wandering eye and was the husband of more than one wife. Also, had a guy killed. Isaiah was a man of unclean leaps and admitted as much in a worship service. Jeremiah was too emotional. He cried. A lot. Was a bit of a chicken-little, always seeing the sky-falling. John the Baptist was a decent enough preacher but was not tactful. Also, sloppy dresser. Weird diet too. Peter denied Christ in public multiple times. Speaks first, thinks later.

And even Jesus would have trouble being considered as leader in many churches. He believes that everyone is welcome. He regularly angers church leaders. He talks too much about money. He spends too much time with sinners and not with legacied members. He thinks He is the boss. He would never keep a job in today's churches.

² William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 23.

I realize that I am not an upgrade of those shepherd leaders in the New Testament. All of God's pastors – except Jesus – miss the mark somehow. In over five and half years, you've certainly seen my short-comings. Every pastor makes mistakes. And in today's technologically advanced era, you can go home and listen to better preachers anytime you want. You can watch more dynamic services online. You can hear about churches that are blowing the doors off their buildings. I realize that I don't always compare favorable with many others. I know that and I know you know that.

And yet, here I am. Standing in front of you and God and everybody and saying, "Obey me and submit to me." It is uncomfortable. Honestly, I am not even comfortable with the text saying it. But it does. "Obey your leaders and submit to them." And that is the larger point. The book says it. God is saying that to his church through his Word.

So there is a word here about pastoral authority and the role it plays in God's plan for the church. Jesus is the leader. The pastor/elder provides oversight. We simply do not do justice to the Bible's plan of a pastor without addressing it. God confers some authority on his pastors. Whether they want it or not. Whether you want to give it to them or not. God confers it. Listen to Paul describe God's design for church leadership in Ephesians 4:

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. (Eph. 4:11-13)

I didn't invent this plan. God did. Pastor Jason and I do not serve here because it was our lifelong ambition to be on staff at FBC Martinsburg. Neither Jason nor myself finagled our way into the positions we hold.

God called us here. We both have different stories about the journey, but we didn't put the plan together to become your pastors. God did. But I do find it difficult to preach Hebrews 13:17. However, 13:18 is a bit easier. Pray for us.

Pray for Jason and myself. There is no way that we will see God do what God has done and does in this church without your faithful intercession for your pastors. Pray for us daily.

There is a prayer from Martin Luther that is a nice place to close this morning. Perhaps it can help guide your prayers for us:

Oh Lord God, you have made me a pastor and teacher in the church. You see how unfit I am to administer rightly this great responsible office; and had I been without your aid and counsel I would have surely ruined it long ago. Therefore, I invoke you.

How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. I, too, desire ever to learn and to keep your Word my constant companion and to meditate upon it earnestly.

Use me as your instrument in your service. Only do not forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

Jason knows his frailties. I know mine too. We ask that you pray for us and follow our lead as we keep watch over your souls. Not your feelings. Not your preferences. Not your traditions. Your souls. It will not always be easy for us, and it will not always be easy for you. But it is God's plan for a healthy, joyful church that looks more like Jesus and advances His gospel and expands His Kingdom.