

“Assistant Shepherds”

1 Peter 5:1-11

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • August 21, 2016

This morning we have done something that might seem to be rather ordinary. We have installed officers to serve as elders and trustees. But it seems to me that this is anything but ordinary. One of the most significant things we do as Presbyterian Christians is set apart elders to lead the church, as we have done this morning. So this morning I want us to spend some time looking at what it means to be a leader in the church, because lots of people get confused about this and sometimes people get hurt.

Let's begin by asking, What is leadership? What does it mean to lead? And specifically, what is church leadership? Field Marshal Montgomery defined leadership as “The capacity and will to rally people to a common purpose together with the character that inspires confidence and trust.” Or you might like this one better. Tom Landry, the former coach of the Cowboys, said leadership is “getting men to do what they don't want to do in order to become what they've always wanted to be.” When we think of a “leader” many of us think of someone out front leading the charge or someone inspiring people to do great things. Maybe you think of someone in a position of authority.

But just having the authority doesn't make someone a good leader. Let me ask you something. When was the last time you sent a telegram? A long time. It's been over ten years since Western Union delivered their last telegram. In 1876, however, Western Union was king of communications in the United States. They had a nationwide network of telegraph offices sending and receiving messages by Morse code. But something else happened that year. Alexander Graham Bell successfully transmitted his voice electrically through a wire. The telephone was born.

What you may not know is that in 1876 Bell offered to sell his patent for the telephone to Western Union for \$100,000. The president of Western Union at the time, William Orton,

looked at Bell's telephone and decided they weren't interested. He said it was nothing more than a toy. As a result, Bell started his own communications company, which went on to dominate telecommunications in our country for years. Ironically, two years later Orton said that if he could get the patent from Bell for \$25 million it would be a bargain. In 1876, William Orton not only ran the largest communications business in the country, he was an expert in telegraph communications. But as he learned the hard way, leadership requires more than just a position of authority and even more than technical expertise.

In the Presbyterian tradition, the office of elder, or presbyter, is the highest office and the most important job. It's so important that we name our churches after them. The word Presbyterian comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means elder. Presbyterian means “ruled by elders.” In a sense it's a position of authority. The people you elected to serve also have gifts and abilities they bring. But leadership in the church is more than that. So this morning I want us to take a few moments to talk about the important role of elders in the church by looking at the 3 Rs. I'm not talking about reading, riting, and rithmatic. I'm talking about the *reason*, the *requirements*, and the *responsibilities* of elders in the church.

First of all, the *reason*. Why do we go through this process of electing and then ordaining elders? The primary reason is the Bible. We find the origins of the office of elder very early in the Old Testament. For example, in our reading from Exodus we find Moses exhausted from trying to do all the work himself. His father-in-law wisely tells him to find some leaders to help carry out the work. In the book of Numbers, God tells Moses, “Go get 70 people that are already leaders and I will put some of my Spirit on them so they can bear the burden of leadership with you.” We find the same principle in the New Testament. In the Apostle Paul's letter to Titus He says, “This is

why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” In other words, he gave Titus the job of identifying people to serve as elders to bear the burden of the people.

Ultimately, though, the reason for elders is Christ himself. As we look at this passage from 1 Peter we get some guidance on the office of elder. And the reason given for serving well is verse 4: “when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” The church—the flock—belongs to Jesus. For generations Presbyterians have explained it this way: “All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body.

Christ calls the Church into being, giving it all that is necessary for its mission to the world, for its building up, and for its service to God. Christ is present with the Church in both Spirit and Word. It belongs to Christ alone to rule, to teach, to call, and to use the Church as he wills, exercising his authority by the ministry of women and men for the establishment and extension of his Kingdom.” The reason for elders is to point people to the Chief Shepherd, Jesus.

That brings us to the *requirements*. You know, we don’t really require anything for someone to come worship with us and participate in much of the life of the church. We don’t insist that you have to believe a certain thing or accept any particular doctrine in order to worship. Even if you don’t believe in Jesus. ESPECIALLY if you don’t believe in Jesus. Everyone is welcome. If you decide to join our church there are some basic beliefs required that are common to most Christian churches. You must recognize that you are a sinner in need of a savior, you must trust Jesus alone as your savior, and you must promise to

live as a follower of Christ and an active member of the church.

But for those called to serve in leadership there are higher standards. Ordain means to consecrate, to set apart for God. Elders are called and set apart by God and it’s God who requires more. 1 Peter shows us the reality of the way of life for elders, which all of us should be striving to live. Elders are to be firm in their faith, casting their anxieties on God, whose “mighty hand” is able to deliver us from our troubles. Peter tells us in verse 8 to be “sober-minded,” meaning mature, clear-thinking; and to be watchful. Elders are not to seek any kind of self-serving gain, they are not to be domineering, and they are to be humble toward one another. General George Custer famously said, “There are not enough Indians in the world to defeat the Seventh Cavalry.” Humility is one of the key characteristics of godly leaders.

Paul’s letter to Titus gives us an even clearer understanding of the requirements. “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 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.” Maybe the best “requirement” is to be an example to the flock. As we see in these passages, the everyday life of an elder should inspire others to get closer to Jesus.

That brings us to the third R, the *responsibility*. Verse 2 says, “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.” Elders are essentially assistants to Jesus, assistant shepherds. Leaders in the church are to follow the example of Jesus who said, “I did not come to be served but to serve.” As you can imagine, the job of assistant shepherd is not one of great glory but one of hard work.

Elders are to help lead the church the way Jesus would lead it. That means they are responsible for the care of the members of the congregation. They are to show God's love, forgiveness, and sympathetic understanding toward the people that God has entrusted to their care. Elders are to help people become firm in their faith by teaching the Bible, and they are to encourage people during times of suffering.

Finally, I want to point out that ordination is for life. Once you have been called and set apart by God you don't simply quit at the end of a term of service. You never stop being an elder, a leader of the church. You might not be

actively serving on the Session but you are still responsible in God's eyes for the spiritual leadership of the church.

So elders are to lead, but they are to lead by example. They are to be humble, firm in their faith, able to teach the faith of the Church and able to love the people of the church. In return, we need to support them in that and respect their work. 1 Timothy 3:1 says, "The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task." Indeed, to serve as an elder in Christ's church is a noble task.

Amen.