

“Equipping the Saints”

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Last week, toward the end of my sermon, I made a comment that I hadn't written down. It was something that occurred to me in the moment. I said that for some people, hearing a sermon on church government might seem like watching a cooking show. It might seem interesting (or not), but it was like getting some information you would never put to use.

I don't know how many of you have ever watched cooking shows. They used to have real cooking shows on the Food Network, but now it seems they're more likely to have strange cooking competitions, where the contestants are given odd ingredients and have to make something edible out of them. “Here's a package of gummi bears, some truffle oil, a head of lettuce, and a can of Spam. Now, do your best to give us a three-course meal.” But before those strange competitions, they used to feature chefs making various dishes that you could recreate if you so desired. I'm sure some people watched those shows to learn new techniques or to see if they could learn a new recipe that they would actually put into practice. But some of us would watch those shows simply to be entertained.

I generally don't cook. Sure, I could cook if I needed to. But I don't, because I married a woman who likes to cook and does it well. And before we got married I survived on breakfast cereal, fruit, and protein bars and shakes. But even I could be entertained by those cooking shows. I appreciate seeing people who are skilled working on their craft.

Now, here's my point: There's a big difference between watching something in order to learn techniques that you will put into practice and watching something to be entertained. If you're watching something to learn a new skill, you're trying to get better equipped. Chefs might watch cooking shows. Athletes study video. Musicians listen to recordings. But many of us are accustomed to being entertained. We watch and listen not to learn new skills, but to pass the time, or to be amused or moved or to have a bit of curiosity satisfied.

So, here's a question for all of us here today: Are we here to learn something that we will put into practice, or are we here to get some kind of spiritual entertainment? Are we here to be equipped, or to feel good about having a spiritual experience, or to do our religious duty? “I'm a righteous person because I went to church today.” If you're here to become equipped, and even

to be led, there's good news: Jesus has given his church people who lead his flock and equip his saints. But if you're here out of a sense of duty or to be entertained, I'm not sure I can help you.

Today is a continuation of what I talked about last week. It's really part two of a longer message on what the Bible says about the leaders of a church. Because of that, I'll recap last week's sermon briefly.

Last week, we learned that leaders of a church are called by three terms: overseer, elder, and shepherd. We usually call these people "pastors." "Pastor" simply comes from a Latin word that means "shepherd." We learned the qualifications for this office: men who are pastors have to have many positive moral characteristics, they must be able to teach, and they must be able to manage their own homes because they are managers over God's household, the church. We also got a glimpse of what a pastor does: he oversees and leads the church, he teaches "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), and he protects the church from false teaching and other things that might be harmful to God's people.

If you wonder why I keep saying "he," it's because two weeks ago we learned that God designed the office of pastors to be filled by men. This doesn't mean that men are somehow better than women. It just means that God designed men and women differently, and he has chosen to use some men to be pastors. Pastors are no better than other Christians; God has simply given them different spiritual gifts and different roles to play in the church.

Today, I want to continue to think about what a pastor does. A pastor shepherds the congregation, and a pastor helps equip God's people for ministry.

Let's first think about what a shepherd does. The theme of shepherding is one that runs through the whole of the Bible. Several important figures in the Bible were shepherds. Abraham, the father of Israel, had sheep (Gen. 12:16; 13:2) and herdsmen who worked for him (Gen. 13:8). His offspring would become the people of Israel. Moses grew up in Egypt, but he fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian; while away, he was a shepherd (Exod. 3:1). Later, Moses would shepherd the Israelites out of Egypt and through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. David was a shepherd, too (1 Sam. 16:11). As the great King of Israel, he would shepherd the nation (2 Sam. 5:2). Most importantly, God is called a shepherd.

Why is this important? Because it says something important about what God's people need. Think about one of the most famous passages in Scripture, Psalm 23, a Psalm of David:

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

- 2 He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
- 3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
- 4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
- 5 You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
- 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.¹

Think about all the things that David says the LORD provides for him. He leads him to pastures and waters. In other words, the shepherd provides him with food, with sustenance. He leads him in paths of righteousness. The shepherd leads David through the valley of the shadow of death. He uses two implements, a rod and staff. The rod was used to fend off wild animals. In other words, it would protect the sheep. But the staff was used to discipline and control the sheep, to keep them on the right path. So, shepherds defend and discipline.

This gives us some idea of what pastors do for their “sheep,” their “flock,” the people of their congregation. They provide spiritual food, they lead, they protect, they nudge the sheep in the right direction and provide correction when necessary.

Last week, I read a passage written by the apostle Peter. In his first letter, he writes something to his fellow shepherds, or elders. This is what he writes in 1 Peter 5:1–4:

¹ 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

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

Last week, I said that the words overseer, elder, and shepherd all refer to the same office, the same position in the church. This passage shows that. Peter addresses the elders, he tells them to shepherd the flock, and he tells them to exercise oversight. Pastors shouldn't feel compelled to do this, but they should do their jobs willingly. They shouldn't do it to get rich, but they should be eager to do the work. They shouldn't be domineering, commanding people to do what they themselves are unwilling to do. Instead, they should serve as examples to the congregation.

They should do this so that when the chief Shepherd, Jesus, comes, they will be rewarded. This shows that pastors aren't just shepherds; they're also sheep who must follow the leadership of the Great Shepherd, Jesus.

We should notice that Peter calls himself a fellow elder. Though he was an apostle, one of Jesus' first followers and a man who was authorized to lead the early church, he considered himself a pastor. And he learned a great lesson about pastoring from Jesus himself.

Many of us know Peter's story rather well. On the night when Jesus was arrested, the night before he died, he denied knowing Jesus three times. He did this to save his own life. If people knew he was with Jesus, who was arrested and was on trial, Peter might very well die, too. So, he lied about his relationship to Jesus out of fear.

Yet after Jesus died on the cross, he rose from the grave. And he later appeared to his disciples. In John's Gospel, we're told about a special encounter that Peter had with Jesus. This is John 21:15–17:

¹⁵ When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶ He said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷ He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

This is an interesting passage for a lot of reasons. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him. Three times, Peter said, "you know that I love you." These three questions and answers parallel Peter's three denials, showing that Jesus is fully forgiving Peter.

But what's interesting is that each time Peter answers, Jesus says, "Feed my lambs," or, "Feed my sheep." Jesus could simply mean, "Take care of my people." But he says "feed" each time. What is Peter supposed to feed the flock? What are all pastors supposed to feed their flock?

It seems the general answer is spiritual nourishment. But that's kind of vague. More specifically, Christians are to "feed" on Jesus (John 6:51, 53, 55, 58). That's metaphorical, of course, but the point is that Jesus gives us life. He is the food that strengthens our souls. But how do we know Jesus? Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). And what is Jesus' voice? How do we hear it? We hear Jesus' voice in the pages of the Bible. The whole Bible is, one way or another, about him. The whole Bible is God's written word, and Jesus is the Word of God, truly God himself. So, we can say that the whole Bible is Jesus' word to us. And Jesus himself said,

"Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 [Deut. 8:3]).

So, if God's written word is food that gives us access to God's incarnate Word, Jesus, and if pastors are supposed to feed the flock that food, then the main way that pastors provide for their congregation is to feed them Scripture. The best way I can help you know God, keep you on the path of righteousness, protect you from false teaching, drive away fears that may surround you as you pass through your personal valleys of the shadow of death, and correct you is to teach you the Bible. That's why I serve up heaping portions of Scriptural meals each Sunday. A pastor teaches with the Bible, leads with the Bible, protects against false doctrine with the Bible, and corrects with the Bible. The pastor heals the wounded and comforts the hurting with the Bible. You might say that both a pastor's rod and staff are the Bible. That is why one of the qualifications of a pastor is the ability to teach (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9).

Feeding a congregation the spiritual food of the Bible doesn't mean that unless you hear Scripture read in a church service, you won't understand it, or that you can't grow by reading the Bible on your own. But what I've found is that many people have a hard time understanding how to read the Bible, how to understand what a passage means in its context. Most people don't have the ability to teach Scripture. A pastor has been spiritually gifted to have certain insights into spiritual matters. And that gifting should be developed through experience, training, and education. The pastor then preaches and teaches the Word to the congregation, helping them to understand how they can read the Bible and interpret it and apply it to their own lives.

So, a pastor is a shepherd who leads, provides the spiritual food of the Bible, protects the congregation from false teachings, and corrects the congregation when false teaching or sinful practices enter into a church.

The pastor also equips Christians to do ministry. I want to look at another passage, this one from the apostle Paul. It's found in his letter to church in Ephesus. In Ephesians 4, Paul talks about the unity of the church. To have true unity, the church must grow up, and one of the main ways that the church grows is to become equipped to do ministry. We're going to zero in on a few verses, but to understand the context, I want us to read verses 1–16 of Ephesians 4:

¹ I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. ¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

That's a long passage, but hopefully you understood the main points. Paul begins by saying he wants the church to walk in a manner worthy of the calling they have received. In other words, they've been adopted in God's family through the death of Jesus, which pays the penalty for our rebellion against God. If we trust in Jesus, if we've been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, then we're forgiven of our sins, we're reconciled to God, and we're his children. So, Paul says, “Act like you're God's children. Be humble and gentle and patient. Bear

with one another. Have peace with one another. Just as there is only one true Lord and God, one true faith, one true baptism, there should be one true church, perfectly united.”

Then Paul says in verse 7, “But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.” The body of Christ, the church, us unified, but within that unity there is diversity. Though every person is made in the image of God, made to reflect God’s glory, made to worship and serve God, made to love and obey God, not all of us have the same abilities and talents. Not all of us have the same spiritual gifts. We call these “spiritual gifts,” because they are gifts given to us by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God, through Jesus Christ, the Son of God. These gifts are abilities that should be used to serve the church.

What Paul says here is that Jesus, after ascending to heaven, gave the church certain people to build the church up. Jesus is the eternal Son of God who descended to earth to become a human being in order to fulfill God’s designs for humanity. Unlike us, he lived the perfect human life, always reflecting the glory of God, always obeying and worshipping God, perfectly loving other people. In short, he never sinned. Yet he died on the cross, not for his own sins, but for the sins of his people. Everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, who trusts that he alone makes us right with God, is forgiven of their sins because Jesus’ death already paid for them on the cross.

But not only did Jesus give his life. After dying, on the third day he rose from the grave. He rose in a body that is indestructible and immortal. His resurrection proved that his death paid for sins in full, that he has power over sin and death. His resurrection is also the first installment of a new creation that God will bring about whenever Jesus returns to earth. After rising from the grave, Jesus ascended to heaven, and he poured out the Holy Spirit on the church. It is the Spirit that enables certain Christians to perform certain roles in the church.

Here, Paul says that Jesus gave the church “apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.” The apostles were people like Paul and Peter, people whom Jesus called to himself and authorized to represent him on earth. These were people who saw Jesus on earth after he rose from the grave. Paul was unique in that he saw visions of Jesus after Jesus ascended to heaven. Prophets were those who revealed truth from God in the first generation or two after Jesus ascended into heaven. I don’t think that we have apostles and prophets today, though there are some Christians who think we do. Earlier in Ephesians, Paul says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph.

2:20). The foundation of the church is biblical truth, revealed by the apostles and prophets. A foundation is only laid once, and there is no new, authoritative “word” from God that equals Scripture. But, certainly, the word of God equips the saints for ministry.

Evangelists are people who are especially gifted to share the message of Jesus. All Christians should be witnesses in one way or the other. But not everyone is going to be particularly good at this. Some people are more outgoing, better able to engage others in spiritual conversations. And these people can help the church do the ministry of evangelism. They can teach us how we all can tell people about how to be reconciled to God through Jesus. But there’s no indication in the rest of Scripture that there is a special office of evangelist in the church. This doesn’t seem to be an official position. But we might think of missionaries as evangelists, people whom the church should support.

That brings us to “the pastors and teachers.” This may refer to one office. In other words, Paul might very well mean “pastors who teach.” The grammar of the Greek is debatable. Perhaps Paul means that pastors equip the church for ministry, and in particular it is those pastors who teach that equip the saints for ministry (cf. 1 Tim. 5:17).

But the important thing we should see is that pastors are given to the church not do all the ministry of the church. No, pastors are given to the church to equip the saints—a word that means someone made holy by Jesus’ sacrifice and by the Holy Spirit—to do the ministry of the church. In other words, all Christians should be engaged in ministry. It’s the pastor’s job to equip Christians to minister.

As you might guess, pastors equip the saints for ministry through teaching the Bible. A pastor should teach about various roles that people play in a church. He should teach about spiritual gifts and help people to understand what their gifts are and how they can be used in the church.

This model of a pastor as equipper is different from the model that most churches have today. Some churches view pastors as the religious services provider. He’s the preacher, the one who does baptisms, weddings, and funerals, the one who visits the sick and offers counseling when people request it. More recently, churches view pastors as CEOs, as managers of a church. He is the leader, the one who manages resources, including people. Now, there are truths to both of these models. Pastors should preach and perform ceremonies and offer counseling. Pastors

should lead churches; they are overseers, managers of God’s household. But both of those models suggest that the people in the pews are consumers.

A different model is that the pastor is a trainer, or a coach. We might say he’s a player-coach, the way that Bill Russell was at the end of his career with the Celtics, or that Pete Rose was at the end of his career with the Reds (though without the gambling). These different models were identified by two writers, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, who wrote a book on ministry called *The Trellis and the Vine*. They suggest the last model, that of trainer, is the most biblical one.² According to them, when this model is used, “Our congregations become centres of training where people are trained and taught to be disciples of Christ who, in turn, seek to make other disciples.”³ The pastor doesn’t only exist to give people spiritual consumers a product. “His task is to teach and train his congregation, by his word and his life, to become disciple-making disciples of Jesus.”⁴

If we all came to church with the desire to be trained for ministry, the church would become more mature, more united. It would better reflect who Jesus is. The pastor is not the one who does all the ministry. One man, or even a few men, can’t do all the ministry of the church. And that’s not God’s design for the church. All Christians should be engaged in the ministry of a local church. I’ll talk more about this in a few weeks when we talk about the role of the congregation in the church and about spiritual gifts.

So, what do we do with this information? Hopefully, we all have a clearer understanding of what a pastor’s role is. I’m sure I could do a much better job of shepherding and equipping you. In particular, I should make sure that I do a better job of training people for ministry.

But I do want to say this to you all: you will get out of church what you put into it. If you are coming on a Sunday morning thinking that church is some kind of product to be consumed, you will be missing out. Church isn’t a product to be consumed. It certainly isn’t entertainment. It shouldn’t be like watching a cooking show and saying, “Oh, so that’s how you make a soufflé!” Are you going to make a soufflé? “No, but I think it’s really interesting to watch other people cook one, and I would like to eat one when they’re done.” That’s not how church should work.

² Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009), 94ff.

³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴ *Ibid.*

We should approach church as though we're all players on a team. We all have different roles to play. Not everyone on a baseball team is a pitcher or a catcher. Not everyone will bat leadoff or in the cleanup spot. A football team can only have one starting quarterback, but it has many linemen. You get the idea. But every player is ready to use his or her abilities. And every player should come under the leadership of the coach.

A pastor doesn't exist to please you. The Bible doesn't say that pastors are your buddies, people that you like. I don't know how much sheep like their shepherds or even agree with their shepherds. A pastor isn't the church's employee, a guy who exists to do the will of the congregation because, after all, they're paying his salary. A pastor exists to do God's will, and he does this by leading the church according to God's word.

The best way that you can benefit from Jesus' gift of pastors is to be willing to be led, to be willing to be taught, to be willing to be equipped. If you are not willing, you won't get much out of church. If you're not willing to do those things, it may be that you don't truly know Jesus. Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Part of following the Great Shepherd is following the shepherds of his church. He gave them to the church for a reason. Jesus laid down his life for the flock, to purchase them for himself. Regardless of our position in the church, all Christians should pour out their lives for Jesus. This, too, is a gift.

Let us ask God to give us the grace and the strength to do what he has called us to do in the church. Pray that I would be a better shepherd and equipper. And ask God to show you how you can be a better sheep and player on the church team. Let us be willing to listen to Jesus and act on what he has revealed to us in the pages of Scripture.