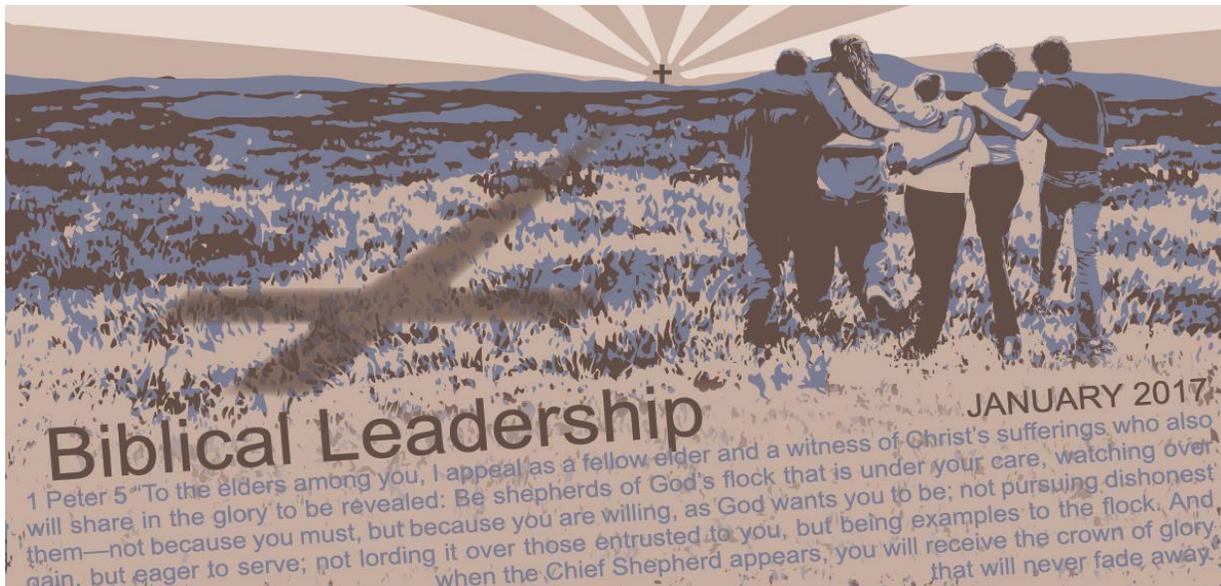


How is the Church Led in Scripture?
January Sermon Series on Biblical Leadership
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
January 8, 2017

TEXT: Acts 20:17-36



We continue this morning in our January series on Biblical Leadership. Last Sunday we started with the church, looking at the church as a whole. The church is a remarkable body. It is an eternal institution. We looked at a foundational passage, Matthew 16, where Jesus gives us a vision of who we are called to be, reminding us that the church is to be a community of people who are committed to following Jesus, that we are to be: a community that cares to know the opinions of the surrounding culture about Jesus; a community born out of a personal response to the revelation of God in Christ; a community that confesses Jesus as Christ, Son of God, Savior of the world; a community that is relying on God's sovereign power to reveal Christ around us; and that we are to be a community that Jesus builds, and, though it is heavily opposed at times in this world, will one day fill the earth. I hope that this week the ground level under your feet has risen a little bit, because the Kingdom of God is a mountain that is filling the earth, that cannot be prevented, cannot be stopped. Even the demons, when they saw Jesus, said: "You are early. Have You come to torment us before the time?" They know; they can see the end.

This is the winning team. We saw that last week. We also said that it is a community that is based on radical discipleship, holy restraint, and a sacred mission. We began looking at biblical

leadership in the church by looking first at the church as a sacred, beautiful, and glorious body of Christ, and it is what is at stake in the church why wide leadership matters so much. So this morning, we turn to the question of how the church is led in Scripture, what the paradigm, the model of biblical leadership is, and we see once again God's sovereign, holy wisdom for guiding our life together. There are lessons for us about how the church is led, but these are transferable to whatever sphere of influence you are in and where God has placed you as a leader. This morning we look at how the church is led. The thesis is that in Scripture the church is led through a shared leadership, through a plurality of elders that share leadership, a consecrated group of leaders. We look to Jesus first for our example in this. It is always good to start by looking at Jesus. In Matthew 10:1, we read:

“And [Jesus] called to Him His twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction.”

Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, organized the church and leadership of the church around a group, a group of twelve, signifying the restoration of Israel, but also modeling for us this shared leadership. Notice that Jesus gives to the twelve real authority. They are not figureheads. They don't have fancy business cards—they have real authority. Jesus gives them authority, and notice they have authority over unclean spirits to drive them out; they have authority to go for healing every affliction. It is remarkable to me that these twelve also contain a variety of points of view. If you will, there are Republicans and Democrats in the twelve. I know that's anachronistic, but it's remarkable to me that Jesus includes a tax collector and a zealot. Those are at the opposite ends of the political spectrum. We are never told what the backroom conversations were between Matthew and Simon the Zealot, but they must have had a few things to work out. And yet, they found together that in following Jesus they had something infinitely more in common than their political identity or opinions. Do you believe that? I really believe that. Notice that this group of twelve also has a mission. They are on a shared mission. Jesus gives them real authority. It's a shared leadership, and then He sends them out. This group is often described in Scripture as a group of elders. In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter, one of the twelve, later writes:

“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.”

I love that. Peter, as important as he is, sees himself as one among many of a group of leaders for the church. Even though he was an eyewitness of Christ, he saw himself as one among many helping lead the church. We see this in the evidence of the Jerusalem church in Acts 13. There is a situation where the church in Jerusalem was in need. The church of Antioch decided to send relief to their brothers. They did so in Acts 11:30, sending it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. Again, here is a group of people that are visible, identifiable. In Acts 15:4, we see:

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.”

Here they are again, this group of shared leaders helping guide the church forward. We see not only the example of Jesus, the evidence of the Jerusalem church, but we see the practice of Paul's missionary church plants. In Acts 14, in Paul's first missionary journey, we see this vividly as he is moving from city to city. In Acts 14:21, we see what ministry is really about, how it is conducted. In Acts 14:21, we read:

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch. . .”

We must be about the gospel. If we are not preaching the gospel, the church has no future, the church makes no difference in the world, but when they preached the gospel, the result is making disciples. People hear the word of the gospel and respond. What do you do after you preach the gospel? They made disciples. In Acts 14:22, we read that the missionary team:

“. . . strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

They remind the new believers that this life, this earthly pilgrimage, also involves tribulation and trials and difficulties, and that must be part of *Discipleship 101*, that there are challenges, obstacles. They see this before their eyes.

If we step back for one moment in Acts 14, we see that there are highs and lows in ministry. When Paul came to Lystra, he preached such a great sermon that the Lycaonians in the city said: "I think God just showed up, and it's you!" and they rushed to worship the preacher. In reality, you know this happens. There are many churches that are led by a cult of personality around a single person. That is profoundly dangerous for the church, and it is profoundly dangerous for that person, because we are not designed for that. Paul manages to avoid being worshiped, but in the next scene, we see his adversaries come and say he is teaching wrong doctrine, and in Acts 14:19, we read:

“But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.”

So we see there are the highs and lows of ministry. You can be worshiped, and you can be executed by the people you are trying to serve. We see this picture: preach the gospel; make disciples; encourage discipleship along the way; and then what do you do to help the church flourish. The next thing we see in Acts 14:23 is:

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Have you ever noticed that? To have the church flourish, the next thing that happened for the church is they appointed elders in every church and set up a shared leadership team so that the local church would flourish. God's wisdom on display: shared leadership. This is not an isolated passage, but a consistent pattern. We see this more at the end of Paul's life when he writes to Titus one of his last letters. We read in Titus 1:5:

"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."

This is a pattern that we see, not only in the New Testament, but also in the Old. In the Old Testament, this is God's design. God is King, and His community, His people are led by not one person, but by a shared group of consecrated leaders so that the movement of God's people can be mobilized to maximize their missional impact in the world. When the Lord reveals Himself to Moses in Exodus 3 at the burning bush, He reveals a divine Name: "I am Yahweh and I am sending you." In this tremendous moment of the revelation of God's Name, what is Moses commanded to do right after this? We see the first instruction he is given in Exodus 4:16:

"Go and gather the elders of Israel together. . ."

There they are, and then it's Moses and the elders who go to Pharaoh and issue the charge.

Why does God establish this as a practice for the people of God? What does an elder do? What does elder leadership teach us about the Lord, about ourselves, about God's honoring biblical leadership? For that, we turn to today's text. In Acts 20, we see the most extended conversation that Paul has with a group of elders, and we see some very powerful lessons about what it means to be a biblical leader. Many people want to lead, and yet most are unwilling to embrace the Bible's vision of leadership because it is very different from a cultural vision. It is very different from a corporate vision. It is something that echoes and reflects the leadership of the Lord Himself over His people. So in Acts 20, Paul is 25 years into his ministry, 25 years of mature reflections on what it means to preach the gospel and develop flourishing churches. In Acts 20, he calls some of the leaders of the church of Ephesus, a city where he ministered for three years. Ephesus was the fourth-largest city in the Roman world of the time, a very large, important, strategic city, and we see the ministry of the gospel flourish there. We see the church of Ephesus planting other churches in neighboring cities and a whole gospel movement happening in this whole region because of this strategic and important church. Yet we see this church is led by a group of consecrated people. They were called elders. Paul summons them to meet with him on his way to Jerusalem, and when he meets with them in Acts 20, he begins by reflecting and modeling the leadership vision that he has set before them. You cannot ask someone to lead in a way that you are not willing to lead. One of my early mentors often said to me: "Never ask the congregation to do something that you're not willing to do." So, Paul is never asking leaders to do something he is unwilling to do. Look at his

modeling of leadership in Acts 20. He gathers them together and he says in Acts 20:18:

“You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia.”

The Greek text literally says: “You know how I was with you.” There are several things about biblical leadership we see that Paul gives us here, and this is instructive for us. He says: “I am with you.” You can't do leadership from a distance. You can't parent from a distance, and he says: “I was with you.” In other words, I ate with you; I talked with you; I slept by you; I got sick nearby you, and I was with you. So he begins with a ministry of presence. Paul led with humility, and this is occasionally accompanied by tears for the people that you love. Sometimes I ‘lose it’ up here, and I think, “Are people going to lose respect for me if I'm just bawling up here?” But, I care that we know Christ and live for Him. Sometimes seeing the glory of the Lord, I just can't hold it together. Sometimes I can't hold it together when I look at you and think: “This is part of the Bride of Christ I'm looking at. This is a group of people that the incarnate Son of God willingly laid down His life and shed His blood to take you and say, ‘You're Mine!’” It's overwhelming. So, a ministry of presence; a ministry that would be characterized by humility; a leadership style in Acts 20:20 that says:

“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.”

Paul didn't hold anything back that was profitable. Leaders don't have the luxury of holding their opinions to themselves. If you know that someone needs a word of encouragement, or rebuke or challenge, you have got to speak it. Haddon Robinson used to host a daily Bible program. He was the one who taught me preaching, and he became a more direct and blunt person the older he got. He told me: “Look, what have I got to lose? I'm older and I know, so I'm just saying it.” He sat down with a man over coffee as he requested to meet with him. The man started to tell his story to Haddon Robinson. He got about 20 minutes into his story, talking about all the things he suffered, and he just went on and on and on. Haddon Robinson finally cut him off, and he said: “Look. All you told me about is your past. Who are you right now? Who are you becoming in Christ?” No one had ever asked him that so directly, and that young man wrote Haddon Robinson years later and told him: “That conversation changed my life because I realized I was something new in Christ.” So, don't hold back. God's will, God's counsel is a ministry that is characterized by what he says in Acts 20:21:

“. . . testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul's leadership vision is also Spirit-led. In Acts 20:22 he says:

“And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there.”

It's a leadership vision that is focused on the mission and not on self-preservation. If you are not careful, you will live your life trying to protect and preserve yourself. If Kenwood is not careful, we will exist to preserve ourselves, and yet Paul says in Acts 20:14:

“But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Paul said he didn't give that much account of his own life, but what he really cared about was finishing the race, finishing the course, eyes on the mission.

The last thing I see in Paul's biblical leadership modeling to these elders is a very large vision of God's will. In Acts 20:27, Paul says:

“I didn't hold back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God.”

He didn't hold back the big vision of the Lord, and leaders need this: a ministry of presence, humility, not holding back, directing to Christ, Spirit-led, focus on the mission, and a large view of God's will and purpose in Scripture. Paul has modeled that, and now he speaks to this group of elders and charges them with a very specific set of instructions beginning in Acts 20:28 in which he says:

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which He obtained with His own blood.”

Pay close attention is an imperative. It is in the plural. Again, you can't lead alone. It's a group, and he says: “Pay careful attention to yourselves, to one another, and to the whole church.” This group of people has to pay close attention to their own lives and to the other leaders around them. They are responsible for the entire flock. They are in the position of oversight or leadership, not by self-selection and not by congregational selection. They are there by the Holy Spirit's selection. The Holy Spirit has made you in this role, and the charge is to pay careful attention to *shepherd*. The ESV says *to care for*. The Greek verb is very straightforward; it's *to shepherd*. This is reflected in other translations. The New American Standard says *to shepherd it*. The NRSV says *to shepherd the church*. The King James says *to feed it*. They are to be on guard, ready to shepherd the church. This is a biblical image of leadership, of shepherding.

When we were in Israel, we saw many shepherds watching over their flocks, and every shepherd I saw was very close by the sheep. I didn't see any shepherds in a three-piece suit. They were dirty. They were with the sheep. They were watching over them. I didn't see any shepherd with an M-16. They had a rod or some kind of instrument in hand, and this is a beautiful image of shepherding the church. It is this church that Christ purchased with His very own blood. This is staggering. This small phrase—*with His own blood*—raises the significance of

leading this group of people well, to the highest order. This means that the church is a more important institution than any university, than any Fortune 500 company, than any branch of the military, than any government. The church is the group of people that has been ransomed, purchased with the precious blood of Christ. This group of people is the source of an eternal song, the saving work of Christ. In Revelation 5:9, the people who were redeemed say:

“Worthy are You to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain, and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.”

That means that you were kidnapped, and so was I, and Jesus Christ ransomed you, and that means that you belong to Him, and so do I, through faith in Him. This includes some from everywhere. We were purchased, redeemed sheep, put together into a flock, and Paul says to this group of elders: “You have got to be careful, be on your guard, be on your watch, to shepherd them.” The reason that sheep need to be shepherded is obvious for Paul in the next phrase. He tells us in Acts 20:29 that we need to be shepherded because:

“I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.”

We will be attacked, and it is naïve and foolish to imagine that the blood-bought, redeemed people of God, who will declare His praises for eternity, will just migrate through this life without any opposition. That is naïve. Paul knew from 25 years in what was going to happen. He says he knows that as soon as he leaves, fierce wolves will come in among you and they will not spare the flock. The wolf is an image of threat.

I remember when the wolf exhibit opened at the Cincinnati Zoo a number of years ago. We



were at that stage of life when we went to the zoo a lot. We were excited to see the wolf exhibit. They had this one Plexiglas viewing area where the wolves were. There they were, just wolves wandering around. They were impressive, fast-moving. I got up close and looked at the wolves behind the Plexiglas, and as I was looking, one of the wolves, the largest one in the area, saw me, made eye contact with me, and then resolved to rush the Plexiglas. He lunged at

it, bared his teeth, and snapped. I was stunned. My heart skipped a beat, and I was intimately aware of how dangerous that beautiful looking creature was. Wolves are not pets. Wolves seek to devour. I came back a couple weeks later and I saw that there there were not two large wolves in that area but just one. I saw a man who worked for the zoo and thought he would know where the other wolf was. I asked him: “Where’s the other wolf?” He looked me straight

in the eye, and he said: "He's been 'humanely euthanized' because he was attacking people that came to see him." I thought: "Wow! I experienced that." Wolves are dangerous. It is naïve to imagine that you will not be attacked. You will be attacked, and the wolves will not stay at a distance. Paul knows that. They come in. Jesus says that these wolves are like false prophets. He says in Matthew 7:15:

"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves."

I know that some of you, as earnestly as I desire to shepherd you and others, I know that there are wolves in your lives. I know that there are sources of input, teaching that you will hear, books that you will read, that will just break my shepherd's heart. Sometimes people show me the reading or a blogger they are following, and I say: "Turn it off. It's not modeling the leadership that you see it in Acts 20. It is not directing you to Jesus Christ. Beware!" But I know I cannot keep track of the 600 people of Kenwood, and that is why we need other shepherds. Paul knows that there will be wolves. He also knows that this will happen. He says in Acts 20:30, and this is very dangerous. He says:

". . . and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."

They will distort the truth and misrepresent it and will draw people to follow themselves. You can always know if someone is speaking from the Lord if they leave you with the impression that Jesus Christ is great. If someone is not speaking from the Lord, they will often leave you with the impression that there is maybe some suspicion here, mistrust, sow seeds of discord: "Follow me. I know." If you listen to someone for a while and they leave you with the impression that we should robustly together be following Jesus, that's a safe voice. But if a person invites you, whether it's a charismatic online pastor that you listen to, or that is someone even here that says: "Just listen to me," and they leave you with the impression that they are the source, beware!

The charge to these elders is first a protecting, guarding, and again it's naïve to imagine that we don't need this. I need help in doing this for this beloved church. Paul also then says a second imperative to the elders. He says in Acts 20:31a: "*Be alert!*" This is the same verb Jesus uses multiple times in Matthew 25: "*Be watchful; be on your guard; be vigilant.*" I like Jerome's translation: *vigilante, be vigilant*. You ought to be vigilant. Be vigilant in this way, so protect the flock, but also be diligent. Be diligent in carrying out of leadership. What does this translate into? For Paul, predominately this translates into a robust generous feeding of the flock from God's Word. In Acts 20:31b, Paul says:

". . . remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears."

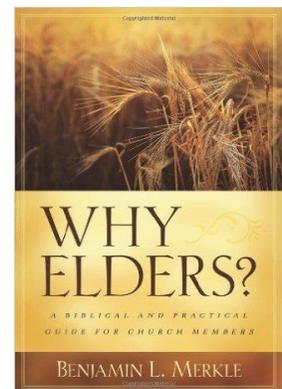
Then he says in Acts 20:32:

“And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Good leadership leads you to God and to Christ. Good leadership says to you: “Build your life on Jesus Christ’s Word.” I praise God for the godly mentor in Mike’s life who said: “When you’re in a moment of challenge or crisis, start feeding your soul regularly on God’s Word.” I love that. I didn’t tell him to do that. Someone else did, someone who was helping to shepherd his soul toward the Lord. Feeding on God’s Word. Paul says that shared leaders must protect, defend, and guard, but must also build. How are we going to build Kenwood? We could invest in a slick marketing program; we could print thousands of glossy flyers; I could model my wardrobe on the latest fashion. How is this church to be built? Paul wants to build the church through the Lord and His Word. I think that’s good material to build with. The Word of God builds us up, makes us strong in the present, and it gives us a future inheritance among all those sanctified, made holy by faith in Christ. The challenge of biblical leaders in Acts 20 is to lead with diligent shepherding. Let me apply this in three very concrete ways for us.

Number one: I want to challenge those who have been entrusted with leadership here to lead in this way. As obvious as this sounds, this is very challenging, and let me assure you I have applied this to myself for several hours before inviting you to model our leadership on what we see in Paul’s own life in Acts 20. If you have been entrusted with the position of leadership, then lead with diligent care and vigilance, protect, and guard, and feed generously, and be at your post with diligence.

Number two: I want to invite us as a congregation to embrace this biblical vision of leadership, this plurality of elders as God’s description of how a church is lead. I think it’s a beautiful picture: a dedicated group of shepherds; balanced gifts; vigilant care of each other in the church; feeding, protecting, guiding the church. For what reason? Not for holding on of power; it’s shared power. Why is the church set up this way? It is set up this way to maximize the mission of the church. That’s the reason and to teach us all to follow Christ together. As we think more about this together, I want to invite you to read this short book, *Why Elders*, by Benjamin L. Merkle. We live in a society that doesn’t read, but Kenwood reads. God’s people need to read because what we’ve been given from the voice of our heavenly Father is in a Book.



Number three, and with this I want to close. It is a challenge for us to be shepherded well. When I think of the image of a sheep, a sheep has no natural defenses; they moving groups; they get easily lost; and yet they are God’s creation and the image that He uses to describe us most often. To be shepherded well means to listen to the Shepherd; keep your eyes on the Shepherd; don’t try to go your own way. Hebrews 13:17 says:

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”

They will give an account to the Lord. We easily have picked up in this cultural moment that we live a praxis of complaining or grumbling. We have almost made it a strange virtue to critique those in leadership when the Scripture invites us otherwise, which we saw in Numbers. Let’s move forward together. Let’s lead with God-honoring, biblical leadership, with shepherding care and vigilance. Let’s grow together in understanding and reflect this model together. Let’s be led well so that God’s flock will move safely through this life, growing, flourishing, bringing honor to His name. Let’s pray.



Lord Jesus, we extol You, and we magnify You. We thank You for the vision of the church as Your Bride, Your flock. We ask that You would build Kenwood and that it would be a flourishing community. We pray that You would raise up among us additional godly leaders that would point us to Jesus, that would take care of one another and Your flock here. Lord, we love You, we thank You that You invite us all to follow You, and that is our earnest desire, that You would use this church to bring glory and honor to Your Name. Jesus, we magnify You. We want to follow You wholeheartedly.

In Jesus’ Name, Amen.