

Shepherding

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Shepherding the Flock

An Interview with Pastor Pete Hurst

(Pastor Hurst is senior pastor of Calvary Reformed
Presbyterian Church in Hampton, Virginia)

Question: I Peter 5:2 commands elders to shepherd the flock. What does "shepherding" mean particularly?

Answer: As I understand the word "shepherding" it has the same meaning as "ruling." Shepherding then is a ruling or leadership responsibility. As it pertains to the flock, shepherds are the chief rulers or leaders over the local congregation. This will express itself in different ways.

It includes general oversight over every aspect of the flock's lives in which scripture gives elders responsibility. Biblical shepherding involves teaching, preaching, counseling, praying, and giving correction when necessary.

Question: In practice, what do many interpret shepherding the flock to mean?

Answer: In many churches shepherding the flock has come to mean praying with that member when a special need arises or something like that. Quite honestly, I do not know that many ruling elders think about shepherding the flock.

Answer: They are supposed to keep a record of these visits. We try to complete them by the end of the year. Toward the end of the year I will do a roll call in each stated session meeting and ask each elder what families they have visited on his list.

This is good for us. Each elder knows it is coming. Thus the visits have to be completed. I say this in a good way. It is good that we are held to a schedule. We usually set a date such as Mar. 1st at which time we want to have our visits completed.

We then schedule our annual planning meeting for the elders. At that meeting we will go over the visits and talk about the responses to the questions in general. We will talk about any problems or concerns that we have.

We may not discuss specific people because maybe it should not go beyond the elder and that family. We do not want to be involved in gossip.

This is healthy for the elders to have a pulse on the congregation. It is also healthy for the congregation to know that someone is going to be expressing their concerns to the Session. There might be some elders who are afraid of this. They may think that it may make the preacher feel bad because someone is not getting anything out of the sermons. It may make the other elders feel bad because they do not feel like they are showing enough love to them. Problems come up. Thus this is a reason some elders may not want to make shepherding visits. They are afraid to get into someone else's life. They are afraid of what problems may arise and need to be addressed as a result of a shepherding visit.

Question: How long on the average does a shepherding visit take?

Answer: As little as on hour, sometimes two hours. I would say that on the average a visit will take an hour and a half. With a single person it may only take forty-five minutes. I know some elders have spent three hours in a visit. I personally think that is too long.

Question: Assume you are in a church where this type of oversight is not currently practiced. How would you as a pastor train elders in the importance of shepherding visits?

Answer: As to the importance of it I would attempt to emphasize it in the preaching of the Word. I may be preaching in the Gospels and could show Christ with the disciples. If I am in the Old Testament I could show the work of Moses and the elders under him. If I am working through the epistles I could instruct the elders on this subject from numerous passages and also make application to the elders in regard to this oversight from Acts.

No matter where you are teaching and preaching in Scripture one can make reference to the fact that all elders are called to be shepherds of the flock. One of the most important things to remember is that, as pastor, I have several opportunities on the Lord's Day and perhaps during the week to teach the doctrine that all elders are called to practice shepherding the flock.

I have also done other things. I let people know that I am an elder among elders. They know we all share oversight responsibilities. We have been very careful to involve all the elders in morning worship. They have the pastoral prayer. They lead in responsive readings and the confession of faith. They are before the people on a regular basis. They understand that, in their involvement, they are being elders. (I stress to them that only they can be an elder.) Sometimes an elder likes to visit newcomers to the church or he wants to do something else. There is no problem with any of this. However, anyone can only do so much. Thus it is important to emphasize to the elder that only they can be an elder. Others can visit newcomers, etc., but only elders can be elders.

I explain to new members that we have working elders. In other words, the elders are not "yes" men for the preacher. Elders in our congregation have responsibilities. They are expected by the people and by each other to carry out these responsibilities.

If the elders do not see the responsibility of shepherding visitation it will not happen. You must begin with them seeing that this is faithfulness to Christ.

Question: How does the pastor train the congregation to receive a shepherding visit?

Answer: I have already partially answered that. While the pastor is training the elders by making various applications in his preaching and teaching ministry, the congregation is learning the role of the elders —

frankly there are people who visit our church and they can't find the door quick enough to get out. The reason is that they cannot hide here and they know that we plan to be a part of their lives and we expect them to be a part of our lives. We live in a military area and many of them run to that chapel where they can just be a number and anonymous. The predominate response that we have experienced in the 15 years that I have been here is that it brings people in. "People realize here are people who are interested in me." Our numbers have grown because of this procedure. They see it as a practical approach of trying to maintain personal contact and they appreciate it.

Question: Another criticism could be that we don't have a right to pry into people's lives. They need to answer these questions before God.

Answer: Well, there are probably some areas of life in which elders should not initiate questions because they would have no reason to do so. All these questions are fair game: personal worship, family worship, relationship between husband and wife, parent-child, the education of their children, tithing, relationships with other people in the church, and ministry. If someone said this to me, I would ask them to remember their vows that they took when they joined the church. They promised submission to the elders. They promised to walk with others in the body of Christ, in the purity and peace of the church. These questions are doing nothing more than promoting purity and peace in the church and our faithfulness to Christ. Elders have not only a right, but a responsibility to shepherd the flock. They are in sin if they are not seeking to know the state of the lives of those folks under their care.

Question: Someone may say, "If our elders did all this we would not have any elders."

Answer: I would say that if your elders object to this or if they find things fundamentally wrong with this, at least, in principal, you don't have any elders now. Any elder would have to see that this is a legitimate way of trying to deal with it and I am not saying that every church has to shepherd in the way we are set up here. I guess the question needs to be asked of the elders, "Do you have a calling to shepherd the flock?" and "If you do, how are you doing it?" I would challenge them to show me from scripture how they can live a distant life away from the flock and still think that they are fulfilling the calling of shepherding.

Question: A member family may not want such a visit. What does the Session do then?

Answer: Well, I think that you go to them and explain to them that the only reason we are doing these visits is because we love them and we love Christ. I would explain to them that they have taken vows that would certainly allow for visits like this. I would also say that if they were afraid of the visit, then I wonder if they don't have something to hide. Maybe the marriage is having problems, maybe they are in some sin or they are guilty because of some relationship that's messed up in the church. It is true that some folks are just a little bit shy, but even then put them on the list of the elder with whom they are closest, that elder who has the personality most suited to them. Usually elders give me the first responsibility of dividing up the church and because I have to deal with a lot of the different families, I will try to match families according to particular personalities of the elders with particular families. However, there cannot always be a perfect match as far as personality goes.

Question: We have one or two elders who will not participate in this type of program, what now?

Answer: Well, I would explain to them that we are a working session and that other elders are working, so they need to work as well. Why is it that they are not participating? Do they need a sabbatical? Or are they just in sin? Every elder has got to carry his weight. All of us are busy. I get aggravated at times because some elders complain about how busy they are and yet they sometimes make themselves busy. I realize that there are extenuating circumstances. A crisis arises in the family, or at work. This may mean that one elder should take a sabbatical, but by and large we all live busy lives. If an elder though says that he doesn't have people skills then he really has no business being an elder in the first place.

Question: We have a number of single women in our congregation, how does an elder handle visits with them?

Answer: If a single lady is on my list, then I meet with her here at the church while my secretary is here. Or I might have her over to my home for dinner with my wife and myself, and then my wife would excuse herself to another room while I go over the questions and have discussion. My wife may be doing the dishes while this young lady or the older lady sits at the table where we just had taken a meal. You could have two elders visit with a single young lady.

- C. Do you take full advantage of opportunities for worship, instruction, fellowship, and service on the Lord's Day. Is this day set apart and profitable to you in your growth in grace?

Family Relationships

- A. How would you describe the husband-wife relationship in your family? Any areas requiring special attention? Leadership? Submission?
- B. As leader of your household, how do you use devotionals, prayer, and other means of grace to set the spiritual climate?
- C. How would you describe the parent-child relationship in your family? Any areas needing special attention? Nurture?

Corporate Relationships

- A. Describe your perspective on the outreach ministries of CRPC (OBT, personal evangelism, CWSG, Riverside, etc.) and the internal ministries (Covenant groups, Sunday School classes, choir, etc.). What is your interest in these? Are you a participant; engaged in ministry in these?
- B. Do you tithe regularly? Do you have any questions about this topic?
- C. Are there offenses that need to be resolved between you and someone else at CRPC? Do you need assistance in Biblical conflict resolution with someone outside CRPC? Are there areas of concern you have with CRPC?
- D. Are there areas of strength in CRPC you'd like to mention? Are there any areas of information for which I may provide assistance? Is there anything else you would like to say, or is there anything about which we need to pray?

- A. Tell me about your personal devotions and prayer life. (To be asked to every family member.) Tell me about family devotions

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and prayer. Is there anything I can do to assist your family in these areas?

- B. Are you participating in all the opportunities for worship, instruction, fellowship and service on the Lord's Day? (A concern of all family members; address reasons why any are not.) Is the Lord's Day a day set apart for you to promote your growth in grace?

In what specific ways do you minister to others within and outside CRPC through our church's ministries? Through other Christian organizations?

Are there other Christians with whom you meet on a regular basis for study, prayer, or life accountability? If not, may I try to match you with a compatible small group or study?

Are there those who are not Christian for whom you regularly pray and to whom you witness? If not, why not? How important is the Christian's responsibility of personal evangelism in your life?

How do you think others perceive you at work, school, social and family gatherings as to your Christian character by what you say, don't say, do, don't do?

For those employed, how do you apply a distinctively Christian world view in your vocation?

For those in school, how is your understanding being shaped so as to understand your vocation in a distinctly Christian way?

Are there offences to be resolved between you and someone else at CRPC? Do you need assistance in Biblical conflict resolution?

On the reverse side of these questions are the vows we have all taken as a part of Christ's Church. Do you have any questions regarding these vows?

Is there anything else you would like to discuss? Anything about which I can pray with you in the future?