

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear friends in Christ,

We live in a culture that is extremely leadership focused. There are a staggering number of books, videos, blogs, seminars, development tools, and coaching networks all dedicated to helping leaders develop and become greater leaders.

The reason for such a strong focus on leaders is that it's typically true: **the leaders strongly shape the culture and values of an organization**. Organizations tend to take on the character of their leader. I can name a few CEO's and I'm sure their company, its products and its culture will immediately come to mind. Steve Jobs (Apple.) Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook), Bill Gates (Microsoft), Warren Buffet (Berkshire.) Ask the world what made these people such great leaders, and you'll probably hear things like: Their vision. Their passion. Their razor sharp focus. Their ability to see a need and its solution before anyone else even knew there was a need. In short, the world looks for strong, natural leaders. Sometimes that's even abbreviated as SNL (not Saturday Night Live... strong, natural leader.)

But what I want to challenge you to think about today is: **What makes a person a great leader in the church?** Church leaders would include pastors, of course. It also includes the principal of our school. The teachers in our schools classrooms. Chairmen of the boards that serve various ministries at Good Shepherd. Coordinators that serve to organize specific ministries in our church. These are the leaders.

What makes them great? It is quite common today that people in the church think like people outside of the church. We need an SNL. Get an SNL as head of the church, and we'll be a strong, growing organization. But is that truly what make a great leader in the church? This is important for us to consider.

Now, you may wonder why we're talking about this when relatively few of you are leaders in the church. You might be tempted to think that this message doesn't have much to do with you. That's just not true. First of all, many of you are potential future leaders, so you need to listen for that reason. But the other reason this message is for everyone is that as I said earlier, the character of the **leader strongly shapes the culture of the organization**. For us to properly understand the church, then, we must understand who the leader is. What does it mean to lead in the church? What should we value in a leader? What kind of leaders should we be looking for? What should we expect of leaders of Good Shepherd? All of these important questions are answered for us in our reading today in Acts chapter 20.

This section of Scripture is fascinating. This is near the end of Paul's third missionary journey... the last one recorded in the book of Acts. (Some count his arrest and trip to Rome recorded in the last part of Acts as a fourth missionary journey – but that's not really an accurate description of it since he was under arrest.) By piecing together information from later epistles like 1 and 2nd Timothy and Titus, we can reasonably assume there was later a 4th missionary journey. We can't say for sure exactly where he went, but it appears the end of Acts is not the end of Paul's missionary activity.

But here he is at the tail end of the third, heading toward Jerusalem.

On the way, he stops at the port city of Miletus. This town was just 35 miles south of Ephesus. Paul did not go there because earlier in this journey had spent three years in Ephesus. He had many close and dear friends there. He knew that if he went there he would end up spending far longer than he wanted to. He needed to get to Jerusalem.

So what he did was invite the elders of the church, that is the spiritual leaders of the church to come down to Miletus and talk to Paul there. Now in our modern usage, we distinguish between pastors and elders. The pastor is typically the spiritual leader of the church and the elders assist the pastor in ministering to the members. But in the Bible there isn't such a clear distinction. Various words are used for the spiritual leaders in a congregation. Pastor. Elder. Overseer. The words seem to be used interchangeably. Also, we get the impression that there usually wasn't a single spiritual leader of a church. We speak of "the" pastor. But they had several elders or leaders. They were trained and encouraged by the apostles and by traveling preachers and teachers.

So it is this leadership group at Ephesus that Paul invites to come and see him. What we're about to read are some of the most touching and sentimental words in the book Acts. We see Paul's great love for the people he brought to faith, and their great love for him.

Now, Paul was convinced that this would be the last time they would ever see these people. Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, and the Holy Spirit was warning him every step of the way that in Jerusalem he would face prison and many hardships. Yet he pressed on toward Jerusalem. Looking at Paul's later writings, it appears Paul did make it back to Ephesus eventually. But when he spoke the words we're about to hear, he is convinced that this is the last time he'll ever see them in person again.

So what do you say to the spiritual leaders of a church as last words? What do you say when this is it? What do you want them to know? To remember? What should they value above all? Whatever he says will stick, and they'll remember it. What he says sets the mold for spiritual leaders. Paul's words are deliberate and instructive. Whether a person is pastor, teacher, elder, or chairman of a board in the church, what Paul says here is of paramount importance. As a member of a church not in leadership, you need to listen carefully so you know what to look for in your leaders, and expect from them. What makes for a great leader in Christ's church?

Acts 20:25-32 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. [Again, Paul is convinced of this, but we can't assume he knew this by divine revelation. All he knew for sure was great hardship and imprisonment lie ahead.] Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.

1. Proclaimer of the whole will of God. Law and gospel.

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

2. Keep watch over yourself. If the spiritual leader is not watching over himself first, how can he watch over the flock. Watching over yourself means nurturing and growing in your personal relationship with Christ.

It may surprise you to know that pastors often fail in this. The temptation for the pastor is to use the Word professionally, but not personally. We are in the word to prepare sermons, to prepare a Bible class, to apply to people we counsel. But if we are not first in the words for ourselves, we can personally drift from Jesus even as we bring others to him. Just like you, pastors and every church leader needs time in God's Word and time in prayer purely for himself and his faith and his relationship with God. If my relationship with God does not remain strong, I will become a hypocrite. I can become resentful. I can suffer from burnout. My preaching will become a bunch of clichés rattled off with little emotion or interest. I will not have sufficient love for God's people. Anyone who serves in the church in any leadership role... the first thing you need to do is keep watch over yourself.

How is your relationship with God? How much time do you spend each day in the Word and in prayer? This isn't optional... this essential and primary. If we're losing our personal connection with Christ, how can we keep watch over others?!

And that's the next point:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

3. **Keep watch over the flock as shepherds.** Under-shepherds since Jesus is THE Good Shepherd. First, please note carefully: to whom does the flock belong? Christ! It's his. Why? Because he bought. And it was EXPENSIVE. He bought the flock with his own blood.

We were born belonging to Satan. Bent toward his will, not God's. So Jesus paid the price to set us free. The wages of sin is death. That's a high price. So he lived a perfect life so he had something valuable to offer as payment. His perfect life he gave as a sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world. The precious blood of God's own son was shed for me. For you. He paid the ransom price to set you free. The wages of sin is death, and he paid it. All of it. So now you belong to him.

This is a huge point. This is not Pastor Ewart's church. We sometimes talk that way. When we have joint functions with our other churches in town, I might ask someone: Where do you go to church? Sometimes the answer I get is: Pastor Jeske's. Or Pastor Helwig's. I know what we mean when we talk that way. But the church is not mine. It's Jesus' church.

Every leader in the church needs to get this... and every member too: The church belongs to Christ. He is the shepherd of the sheep.

So what does it mean to be shepherds of the flock? We are under-shepherds. Shepherds under Christ. The flock is one. The flock is his. I just serve under Christ as the shepherd of the flock that gather at Good Shepherd in Midtown Omaha. And all leaders here do the same. Christ is the leader.

The culture and character of our church is not ultimately drawn from me or any other leader. It's drawn from Christ. He is the Leader! But he has entrusted the leaders to shepherd the flock that belongs to him... a high responsibility.

Shepherd the flock: Feed it, primarily. With word and sacrament.

But shepherding also means protecting, which is spoken of next:

I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

4. Leaders will **watch for false teachers** from without and from within. The devil knows that if he can corrupt God's Word, he will destroy saving faith. The Word is what feeds us. If you poison the food, you kill the soul. So what is one of the main responsibilities of spiritual leaders? To watch out for the poison. Watch out for the false teaching.

Sometimes from outside. We hear false teaching in other churches, on the radio, on TV. We accept and believe whatever bears the name Christian. We should not! Watch out! Paul said it, Jesus said it. Multiple times.

Sometimes from inside. The pastor couldn't introduce false teaching, could he? Yes, he could. It has happened. So have teachers. So have other leaders. We all have an obligation to keep watch for those who distort the truth. Double check what your leaders say! Compare with Scripture.

“Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

5. Paul models our fifth characteristic of the leader. They are committed to God and his Word. No other agenda. No personal fame or power or wealth. No social agenda. It's easy for churches to get sidetracked by other things. Is it good to help the poor? Feed the hungry? Provide ESL classes? Encourage foster parenting? Yes! There are any number of good works Christians should be engaging in in the community. Those are all excellent ways to show the love of Christ. But please note that this

is not the main calling of the church leader! We are committed to God and to the Word of grace, because it is this Word alone that gives an eternal inheritance among the sanctified.

Acts 20:33-37 I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.' ” When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed.

6. The leader of the church will be free of self-interest, eager to serve others. Anyone who is leadership for any kind of personal gain is not fit to be a leader in Christ's church. Paul set an example of how selfless the leader is to be by not taking any money for his work among them. He provided for himself as a tentmaker. By the way, the Bible clearly says that a church should support its workers and that a worker is worth his wages. Paul simply chose not to be compensated even though he had a God-given right to receive such support. He didn't want to give anyone the opportunity to say he did what he did for money. The leader of the church must be free of self-interest. The leader in the church is a servant, not a master. He is a giver, not a taker.

They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. Isn't that amazing? What a close bond of Christian love

At the beginning I said, “**leaders strongly shape the culture and values of an organization.**” So let's get this straight: Jesus Christ is the leader. He alone shapes the culture, values and character of the “organization”, the body, that is his church. And in this churches he has placed some as leaders, shepherds... under-shepherds to serve, feed and watch over the flock of Christ. And these six characteristics were mentioned:

1. Proclaim the whole will of God.
2. Keep watch over themselves.
3. Are shepherds, watching over the flock.
4. Watch for false teachers.
5. Keep God and his Word central.
6. Are free of self-interest, eager to serve others.

Whether you are a spiritual leader or not, this list may give you reason to repent. Has your understanding always lined up with this? Has this opened your eyes to the kind of leader God is looking for in *his* church? Where God calling you to repent? Ask God's forgiveness. Know he does forgive for Jesus' sake! Realign to God's definition! As we are blessed with real leaders as God defines them, we will be a church that is richly blessed... a church that is carefully guided, fed and watched by Jesus Christ through the under-shepherds he gives to watch over us! Amen.