

## The Steward of God: Exploring the Role and Function of Elders

Jeremy Kimble  
*Cedarville University*

### Introduction

A variety of titles and images are used in the Scriptures to describe those who commit their lives to serve in pastoral ministry. Those who are called to such a vocation are described as shepherds or pastors (Eph 4:11), elders (1 Pet 5:1–5), and overseers (1 Tim 3:1), which are all terms replete with meaning and significance. Through these various titles we receive a more full-orbed understanding of what the role and function of a minister truly is. This is due to the fact that words like shepherd and overseer can function as metaphors, describing the realities of pastoral ministry.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if a term used to describe pastoral ministry were to be overlooked it would leave a considerable gap in understanding regarding the true nature of the pastorate.

It is my contention that terms such as “steward” (οἰκονόμος), and “stewardship” (οἰκονομία) have been relatively overlooked in conceiving of the function and role of one who serves as a pastor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a helpful discussion of metaphors in Scripture, specifically in regards to shepherding, see Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Leicester, England: Apollon, 2006), pp. 31–41.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper I will be using the terms of pastor, elder, and overseer interchangeably (cf. Acts 20:17–35; 1 Peter 5:1–5). For a recent argument in favor of elder and overseer being one office in Scripture, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church* (Studies in Biblical Literature 57; New York: Peter Lang, 2003). See also Mark E. Dever, “The Church,” in Daniel L. Akin, David P. Nelson, and Peter R. Schemm, eds., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2007), pp. 800–805; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2013), p. 1026; John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), pp. 159–89; Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids:

This paper will demonstrate through an exegetical analysis of these words—along with relative cognates—that the overseer is responsible as a steward for rightly proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, and for overseeing the souls of the people in their local church. This metaphor for pastoral ministry reveals a crucial connection between preaching the Word of God and the shepherding and oversight of the congregation as a whole.<sup>3</sup> If this is true there are implications for pastors as they seek to responsibly proclaim the truth of God’s Word and watch over the spiritual temperament of the people within their congregation, knowing they will have to give an account to God as a steward. As such, it will be argued that this image gives greater depth and clarity to the role and function of one who serves in pastoral ministry.

This work will begin to delve into this matter by looking at the literal occurrences of the terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία in the NT, followed by the metaphorical uses, noting most specifically those texts that give clarity to the meaning this metaphor brings to the pastoral task. After observing these occurrences and their significance, the way in which stewardship language influences and unites the ministerial responsibilities of preaching and shepherding will be taken into account. Finally, a theological synthesis will be proposed regarding our findings and the implications that this metaphor may have for pastoral ministry in a present-day local church context.

### The Use of οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία in Scripture

Before we delve into the biblical material, it should be noted that these terms were commonly used in the OT (cf. 1 Kgs 4:6; 2

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Zondervan, 2011), pp. 856–57; Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005); Samuel E. Waldron, “Plural-Elder Congregationalism,” in Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), pp. 212–21. This list is certainly not comprehensive, but gives the reader an ample starting point for further research.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Oden uses similar terminology when defining the pastoral office: “‘The Pastor,’ concisely defined, is a member of the body of Christ who is called by God and the church and set apart by ordination representatively to proclaim the Word, to administer the sacraments, and to guide and nurture the Christian community toward full response to God’s self-disclosure.” Thomas C. Oden, *Pastoral Theology: Essentials of Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 50.

Kgs 18:18, 37; Isa 36:3, 22) as well as the culture of the NT era. Thus, there would have been a degree of understanding attached to this concept for those living in biblical times. In the Roman empire of the first century, absentee landlords dominated the landscape. These wealthy landowners typically lived in the city and visited their farm estates only occasionally. As a result, these landlords utilized people known as stewards to inspect, certify, manage, oversee and report on the household and its accompanying land.<sup>4</sup> Though much more could be said regarding stewardship in the first century, for our purposes it is sufficient to note that the terms have a tangible background to draw from in elucidating how stewardship was conceived of in that time, which gives helpful grounding for the topic at hand.

### *Literal Occurrences*

The idea of stewardship is depicted in a literal manner in several places throughout the NT. The first occurrence canonically is found in Matthew 24:45–51 and Luke 12:42–48, which are parallel accounts. Contextually the Matthean passage is located in the midst of Jesus’ Olivet Discourse in a section where Jesus is emphasizing the imminent coming of the Son of Man and the demand for readiness at his return (Matt 24:29–51). Luke is similarly dealing with Jesus’ exhortation for readiness at the return of the Son of Man (Luke 12:35–48). Jesus tells a parable about stewardship to his dis-

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<sup>4</sup> So F. Alan Tomlinson, “The Purpose and Stewardship Theme within the Pastoral Epistles,” in Andreas J. Köstenberger and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *Entrusted with the Gospel: Paul’s Theology in the Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), pp. 75–77. See also See K. H. Rengstorf, ‘*Hypēretēs*,’ *TDNT*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 539. He states, “The steward is an assistant to another as the instrument of his will.” Additionally, Tidball defines the relationship between the steward and his master in the following way: “[The steward] completely identifies with the aims of his master and knows how his master would wish his desired objectives to be brought about. Moreover, his master has put all the necessary resources for their achievement at his disposal. The relationship between master and steward is close and it gives the steward a certain independence from the criticisms and designs of others. He is, however, unlikely to abuse his master’s trust, for the steward knows that accountability is another mark of their relationship.” Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Ministry Resources Library, 1986), p. 105.

ciples as a concrete example for how they should ready themselves for his return.

It should be noted that in Luke 12:42 Jesus uses the term οἰκονόμος, while in Matthew 24:45 the term δοῦλος is used to refer to the servant overseeing the estate. This is not problematic, however, when one considers the fact that stewards were often indentured to their masters, but received this privilege of overseeing the estate due to their garnering favor with their master.<sup>5</sup> Also, one can see from the near identical wording of this parable in both Matthew's and Luke's Gospel account, and the use of δοῦλος later in Luke's account (12:43, 45), that they are referring to the same kind of idea.

Jesus tells this parable in a contrastive sense, noting both a faithful and wise steward and a wicked steward. The faithful steward is in charge of all the other servants, dispenses food at the proper time, and works diligently in overseeing his master's estate. Because of his faithful work his master rewards the steward when he returns to the property and sees its good condition (Matt 24:45–47; Luke 12:42–44).<sup>6</sup> However, Carson notes, “The wicked servant is faithless in his responsibilities, abusive to fellow servants, lax in waiting for his master's return, and ultimately earns the punishment

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<sup>5</sup> See Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), p. 225; Tomlinson, “The Purpose and Stewardship Theme,” pp. 73–77. It was not uncommon for there to be rankings of sorts even between slaves in Greco-Roman society. Clarke states, in relation to leadership and rank in first-century Roman culture, “In this chapter it has been made clear that the careful gradations of honor were not the sole prerogative of the aristocracy. Comparison of honor took place even amongst slaves; and the anomaly should be noted of those slaves and freedmen who were attached to the imperial household, that, although they could never climb the ranks of aristocracy, theirs was an honor which surpassed that of other slaves and freedmen.” See Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (First-Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Estate-holders often arrived without warning at the estate in order to check on accounts to get an honest appraisal of their property and the steward's management. See Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 170.

that is his due.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, Jesus is likened in this parable to the master who could come at any time to take account of his estate, and Jesus’ followers, likened to stewards, must realize that life can be terminated by the master’s coming at any moment, and therefore they must live accordingly so that they will be able to give a good account.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Jesus tells a parable in Luke 16:1–13 regarding faithful stewardship. The interpretation for this particular parable, which is unique to Luke, is somewhat contested,<sup>9</sup> but for our purposes it is sufficient to say that Jesus used the example of a rich man and a servant, acting as a steward, who managed his accounts poorly. The point Jesus is making, according to Bock, is that, “Just as the unrighteous manager was prudent in considering what the future required, so we must be prudent in considering how God desires us to handle his resources.”<sup>10</sup> God gives us resources in this life that we are to handle with integrity, generosity, and grace, and God will reward us at His return depending on how we have managed those resources (cf. Luke 16:10–13).

Two other texts that deal with the concept of stewardship in a literal sense are seen in Romans 16:23 and Galatians 4:1–2. Erastus is referred to as ὁ οἰκονόμος τῆς πόλεως in Romans 16:23, which is typically translated as “city treasurer,” though we cannot be sure if this was significant office, or a minor financial official.<sup>11</sup> Again, for our purposes here it is sufficient to say that this type of position would have been an administrative role, looking over the financial affairs of the city, and quite possibly servile in nature, meaning the

<sup>7</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in Frank E. Gaebelien, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 510.

<sup>8</sup> David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 592–93.

<sup>9</sup> For a helpful study of this passage in the history of interpretation see Dennis J. Ireland, *Stewardship and the Kingdom of God: An Historical, Exegetical, and Contextual Study of the Parable of the Unjust Steward in Luke 16:1–13* (Supplements to Novum Testamentum 70; Leiden: Brill, 1992), pp. 5–47. In the discussion of this text Ireland notes six prominent interpretive options.

<sup>10</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 421.

<sup>11</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 6; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 808; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 935–96.

treasurer was accountable for his actions to a higher-ranking official.<sup>12</sup> The passage in Galatians describes redemption through Christ in the picture of a child in relation to the household slave. The slave is referred to as ἐπιτρόπους καὶ οἰκονόμους, which, though possibly connoting slightly different roles, should most likely be viewed as synonymous terms.<sup>13</sup> Keener avers that this passage is communicating that, “Minors were required to be under legal ‘guardians’ even if their father was deceased.”<sup>14</sup> This denotes another possible function a steward may have had in a first-century Roman context.

In summary, the οἰκονόμος, who was typically a slave himself, held responsibility over the properties belonging to their master, were accountable for the other slaves of that particular estate, performed administrative duties in caring for the estate, at times may even have been involved in the upbringing and education of the children of their master, and would have to give an account for their actions. All of these literal uses of this particular word in the NT give us a helpful interpretive lens to better understand its metaphorical usage, to which we now turn.

### ***Metaphorical Uses***

The terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία are used in the Scripture to denote an actual manager of an estate, as we noted in the previous section, but these words are also used to describe pastoral ministry in the NT. The Apostle Paul uses these terms the most extensively of all NT writers, though they can also be found in the writings of Peter (1 Pt 4:10). With an understanding of what a literal steward was in Greco-Roman culture we now have a better grasp of the concept in seeking to understand how stewardship relates to the role and function of the pastor.

**1 Corinthians 4:1–2.** The first metaphorical usage that occurs canonically is found in the apostle’s first letter to the Corinthians. Contextually, Hamilton notes, “Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 1–4 that God has outmatched worldly power through the weakness of

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<sup>12</sup> Wilfred Tooley, “Stewards of God: An Examination of the Terms OIKONOMOS and OIKONOMIA in the New Testament,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19/1 (March 1, 1966): p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, p. 528.

the cross, perplexing human wisdom with its folly.”<sup>15</sup> Paul is addressing division among the Corinthian people over who they espouse as their leader (1 Cor 3:1–4). Paul reiterates the fact that they are merely “servants” (διδάκονοι) of God (3:5–9) and it is by His grace and His Spirit that they are able to be built up as God’s people (3:10–17). Therefore, they should not boast in men, for all things belong to them in Christ (3:18–23).

Paul states that the Corinthians should regard him and the other leaders of the church as “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ; 1 Cor 4:1). Fee rightly asserts, “Thus apostles are to be regarded as ‘servants of Christ,’ reemphasizing their humble position and their belonging to Christ alone; at the same time they are ‘stewards of the mysteries of God,’ emphasizing both their trusted position and their accountability to God.”<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the apostle is a steward of the “mysteries of God,” a phrase that appears to be referring to the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, now known through the Spirit and especially entrusted to the apostles to proclaim. This rendering is supported by the preceding context, particularly in 2:7 where the same kind of language is used to de-

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<sup>15</sup> James M. Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), p. 457. For a fuller explication of this theme in 1 Corinthians see D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 159. Martin Bucer comments on this text and states, “And in all this these ministers of the church are *servants of Christ and stewards of the secret things of God*, that is, of Christ’s salvation and of the Holy Spirit, not merely of the letter. They take the elect of God and raise them up into the new eternal covenant which has been established through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with all God’s elect throughout the whole world. They also serve the Lord in ministering the holy gospel to the elect, teaching and admonishing them and also administering the holy sacraments, so that people might come to him, Christ our Lord, and be saved.” Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls* (trans. Beale, Peter; Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), p. 21. Bucer might be pressing a bit in this last sentence in seeking to interpret 1 Cor 4:1–2 as saying all that he says it does, but I would argue that when one looks at the “stewardship” texts cumulatively in the NT Bucer is accurately translating the nuances of this idea.

scribe the “wisdom” decreed before the ages, which seems to be clearly referring to God’s plan for the world in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2:1–16).<sup>17</sup> Paul, as a steward of God—specifically the revelation of the mystery of the gospel in this context—aims to be found faithful by his Lord (1 Cor 4:2) in proclaiming the message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Therefore, he exhorts the Corinthians not to judge him, knowing that he will answer to God for his stewardship, no aspect of which will be hidden at His coming (1 Cor 4:3–5).

**1 Corinthians 9:17.** Later in the same book Paul again takes up this idea of stewardship and again the term is connected closely to the gospel (1 Cor 9:15–18). Paul has been addressing the issue of eating food sacrificed to idols and claims that he will never eat this kind of food if it will make his brother stumble (8:1–13). Paul is very aware that the actions of a leader can have a profound influence on the people to whom he is ministering, and therefore he seeks to approach his apostolic task as a servant, not in an overbearing way.

Paul transitions into a defense of his apostleship and the way in which he ministers (9:1–27), and in the midst of this defense he speaks of his ministry as a necessity (9:16), knowing that he has been “entrusted with a stewardship” (οἰκονομίαν πεπίστευμαι; 9:17).<sup>18</sup> Paul is entrusted with the preaching of the gospel, and he does so free of charge in order that he might be a servant to all and win some to Christ (9:18–19). His apostleship is similar to that of a steward (usually a slave) who has been entrusted with managing a household. Such a person is entitled to no pay, which is exactly the point he will make in the next verse.<sup>19</sup> Thus, while we can observe

<sup>17</sup> Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 159–60. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 65; Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 337.

<sup>18</sup> For helpful commentary on the complexity of the syntax of the second clause of verse 17 and its proper rendering see Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 419–20. His final rendering of the verse is, “If not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. What then is my reward?”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 420. Hays also states, “The language here suggests once again the image of a slave as steward (cf. 4:1–4). Paul preaches because ‘necessity’ has been laid upon him by God. (We might recall the image of Jeremiah, for whom the prophetic word is ‘something like a burning fire



the proclamation of the gospel again connected with stewardship, we also see language that is obligatory in nature,<sup>20</sup> meaning it is a job given him by God that must be done (cf. Luke 17:7–10)

**Ephesians 3:2.** Paul’s letter to the Ephesians seeks to make central the glory of the grace of God in Christ (Eph 1:1–14)—who is the head of the church (1:15–23)—by grace through faith in Jesus (2:1–10), for both Jew and Gentile (2:11–22).<sup>21</sup> This grand reality touches on the way in which Paul conceives of his ministry as the steward of God.

In this letter Paul addresses the issue of stewardship as an apostle of Jesus and links it with “the mystery of Christ” (3:1–6; cf. 1:9–10). Paul is writing to Gentiles in Ephesus regarding the “stewardship of God’s grace” (οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ), which was given to him that he might understand the mystery about Christ and make it known to them for their full inclusion into the people of God (3:1–4).<sup>22</sup> Schreiner elaborates,

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shut up in my bones,’ Jer. 20:9.) He has no choice but to proclaim the gospel. Therefore, his ‘reward’ is, paradoxically, to make the gospel available to others ‘free of charge,’ thereby not making use of his rights.” Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 153.

<sup>20</sup> Garland helpfully notes, “The problem with the slavery imagery is that it might give the impression that Paul carried out his ministry only reluctantly. Nothing could be further from the truth. He is talking not about his feelings concerning his calling but about his status. He chooses not to receive fees from those to whom he preaches because he understands himself to be under a commission (*oikonomia*) as Christ’s slave.” David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 425–26.

<sup>21</sup> See Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, p. 479, who states, “Paul’s letter to the Ephesians celebrates the glory of God in salvation through judgment demonstrated in the ‘mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to the holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit, for the Gentiles to be co-heirs and co-bodied and co-partakers of the promise in messiah Jesus through the gospel’ (Eph. 3:4b–6). It is this radical assertion that Paul explains in the first two chapters of Ephesians, and then he makes it explicit in Ephesians 3 before addressing the life that corresponds to this gospel in Ephesians 4–6.”

<sup>22</sup> Gentile inclusion is an issue Paul addresses in detail in Ephesians 2:11–22. For a helpful discussion of this text in relation to the unity of the Church see G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), pp.

The administration of God's grace has been vouchsafed to [Paul] (Rom 15:15–16; Eph 3:2; Col 1:25), for the mystery of Gentile inclusion has been revealed to him (Eph 3:3). God has given him this ministry according to his grace, and even though Paul is unworthy, he has the task of preaching the riches of Christ to the Gentiles (Eph 3:8–9; Col 1:28–29). He is a specially appointed 'minister [*leitourgos*] of Christ Jesus for the Gentiles,' and he functions as a priest in his proclamation of the gospel (Rom 15:16).<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, Paul is speaking of stewardship in relation to God's grace, and this grace is now extended to the Gentiles through the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Paul stewards the grace of God by revealing the mystery of Gentile inclusion through Christ so that "through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3:10). Ultimately, this is done according to the "plan," or "dispensation" (οἰκονομία) of God, who is uniting all things in Christ, both in heaven and on earth (1:10).

**Colossians 1:25.** The apostle in his letter to the Colossians seeks to make much of the glory of Jesus Christ (cf. Col 1:15–22). In so doing, Paul calls the Colossians to persevere in their faith (1:23) and also to understand the kind of ministry Paul seeks to embody (1:24–29). Paul highlights his ministry, which is one of suffering, and actually "filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (1:24).<sup>24</sup> Paul ministers in this way, once again, to be a faithful steward to God.

Paul writes in a similar fashion in this context as he did in 1 Corinthians 4 and fills out this idea of stewarding the mysteries of God, asserting that he "became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me" (ἦς ἐγενόμην ἐγὼ διάκονος κατὰ τὴν οἰκονομίαν τοῦ θεοῦ τὴν δοθεῖσάν μοι; Col 1:25). The con-

538–40; Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 714–17. It should also be noted that the declaration of the gospel to the Gentiles was a central and unique salvation-historical aspect of Paul's apostolic ministry (cf. Acts 13:47).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> For a pastoral exposition of this particular text see Ajith Fernando, *The Call to Joy & Pain: Embracing Suffering in Your Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

tent of Paul's stewardship is to "fulfill" the Word of God, which, according to O'Brien, refers to "the notion of an effective and dynamic preaching of the gospel on the part of the apostle."<sup>25</sup> Specifically, the message of the Word of God, which Paul now seeks to "fulfill," is defined as "the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints" (1:26). Like 1 Corinthians 4 this text also points to Christ as the center of this "mystery," who indwells believers and is proclaimed by Paul for the salvation and maturity of his hearers (Col 1:27–28).

Therefore, one can observe in these passages from the NT that Paul has been entrusted with a commission and is responsible for managing the "mysteries of God" obediently as he proclaims Christ as the center of God's plan in salvation history.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it can be clearly seen throughout each of these passages that proclamation of the gospel message is central to Paul's stewardship, which has been given to him by God.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary 44; Waco: Word, 1982), p. 83. O'Brien continues, "The Word of God is "fulfilled" not simply when it is preached in the world, but when it is dynamically and effectively proclaimed in the power of the Spirit (cf. Rom 15:19; 1 Thess 1:5, 6; Eph 6:18–20; Col 4:2–4; 2 Thess 3:1–3)." See *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>27</sup> One other passage that uses the term οἰκονόμος and relates, albeit indirectly, to our study is found in 1 Peter 4:10: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace" (ἕκαστος καθὼς ἔλαβεν χάρισμα εἰς ἑαυτοὺς αὐτὸ διακονοῦντες ὡς καλοὶ οἰκονόμοι ποικίλης χάριτος θεοῦ). Contextually Peter is speaking to Christians scattered abroad and giving them various exhortations about Christian living in light of Christ's sacrifice (1 Peter 4:1–19). Therefore, Peter is not speaking directly to pastors here, but to all Christians, telling them to use their gifts in service to one another, whether they be speaking gifts or serving gifts (4:10–11). Achtemeier states, "The word 'steward' (οἰκονόμος) originally designating the purely secular position of household manager (as in Luke 16:1) and then expanded to describe one who undertook broader duties (e.g., city treasurer as in Rom 16:23), is used here figuratively in the former sense, perhaps influenced by the author's concept of the Christian community as a household (e.g., 2:5; 4:17). Being good stewards of God's grace involves therefore employment of one's gift for the good of the household of faith, not for one's own benefit, surely an appropriate reflection on the nature of the mutual love mentioned in v. 7, and an equally appropriate introduction to the further description of how those gifts are to be used in the following verse." Paul J Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commem-*

**Titus 1:7.** At this point some may question the validity of the category of “steward” and “stewardship” being applied to contemporary pastoral ministry due to the fact that all of the passages that have been cited thus far relate to apostolic ministry, which was temporary in nature (cf. Acts 1:15–22). Therefore, some would say, though there are certainly similarities between the apostle and pastor, one cannot simply draw complete parallels between the two. Certainly more could be said regarding the ministerial relationship between the apostles and pastors, but for our purposes it is fitting to note that while Paul may not have served as a “traditional pastor” and was deeply ingrained in the salvation-historical plan of God, Paul did serve churches “pastorally” and there are foundational principles that one can draw from his apostolic work for pastoral ministry.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, several other texts should be considered, since they use the terms “steward” and refer specifically to the office of elder/overseer. Drawing upon the background information and the insights garnered thus far from the other texts we have observed, we will now look specifically at two key passages

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*tary on First Peter* (Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 298. See also, Wayne A. Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 17; Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1988), p. 175; Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 281–82.; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude* (The New American Commentary 37; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), p. 214. While not relating specifically to the function and role of elders, this is another helpful text in grasping the concept of stewardship.

<sup>28</sup> Tidball is helpful on this topic: “Admittedly, Paul is difficult to categorize. He was a gifted pioneer evangelist and an astute theologian as well as being an accomplished pastor...Nonetheless Paul serves as an exemplary pastoral model, if not a perfect one. His theology arises out of the questions thrown up by pastoral and everyday situations in the churches. And his writings constantly reveal his pastoral heart, his pastoral ambitions, his pastoral techniques, his pastoral advice, and his pastoral frustrations.” Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), pp. 107–108. To see how he fleshes out this claim see *Ibid.*, pp. 108–61. One can also take note of the fact that the apostle often held himself up as a paradigm and model to follow in ministry (cf. 2 Tim 2:1–2; 3:10–14; 4:6–8).

from the Pastoral Epistles that will elucidate our understanding of pastoral ministry by the use these terms.

In the letter from Paul to Titus<sup>29</sup> we find a seasoned apostle addressing a younger man ministering on the island of Crete. Paul addresses a number of issues as he assists Titus in knowing how to “be firm in the apostolic faith, to communicate it to new disciples, and to defend it against attackers.”<sup>30</sup> Among the various exhortations that Paul gives to Titus, the apostle points out that he left Titus in Crete so that he would “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Paul then begins to list off specific criteria for elders in relation to their character and teaching ability (Titus 1:6–9; cf. 1 Tim 3:1–7), and he specifically addresses the overseer<sup>31</sup> “as God’s steward” (ὡς θεοῦ οἰκονόμου). This is a very brief reference and could be somewhat difficult to identify and define.<sup>32</sup> However Paul, who has used this term to define his own apostolic ministry, is now identifying the elders as stewards of God. It must be noted as significant that the man who has used the terms οἰκονόμος and

<sup>29</sup> For a helpful discussion on the authorship of the Pastoral Epistles being Pauline see Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2009), pp. 638–42; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Hermeneutical and Exegetical Challenges in Interpreting the Pastoral Epistles,” in Köstenberger and Wilder, *Entrusted with the Gospel*, pp. 1–8.

<sup>30</sup> Hamilton, *God’s Glory in Salvation Through Judgment*, p. 509.

<sup>31</sup> Some question whether elder and overseer are referring to the same office in this context due to the fact that πρεσβυτέρους in verse 5 is plural, while ἐπίσκοπον in verse 7 is singular. So R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity* (T & T Clark Academic Paperbacks; London: T & T Clark International, 2004), p. 244. However, the connective γάρ in verse 7 suggests that Paul is referring to the same office; William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Word Biblical Commentary 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), p. 390. Also, it is not uncommon for Paul to alternate between singular and plural generic nouns, particularly within the Pastoral Epistles (cf. 1 Tim 2:8–9, 15; 5:3–4, 17–20). See Merkle, *Elder and Overseer*, pp. 142–48 for several more compelling reasons to consider elder and overseer to be one office in this context.

<sup>32</sup> See F. Alan Tomlinson, “The Purpose and Stewardship Theme within the Pastoral Epistles,” in Köstenberger and Wilder, *Entrusted with the Gospel*, pp. 52–83. In this chapter he helpfully demonstrates the importance of the theme of stewardship throughout the Pastoral Epistles, which helps give clarity to a text like Titus 1:7.

οἰκονομία to describe his own ministry is now using the same vocabulary to describe what an overseer actually is. Therefore, a conceptual link can be tentatively made in relating Paul's stewardship to that of the elders. This link becomes more concrete when analyzed alongside another passage in the Pastoral Epistles.

**1 Timothy 3:15.** To acquire a more accurate conception of what Paul means in this brief phrase (θεοῦ οἰκονόμον) in Titus 1:7, it will be helpful to also look at Paul's first letter to Timothy, who served in pastoral ministry at Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim 1:3). After citing nearly identical qualifications for an overseer as he did in Titus 1 (1 Tim 3:1–7), as well as qualifications for deacons (3:8–13), Paul addresses Timothy about rightly leading the church should he be delayed in coming (3:14–15). Here the apostle refers to the church as “the household of God” (οἶκῳ θεοῦ),<sup>33</sup> an image that has distinct connections to stewards who, as noted earlier, were typically responsible for overseeing the household and property of their master. Merkle explains:

The metaphor [used to describe the church] that is mostly used in the Pastoral Epistles is that of the family or house-

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<sup>33</sup> Knight gives helpful commentary regarding the relationship between οἶκος and ἐκκλησία in the Pastoral Epistles: “The standards of conduct prescribed are no mere rules of etiquette, they are standards for the house/household that is none other than God's. They provide directions for conduct in his temple, where he dwells by his Spirit, and they provide directions for relationships among his people... An analogy had already been drawn between οἶκος and ἐκκλησία at the first occurrence of both in 1 Timothy (3:4, 5). Now what was implicit is made explicit: God's οἶκος is his ἐκκλησία. The three occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the PE (all in 1 Timothy: 3:5; 3:15; 5:16) provide a description of the church similar to what we see elsewhere in Paul and the NT. 3:5 depicts the church as a family under the oversight of the ἐπίσκοποι, 3:15 depicts it as the house/household of God and on that basis calls for godly conduct on the part of those who are the possession and locale of the living God and the structure undergirding God's truth, and 5:16 depicts the church as the caring community (next to the actual family itself). Since the whole letter is about the church, it would be inappropriate to restrict the description of the church in it to the three occurrences of ἐκκλησία, but the emphasis on order and oversight, on godly conduct and on God's people upholding his truth, and on caring for those in need is striking and noteworthy.” George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 180–81.

hold. For example, in 1 Tim 3:5 and 12 a person qualified to be an overseer or deacon must know how to manage his own household well before he is fit to hold an office in the church. An overseer is also said to be God's steward or manager (Titus 1:7)—one who manages the affairs of God's household or family. In 1 Tim 3:15 Paul explicitly calls the church 'the household of God.'<sup>34</sup>

Thus, the concept of the "steward of God," which was cited in Titus 1:7, is given greater clarity when one understands the connection to household imagery.<sup>35</sup> The elder/overseer is the steward of God overseeing His household, the church.

This conclusion yields crucial implications for understanding pastoral ministry, as Tooley, speaking directly of Titus 1:7 and its relationship to 1 Timothy 3:15, points out. He says:

The essential qualities of such elders are listed and among them is the reference to the ἐπίσκοπος as God's steward [Titus 1:7] who 'must hold firm to the sure word as taught so that he may be able to give instructions in sound doctrine' [Titus 1:9]. The whole clause, as J.H. Bernard states, 'indicates the functions of the ἐπίσκοπος as the guardian of the deposit of faith,' and we may relate the office to the reference in 2 Tim. 2:2, to 'faithful men' whose task is to transmit the Church's teaching...The Church is the 'pillar and bulwark of the truth' [1 Tim 3:15] and so the guarantor of right doctrine. The function of leadership is to teach what befits

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<sup>34</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, "Ecclesiology in the Pastoral Epistles," in Köstenberger and Wilder, *Entrusted with the Gospel*, p. 174. Likewise Knight, who states, "An οἰκονόμος, 'steward,' is one chosen by his employer to manage his business or his household (cf. Lk. 12:42). The elder/overseer is a person chosen by God to be a manager and entrusted with the church as God's household (cf. 1 Tim. 3:5–6, 15)." Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, p. 291.

<sup>35</sup> So Towner: "Theological description of the church is most evident in 1 Timothy where household imagery provides the dominant components. The church is God's household (3:15; Gk. *oikos theou*). This phrase ties together related concepts in key places to describe God's rule in life in terms of household order (1:4; Gk. *oikonomia theou*), and the overseers' leadership in terms of household management (3:4–5). P. H. Towner, "The Pastoral Epistles," in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, eds., *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 2000), p. 334.

such doctrine and so to ‘superintend’ the life of the Church as to preserve the purity of its gospel.<sup>36</sup>

Like Paul, the elder is responsible for being a good steward of the message of the gospel.<sup>37</sup> This may differ in some ways from Paul’s apostolic ministry, as has been noted, but the overseer, as we will see in greater detail momentarily, is called by God to give instruction in sound doctrine in accordance with the gospel and be able to refute false teachers (cf. 1 Tim 1:10–11; Titus 1:9). It can also be seen from these texts that the elder is called to be a steward of the “household,” namely the people of God who have been entrusted to him.<sup>38</sup> The church is God’s household, and like any steward in the first century the pastor must manage, oversee, care for, be an example to<sup>39</sup> and give an account for the people God has assigned to him.

<sup>36</sup> Tooley, “Stewards of God,” pp. 78–79.

<sup>37</sup> So Tooley who writes, “The true sign of the steward, therefore, is that he will faithfully proclaim God’s ‘*mysterion*.’” Wilfred Tooley, “Shepherds of the Flock and Stewards in the Household of God,” *London Quarterly and Holborn Review* 190 (January 1, 1965): p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> This conclusion is derived from the fact that in 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul writes so that “you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God. God’s οἶκος is defined as His ἐκκλησία. The term can be defined as a legislative body, assembly, or congregation, all signifying groups of people. See BDAG 303–04. Dever rightly points out “Etymologically, a connection exists between the Old Testament word for ‘assembly,’ *qahal*, and the New Testament word from which ‘church’ is translated—*ekklesia*... This word for assembly, *qahal*, is closely bound up in the Old Testament with the Lord’s distinct people—Israel. The rich association between the assembly of God and the distinct people of God then carries over to the New Testament by the word now translated in the New Testament to describe God’s distinct people—the church.” Dever, “The Church,” pp. 768–69. See also Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Contours of Christian Theology; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), pp. 37–47; Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, pp. 25–31. The point for our purposes here is that Paul is calling for pastors to oversee the church of the living God, which means they are responsible before God for a local congregation of believers.

<sup>39</sup> Though a neglected aspect of pastoral ministry at times, setting an example of godliness is key to being a pastor, who is God’s steward. One can note in Titus 1:7 that the overseer, who is God’s steward, is told that he must be “above reproach.” The apostle explicates this phrase in verses 8–9, stating specific qualifications that all deal with exemplary character.



*Other Texts in the Pastoral Epistles*

The frequency and emphasis that is laid upon preaching and shepherding in the Pastoral Epistles as a whole gives further evidence that this metaphor is central to Paul's understanding of pastoral ministry. First, as it relates to preaching, Timothy is told to refute false teachers with sound doctrine (1 Tim 1:3–5;<sup>40</sup> 2 Tim 1:13–14; Titus 1:9–2:1), appoint overseers that have an aptitude for teaching (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9), be a good servant of Christ by giving sound doctrine to the church (1 Tim 4:6, 11), devote himself to reading Scripture privately and publically while exhorting and teaching from the Word (1 Tim 4:13, 16; 6:2; 2 Tim 2:14–16), labor in preaching and teaching (1 Tim 5:17), entrust sound doctrine to other men who will be able to teach it to others (2 Tim 2:1–2), and preach the Word faithfully, both in season and out of season (2 Tim 3:14–4:4). Moreover, as it relates to shepherding, Paul instructs Timothy to oversee the way in which his people are relating to one another, particularly in their care for widows (1 Tim 5:1–16), continually instruct masters and slaves how they are to interact as Christians (1 Tim 6:1–2), admonish the rich on how they are using their wealth (1 Tim 6:17–19), see that people are living out the real-

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Towner, commenting on this text, states, “To be a ‘steward’ was to acknowledge the requirement of utter faithfulness (Lk 12:42; 1 Cor 4:2). In God’s house faithfulness is required in every part of life.” Philip H. Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 14; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994), p. 226.

<sup>40</sup> Though we have not used it as an example, the phrase οἰκονομία θεοῦ occurs in 1 Timothy 1:4. In seeking to understand whether the phrase in this context is referring to God’s administrative activity in salvation history, or to a stewardship that is issued by God to a particular person, Knight states the following: “God’s οἰκονομία is certainly in view in 1 Tim. 1:4, as the qualification θεοῦ makes plain (genitive of possession), but it is, at the same time, one that must be responded to and that is operative in the realm of faith. Further, this οἰκονομία is in v. 5 called παραγγελίας, i.e., ‘apostolic instruction with divine warrant.’ Since the concept seems to be set in such a context not only here but also in Ephesians, where it is spoken of as being brought to light or communicated (Eph. 3:9), it seems that neither of the two extremes is in view here, i.e., God’s plan without reference to human stewardship, or Paul’s stewardship in the most specific sense. Rather, what is referred to is the outworking, administration, or stewardship of God’s plan of salvation through the gospel and its communication.” Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 75–76.

ities of the gospel (Titus 2:1–15), and exercise discipline within the church as is necessary (Titus 3:10).

Some may question whether these latter texts are specifically dealing with issues of shepherding, however none of these tasks can be done merely through preaching and teaching, there must be a closer connection and a personal dimension of accountability to ensure that what Paul said is actually being accomplished in the lives of the people in that church. In this way there is a definite connection between proclaiming God's Word and shepherding His people as a steward of God. To ensure that the teaching is bearing fruit, elders must take it upon themselves to watch over the lives of their people, and this is why we find the two concepts linked together so often.

### **The Ministerial Tasks in Acts 20**

One final passage that will now receive our attention is Acts 20:17–38. This text will be analyzed due to the fact that it is a primary example of Paul addressing elders about their specific role and function. The connection between preaching and shepherding will be more readily seen now that the metaphor of stewardship is incorporated into our conception of pastoral ministry.<sup>41</sup> Though one does not actually see the terms “steward” or “stewardship” in the passage itself, the discourse is directed to the elders—addressed with the task of oversight and shepherding—who are considered by Paul as stewards of God who keep watch over His household, the church (cf. 1 Tim 3:15; Titus 1:7). Paul thought of himself as a steward, which was a metaphor that shaped his ministry, and in Acts 20 he is seeking to pass on similar ministerial priorities in light of the reality of their stewardship as elders.

In Acts 20 Paul is in the midst of his third missionary journey as he ministers in Ephesus. Paul's ministry there had resulted in rejection of the gospel message as well as conversions (Acts 19:1–10), extraordinary miracles and a prevailing of the Word of God (19:11–20), and even a riot of the citizens in response to the decline of sales for their Artemis idols (19:21–41). At that point Paul had

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<sup>41</sup> Though somewhat outside the purview of this study, a detailed analysis of this text in relation to its ANE, Jewish, and Greco-Roman background can be found in Bernard Aubert, *The Shepherd-Flock Motif in the Miletus Discourse (Acts 20:17-38) Against Its Historical Background* (Studies in Biblical Literature 124; New York: Peter Lang, 2009).

left the disciples in Ephesus to go and visit Macedonia and Greece (20:1–12). He then makes his way back, knowing that he is destined to go to Jerusalem, and stops by Miletus, where he sends for the elders of the church at Ephesus (20:13–17).

Prior to moving into the details of the text, it should be noted exactly who Paul is addressing in the discourse. As previously stated, it was the elders (πρεσβυτέρος) that Paul called to meet with him (20:17). A few verses later in the same speech, however, the same men are called “overseers” (ἐπισκόπους), and their position as overseers is ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that elders and overseers are two different designations for the same office.<sup>42</sup>

Paul begins addressing the elders by looking back at his own ministry, emphasizing the kind of lifestyle he had adopted. Paul has served in great humility and with tears (20:19), passionately committed to serving the Lord, even if it may not have been popular (20:20). Committed to finishing his ministry, which has been filled with hardship and oppression (20:23–24), Paul declares that he has declared the Word of God fully and faithfully (20:26–27), and now he desires that these leaders would have the same heart and determination (20:28–32).<sup>43</sup>

### *Preaching*

Having viewed the context we are now in a position to look at this passage and its emphasis on the proclamation of the Word of God and shepherding the people of God. First, Paul puts an immense amount of emphasis on the proclamation of the Scriptures, which is in concert with how he describes his own ministry in stewarding the gospel of Jesus Christ. He begins by stating he has not been cowardly in his approach, but rather he “declared” and “taught” anything that was profitable to the people there, both in

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<sup>42</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, p. 693. See also Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, pp. 129–35. It should also be noted that the elder/overseer has been instructed to “care for the church of God” (ποιμαίνειν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ). The term ποιμαίνειν is a verbal form of the term ποιμήν, which is the idea behind our English word “pastor” (cf. Eph 4:11). Thus, this passage of Scripture contains all three of the terms that are attributed to pastoral ministry in the NT. For an excellent study on the connections between the shepherd and the pastor and its ministerial implications see Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*.

<sup>43</sup> This summary was derived from Tidball, *Ministry by the Book*, p. 103.

public and from house to house (20:20).<sup>44</sup> Specifically, in verse 21, he has proclaimed the gospel, which is in accordance with the stewardship Paul has received from God (cf. 1 Cor 4:1–2; Eph 3:2; Col 1:25). Bock, commenting on this verse, writes, “Repentance to God represents a change of direction in how one relates to God. It entails faith in Jesus, so that the turning results in one placing trust in what God did through Jesus as one embraces his person and work. This is a message for both Jews and Greeks, considering that both need to hear the same thing.”<sup>45</sup> This is certainly something Paul did on a consistent basis, and he is now implicitly calling for these elders to do the same.

Paul continues and asserts that he is innocent of all of their blood (Acts 20:26). The ground for this claim (γὰρ; 20:27) is that Paul did not “shrink” from declaring the “whole counsel of God” (20:20, 27). In referring to “the whole counsel of God,” Paul appears to have in mind all that is part of God’s plan as it is tied to the preaching of the gospel (1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:4).<sup>46</sup> Thus, one can see a connection between Acts 20:20–21 and 20:27 in that Paul proclaimed the whole counsel of God to these people, which certainly comprised a great amount of material, but central to that proclamation was the reality of the person and work of Jesus, who was the center of God’s redemptive plan in salvation history (cf. Luke 24:27, 44).

One final point Paul makes in this discourse in reference to preaching is in the final commendation given to these elders before his departure (Acts 20:32). Here Paul entrusts these leaders “to God and the 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.” In Paul’s absence these men still have God’s Word to turn to for instruction and edification. This will be beneficial both for themselves as well as their churches to continue to grow in their

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<sup>44</sup> For discussion on the cultural background of references to speaking “in public and from house to house” see Jerome H. Neyrey, “‘Teaching you in Public and from House to House’ (Acts 20:20): Unpacking a Cultural Stereotype.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26/1 (September 1, 2003): pp. 69–102.

<sup>45</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Acts* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 627.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 629.

faith.<sup>47</sup> Thus, one can see in this discourse to the Ephesian elders that proclamation of the whole counsel of God, especially the gospel, was central to Paul as the steward of God, and he is passing on this same responsibility to the elders, who are also God's stewards.

### *Shepherding*

Alongside of preaching, the apostle also exhorts the elders at Ephesus to shepherd the people within their church. This is taken up most directly in Acts 20:28, where Paul tells these elders, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock [ποιμνίῳ], in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [ἐπισκόπους], to care for [ποιμαίνειν] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The verb ποιμαίνω in this verse carries the idea of serving as a herder of sheep, protecting, caring, leading, and nurturing.<sup>48</sup> Marshall rightly asserts, "The metaphor of shepherding the flock of God takes up a familiar OT picture of God's people under their rulers (Ps. 100:3; Isa. 40:11; Jer. 13:17; Ezek. 34) and applies it to the task of caring for and directing the church."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the elders, in continuity with OT leadership, function as overseers who are to care for the people that God has entrusted to their care.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Bruce states, "Though Paul might go, God was ever with them, and so was God's word which they had received—the word that proclaimed His grace in sanctifying them...By that word, as they accepted and obeyed it, they would be built up in faith and love together with their fellow Christians; by that word too, they were assured of their inheritance among all the people of God, sanctified by His grace. In due course Paul and all the apostles passed from earthly life; but the apostolic teaching which they left behind as a sacred deposit to be guarded by their successors, preserved not merely in the memory of their hearers but in the scriptures of the NT canon, remains with us to this day as the word of God's grace." F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts; the English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 417–18. These elders were, in effect, Paul's successors, and as such they took up the task of proclaiming the whole counsel of God, which is the word of His grace.

<sup>48</sup> BDAG, p. 842.

<sup>49</sup> I. Howard Marshall, "Acts," in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 596.

<sup>50</sup> So Bock, *Acts*, pp. 629–30; Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts; the English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, pp. 415–16; John B. Polhill, *Acts* (The New American Commentary 26; Nashville: Broadman, 1992), pp. 426–27.

Paul follows up this imperative by warning the Ephesian elders that “fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:29; cf. Ezek 22:27; Zeph 3:3; Matt 7:15; Luke 10:3; 2 Cor 10–13). These wolves would come from within their own ranks, speaking “twisted things” (i.e. false doctrine) to draw people away from the truth, and therefore the leadership are to be alert (Acts 20:30–31).<sup>51</sup> The work of the elders was to guard themselves and their congregation from false teachings and false teachers that will inevitably come. They are also commanded to “shepherd” the church of God (cf. John 21:16; 1 Pet 5:1–2; Eph 4:11) and to “be alert” (20:31).<sup>52</sup> This admonition involves both preaching and shepherding, as the leadership must concentrate on being able to refute false teaching as well as guide and protect the flock from being drawn away in a more personal manner.

Acts 20:28 is quite similar to the exhortation Peter gives to his fellow elders in 1 Peter 5:1–5. They are told to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight” (ποιμάνετε τὸ ἐν ὑμῖν ποίμνιον τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπισκοποῦντες).<sup>53</sup> Laniak offers the following assessment of these two passages.

The shepherds are to shepherd (*poimano*) God’s flock under their care. Only here and in Acts 20:28 is the imperative form of the verb used in this way...In both contexts the association between shepherding and careful oversight is clear. In Acts the ‘overseers’ (*episkopoi*) are expected to guard or pay close attention to (*prosecho*) the needs of the flock (in the context of wolves; v. 29). Similarly, leaders in Hebrews 13:17

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<sup>51</sup> So Bock who asserts, “The threat is of teaching that takes one off the ‘straight’ path and pulls disciples away (*apospa*) from God’s direction and leading. ...The image is of pulling someone in a direction that the person should not go, as here, or of leaving a former location (Luke 22:41; Acts 21:1). The elders should prevent false teaching at all costs. They are ‘guardians of the tradition of the apostles’ and are entrusted with the guidance of the community.” Bock, *Acts*, p. 631.

<sup>52</sup> Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer*, p. 130.

<sup>53</sup> Regarding the participle ἐπισκοποῦντες, Schreiner notes, “The participle is missing in some early manuscripts (8, B, 323), but the majority of witnessed include it, and we should not put much confidence in B, which also wrongly omits v. 3. The corrector of Sinaiticus includes the participle, and it may have been omitted by some scribes because they distinguished the offices of elder and overseer and thought the text was mistaken in correlating them. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, p. 234.

‘watch over’ (*agrypneō*) your souls as they serve the ‘great Shepherd of the sheep’ (Heb. 13:20). In 1 Peter 5:2 the elders are to oversee (*episkopeō*) the flock. This is the flock of the ‘Shepherd and Overseer (*episkopon*) of your souls’ (2:25). Watching, noted frequently in this study, is a comprehensive summary of shepherding tasks. It is the vigilant attention to threats that can disperse or destroy the flock.<sup>54</sup>

As Laniak states the elders are to watch over the church of God, which was obtained with His own blood (Acts 20:28), and the flock entrusted to them by the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:2, 4). Thus, while the apostle was God’s steward of the good news of Jesus Christ, overseers likewise are the stewards of God’s gospel message, as well as His people to the degree that they can work to see God’s people entrusted to their care living worthy of the gospel of Christ (Phil 1:27).

### Theological Synthesis

With this understanding in place we must now look at the way in which this metaphor, rightly understood in relation to pastoral ministry, will affect the way in which an elder/overseer conceives of his ministerial task in the present. The idea of stewardship gives greater weight and meaning to two duties in particular: preaching the Word<sup>55</sup> and shepherding the flock of God. Having examined

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<sup>54</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, pp. 232–33.

<sup>55</sup> When conceiving of this concept theologically, one could also say that as the steward of God the elders should have a direct leadership role in the observance of the ordinances. This is due to their close connection to the task of preaching, as noted by Moore and Sagers: “When the church is gathered together in a covenant community, with the Word of God faithfully proclaimed, Jesus is present as King (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 5:4). The ordinances are themselves a continuation of the preaching ministry of the church. The very fact that Jesus promised that he “will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25) conveys a certain confidence within the church in the ultimate victory of God. The church proclaims “the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26), a death that was overcome in resurrection, and a triumphant return that is certain. Partaking of the Lord’s Table is no light matter (1 Cor. 11:27-32), and unbelievers or those in persistent sin are not to partake of this church ordinance (1 Cor. 5:6-13). The Lord’s Supper, then, is to look forward to the marriage supper of the Lamb, when all the redeemed of all the ages will eat with a slain and resurrected King Jesus of

the relevant texts in this study I would argue that the concept of stewardship is paradigmatic for rightly understanding the task of present-day pastors.

### ***The Modern Pastor as the Steward of God***

Though this is not a term frequently used to describe the function and role of a pastor in Scripture, there is a great amount of significance for ministry, and thus it should not be neglected. God has given pastors a tremendous amount of responsibility, and those who serve in ministry should feel the weight of this calling. Com-

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Nazareth seated at the head of the table (Rev 19:6-9). But until that day, the church eats together of the broken bread and the fruit of the vine in anticipation of the Kingdom to come and in celebration of the Kingdom at hand. No doubt many Baptists have misunderstood the sign nature of the Lord's Supper and baptism, translating the ordinances into hyper-Zwinglian terms. Baptists are right to deny sacerdotalism, but we would not speak of the baptismal waters or the Eucharistic bread and wine as "just symbols" any more than we would speak of the Bible preached as "just words." All of these are proclamations—the voice of Jesus announcing an invading Kingdom through the first stage of the invasion force, his church. Where Jesus speaks, he is *there*. And he is there as King and Lord." Russell D. Moore and Robert E. Sagers, "The Kingdom of God and the Church: A Baptist Reassessment," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 12/1 (March 1, 2008): pp. 80–81. See also Stott, who states, "In laying this emphasis on the Word of God as indispensable for the church's welfare, I am not forgetting the gospel sacraments...The major difference between them is that the message of the one is directed to the eye, and of the other to the ear. So the sacraments need the Word of God to interpret them. The ministry of the Word and sacrament is a single ministry, the Word proclaiming, the sacrament dramatizing, God's promises. Yet the Word is primary, since without it the sign becomes dark in meaning, if not actually dumb." John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (1st ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), p. 114. This is also an interesting connection to make, in that the link between preaching and the ordinances helps to strengthen the link between preaching and shepherding. Pastors must proclaim the truths of Scripture and explain how they are then visualized in the ordinances. It must then be noted that the elements are for those who have confessed faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and are persevering in that faith (cf. 2 Cor 13:5). Therefore, pastors must proclaim the gospel verbally and through the ordinances, and, while doing so faithfully, watch over those in their local church to as to rightly administer the sacraments and shepherd God's people.



menting on this biblical understanding of stewardship, Ferguson looks at its implications for ministry:

The language of stewardship refers to the practice in the ancient world of giving to a trusted slave or employee the administration of the owner's property or business...The biblical theme of stewardship derives from the premise that God creates all and so owns all (Gen. 1:1; Deut. 10:14; Ps. 24:1). His claims as creator are enhanced by his redemptive activity, his saving plan itself referred to as a 'stewardship' or 'administration' (Eph. 1:3–5, 9–10; 3:9). Hence, human beings are accountable to God for their use of what he placed at their disposal (Gen. 1:26–30).<sup>56</sup>

It must be noted, therefore, that elders are not simply taking on some unimportant leadership position in a local church; rather they are overseeing the property of God, namely His Word and His people.

It is needful that pastors begin to see their ministries in these categories in a fresh way. Their ministry, as with all of life, is a gift from God, and they will one day give an account for the kind of stewardship they administered. This is spelled out clearly in Hebrews 13:17, where the church is told to obey their leadership, and they must do this because the leaders are keeping watch over the souls of their people since they will have to give an account for their oversight.<sup>57</sup> The leadership will give account to God, as has

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<sup>56</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 276. Ferguson goes on regarding stewardship, specifically in reference to Titus 1:7, and states, "The church is presented as the family or household of God the Father (1 Tim. 3:15); the stewards take care of its affairs for him. Since a steward took care of what was not his own but belonged to another, he was expected to be prudent (Luke 12:42) and above all faithful (1 Cor. 4:1–2), for he would have to give an account to the owner (Luke 16:2; cf. Heb. 13:17)." *Ibid.*, p. 323. Similarly Hammett, "As it is a position of considerable trust, the key requirement of a good steward is faithfulness to the master." Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, p. 164.

<sup>57</sup> It must be noted that the term ἡγέομαι is used in Hebrews 13:7, 17 to conceive of the church's leadership rather than the more commonly used words (elder, overseer, pastor), and the question must be asked as to whether this text refers to pastoral leadership. This word was used in Greco-Roman culture to refer to civic leaders, while later Jewish sources often associated this word with elders who looked after the affairs of the

been evidenced by the texts on stewardship noted previously. Pastors would do well to remember that everything they have in ministry is a gift from God, for which they will one day give an account to God.

### *The Modern Pastor as Preacher*

In being a faithful steward of God, the pastor of a local church must be in continuity with the apostle Paul and proclaim the “whole counsel of God,” which is centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ. As one who is responsible for communicating the very Word of God to the people in his local church, it seems there are several theological implications for preaching in relation to the concept of stewardship.

First, since God gave us His Word, it would seem that a pastor would desire to proclaim biblical truths as accurately as possible, which means that exposition would be the primary way in which Scripture would be communicated.<sup>58</sup> This type of preaching will

community. So BDAG, p. 433. Thus, it is a more generic term, but the author also places qualifications on who this leadership consists of: they have spoken the Word of God to the people and possess a faith that is imitable (13:7), and keep watch over the souls of the congregation (13:17). In regards to the term ἀγρυπνέω in 13:17 Guthrie states, “The same verb is used in Ephesians 6:18 in an injunction to keep alert in prayer. The task of the leaders is to maintain constant watch over those committed to their care. This is reminiscent of Paul’s care of all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28) and of Peter’s injunction to the elders to tend God’s flock (1 Pet. 5:2), which is itself reminiscent of the words of Jesus to Peter (Jn. 21:15ff).” Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 276–77. Thus, the leadership described here appears to be that which is carried out by pastors, and this assertion is further supported by the author’s reference to Jesus as the great Shepherd of the sheep in 13:20 (cf. 1 Peter 5:1–4). See also David Allen, *Hebrews* (New American Commentary; Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2010), 624–25; George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 438–42; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 529–30.

<sup>58</sup> So Vanhoozer, who writes, “To preach is to address people in God’s name, and address ‘directed to men with the definitive claim and expectation that it has to declare the Word of God to them.’ This is precisely why preaching ought to be an exposition of Scripture, the objective

focus most intensely upon the actual words of Scripture, and as such serves as the greatest possible means to being a faithful steward of God's Word. Second, if we are to be faithful preachers we must recall that we are specifically stewards of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and as such it must be clearly communicated to the people in our church. This does not simply mean that a preacher tags the gospel onto the end of any sermon he preaches without making previous reference to it; rather Christ will be the culminating focus and aim of every exposition, regardless of the text being preached.<sup>59</sup> Finally—and this transitions into the concept of shepherding—preaching, by God's grace, brings about the realities of the gospel in the lives of God's people. Preaching is not only doctrinal and moral instruction, though it includes these; it is also the means by which God, through the Spirit, creates and sustains Christians and churches in their union with Christ.<sup>60</sup> Pastors must rightly conceive of their stewardship of God's Word, knowing that by rightly proclaiming the truths of God, His people, under the

or written form of God's Word. To be sure, the ultimate authority over church proclamation is God in triune communicative action, and those who proclaim the word are not able to coerce the Spirit to accompany it so that it will unfailingly achieve its purpose. Nevertheless, we are responsible for preserving as much of the communicative action in Scripture as we can." Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 74. Certainly various preaching texts espouse different models of preaching, but for a sampling of recent works that argue for the primacy of expository preaching see Daniel L. Akin, David Lewis Allen, and Ned Lee Mathews, eds., *Text-Driven Preaching: God's Word at the Heart of Every Sermon* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Dennis E. Johnson, *Him We Proclaim: Preaching Christ from All the Scriptures* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: P & R Publishing, 2007); John MacArthur, *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992); R. Albert Mohler, *He Is Not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008); Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven-Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> For a helpful text that seeks to equip preachers to make Christ central in every sermon see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>60</sup> Michael Scott Horton, *People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), p. 253.

sovereignty of God, will be transformed progressively into the likeness of Christ (cf. John 6:63; Acts 10:44; 12:24; Phil 2:14–16; 2 Tim 2:9; Heb 4:12; 1 Peter 1:23). God has given His Word to elders that they may oversee the people God has entrusted to them through the proclamation of biblical truth, and shepherding their overall spiritual vitality and perseverance in the faith.

### ***The Modern Pastor as Shepherd***

Finally, the contemporary minister is called to steward the people of God in his local church responsibly and faithfully. Though preaching has been a frequent topic of conversation in recent days, the same cannot necessarily be said of shepherding. One possible reason for this, Laniak asserts, is, “For most modern readers in the industrialized, urbanized West there is little first-hand familiarity with the cultural realities that inform the *meaning* of the metaphor.”<sup>61</sup> However, there is a desperate need for pastors to recover an understanding of the concept of shepherding in order to serve faithfully as God’s stewards.

Thus, it must be noted that preaching and shepherding are closely connected for the steward of God, and as such overseers cannot concentrate on one while neglecting the other. In other words, pastors must not only preach, they must shepherd their people in such a way as to watch over their lives and assist them in pursuing godliness on a personal level.<sup>62</sup> Shepherding and oversight can readily be seen in pastoral visitations, counseling, and even over meals in a home, but another key area that shepherding must take place in the church is through church membership and discipline. Commenting on Acts 20:28 and Hebrews 13:17, Leeman

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<sup>61</sup> Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart*, p. 21.

<sup>62</sup> Bucer insists on both public and private ministry as being priorities for the minister: “Christian doctrine and admonition must not be confined to the assembly and the pulpit; because there are very many people who will take what they are taught and admonished in the public gathering as being of only general application, and consider it to apply more to others than to themselves. Therefore it is essential that people should also be instructed, taught and led on in Christ individually in their homes.” See Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, p. 181. This is especially pertinent to megachurch and multi-site models of ecclesiology that, with increasing membership, may find it difficult to oversee their people effectively. However, churches will need to think through this if pastors are to fulfill their roles as the stewards of God.

states, “the plainest way to read these two passages is to say that the elders of a church, collectively, should be able to pay careful attention to every member of the flock, because they will give an account for every member of the flock before God.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, shepherding involves the admittance, the edifying, and, when necessary, the exclusion of persons from the local church. This must be done if the overseers are to steward the people of God in a responsible fashion.

It is difficult to press on this issue too definitively and say that no oversight can be delegated to lay ministers such as small group leaders, but it should at least be conceded that every mediating step placed between the elders and a believer moves that individual one step further away from careful, shepherding. The church should receive oversight, not just from a senior pastor, but from a plurality of elders who are committed to their spiritual well-being.<sup>64</sup> Thus, as a steward of God’s Word and His people, pastors must aspire to preach accurately, know their people well, and work to see individuals grow in conformity to that preached Word, by the grace of God and the power of His Spirit.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

The concept of stewardship demands a particular role and function for those who would serve as elders in a local church. They must recognize that God has granted them a responsibility in giving them the Scriptures and a people to watch over. They are gifts that must be handled faithfully, for they will one day give an account to their master. This kind of work is summarized by James Thompson, who defines pastoral ministry in the following way: “Ministry is participation in God’s work of transforming the com-

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<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), p. 308. This is also a pragmatic argument for a plurality of elders serving in a local church, particularly as churches grow.

<sup>64</sup> For a convincing argument on the church being led by a plurality of elders and governed by the congregation see Waldron, “Plural-Elder Congregationalism,” in Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, pp. 187–221.

<sup>65</sup> Leeman, *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God’s Love*, pp. 308–309.

munity of faith until it is 'blameless' at the coming of Christ."<sup>66</sup> Certainly, even when a pastor faithfully does his work there will be seeming shortcomings in his congregation, preaching, and his own life, but no matter what the results may be God calls for His stewards to be faithful to their calling. Since pastors are to give an account to their Master, they must be sure to work diligently in proclaiming God's Word concerning the good news of Jesus Christ and in leading the congregation in applying that proclaimed Word and walking in the ways of God. With this kind of faithful pastoral ministry God will be well pleased.

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<sup>66</sup> James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 20. Thompson spends the rest of the book teasing out that thesis in a convincing fashion by concentrating specifically on the apostle Paul.