

## **What Is a Pastor?**

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**Rich Nathan**

**December 7, 2025**

**Denver, CO**

**1 Peter 5:1-4**

Pastoring has fallen on hard times here in America. Over the past decade, we've heard about pastoral spiritual abuse more times than we can count, and we in the church have been subjected to a regular stream of reports concerning pastors who have been accused and then convicted of molesting teens in their care. Many churchgoers wonder what is going on here? Is there something about American culture that produces such an abundance of narcissistic church leaders, especially in mega churches? I'm sure that there are a number of things about the way that we in the 21st century do church that brings out some of the worst qualities in pastors. And there's certainly something about America in the 21st century that is producing narcissists by the bushel load, not only in the pulpit, but in politics, in big business, in sports, and in entertainment.

Listen, the problem of bad pastors is not a new problem. As far back as the Old Testament, we hear God's warnings to corrupt shepherds, some of whom were government leaders, but others were folks who were caring for the spiritual wellbeing of God's people. Twenty-six hundred years ago, God says through the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 34, these words:

**[SLIDE #] “Woe to you, shepherds of Israel, who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You’ve ruled them harshly and brutally.” [Ezekiel 34:2]**

Bad shepherding has been a problem for more than two millenia. Today, we have the privilege of ordaining Scott and Hannah Engebretson as pastors here at Northwest Vineyard who are really good shepherds, and have proven that in multiple church contexts over the past several decades. But before we do so, especially at a time where there's so much suspicion of pastors and so many bad models of spiritual leadership, what I'd like to do is turn to God's word and try to answer the question, “What is a pastor? When a church lays hands on a pastor and says, “You are going to be a spiritual leader for us,” what exactly does that mean? What is it that we are saying today about God's calling on Scott and Hannah? What is a pastor? That's the title of today's message. Let's pray.

Let me read from 1 Peter 5:

**[SLIDE #] To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God**

wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. [1 Peter 5:1-4, NIV]

Peter's fundamental question is simply this: What is a pastor? Let me break down the question the way Peter does into three subordinate questions. First, what kind of person is a pastor? He speaks about that in verse 1. Let's read that again.

**[SLIDE #]** To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: [1 Peter 5:1, NIV]

Second, in verse 2, Peter asks the question, what kind of roles does a pastor have?

**[SLIDE #]** Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them,,, [1 Peter 5:2, NIV]

Finally, the third question that Peter asks and answers is this: what are the proper motivations of a pastor? And here's Peter's answer in verses 2 and 3:

**[SLIDE #]** <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. [1 Peter 5:2-3. NIV]

So, let's start with the first question:

**[SLIDE #]** What kind of person is a pastor?

Let's read verse one again.

**[SLIDE #]** To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: [1 Peter 5:1, NIV]

Peter says two things here. First of all,

**[SLIDE #]** A pastor is an elder.

The term elder was borrowed from Jewish synagogue practice. It was used in Judaism to signify the older men in the congregation, who were the leaders in the synagogue, and the leaders in the nation. But in the New Testament, even though the term elder was borrowed from the Jewish synagogue, eldership was not necessarily connected with age. Timothy was a young elder. In the New Testament, eldership primarily deals with a person's character. There are issues of character and integrity that needed to be in place before we appoint someone to eldership in the church.

It's interesting that when the New Testament lays out the qualities necessary for eldership, or for pastoring, it doesn't speak about academic credentials - although you are the rare American church that is privileged to have a senior pastor with a PhD in Old Testament from one of America's top evangelical seminaries. And you are also privileged that this PhD in Old Testament has a wife with a Masters of Divinity, who everyone knows can run circles around Scott academically. Nevertheless, the New Testament doesn't say that certain academic credentials are a prerequisite for pastoral ministry.

The New Testament doesn't even say that certain gifts are required to qualify for church leadership, or even a list of tasks demanded of a pastor beyond being "able to teach." Teaching God's word is the one task highlighted for an elder in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus chapter 1, which speak about eldership. But

everything else listed as prerequisites for eldership are character qualities - not academic credentials, not gifting, not a list of tasks to be done - character qualities.

And let me add personally that this is what I see in Scott and Hannah over the nearly 15 years that I've known them. These are two people with great Christian character! They have a rock-solid devotion to Jesus and his Word. They have a deep commitment to their covenant of marriage. They actively pursue holiness in their lives. They practice hospitality with great joy. They embody in their own behavior and lives 1 Timothy 3 and Titus chapter 1. And then, as an added bonus, they are both very both very gifted leaders and Bible teachers.

Bottom line, pastors are called to be elders, which in the New Testament is primarily an issue of character qualities - not gifting, not educational credentials, but integrity and trustworthiness. As we ordain Scott and Hannah today, we should be asking character questions. Integrity questions. Questions of spirituality, not questions about their charisma or their academic degrees. And in answer to the question about what kind of person should a pastor be?

Peter says second of all:

**[SLIDE #]** A pastor is someone willing to pay the price of leadership.

In verse 1, Peter says that he is a witness of Christ's suffering. Let's look at verse 1 again:

**[SLIDE #]** To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: [1 Peter 5:1, NIV]

Peter is not just an eyewitness of Christ's suffering. He's not even just a proclaimer of the message of Jesus' suffering and death to pay for the sins of the world. Peter is also someone who says a Christian leader must be willing to walk in the footsteps of Christ's sufferings. 1 Peter 5 is a text written to a suffering church, a church of resident aliens, a church that is under tremendous pressure from the larger society. Peter is writing to a persecuted church. And we know this from lots of statements in this letter like 1 Peter 4:12

**[SLIDE #]** Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. [1 Peter 4:12, NIV]

The people in the church were suffering. Many of them were being persecuted,

Now, when persecution comes to the church, it's almost always the church leaders who are most visible to the authorities and who are therefore most vulnerable to severe persecution. In almost every situation, if you are the pastor or leader of a persecuted church, you will be the first one attacked. Governments understand the principle that Jesus stated at his last supper, "Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." In other words, get rid of the pastor, and you will destroy the church.

In many countries and at many times, there has been real danger in being a pastor. One of the church members of Vineyard Columbus, a dear friend of mine, was thrown in prison because he was the leader of several vibrant Christian home fellowship groups in a country that is closed to Christianity. As he worked in these underground churches in this closed country, he instructed his church members that "If you are arrested, blame me. Make me the fall guy. You don't have to suffer; I will suffer in your place!" And that's what happened. A few church members were arrested, and they pointed the finger at him and he was thrown into solitary confinement for many months.

Jesus said that being willing to pay the price of sacrificing yourself for your people is the difference between being a pastor and being a mere employee of the church. Mere employees, when they see danger coming, take off. Pastors, true shepherds are willing to pay the price of leadership.



**[SLIDE #] What kind of price should a pastor be willing to pay?**

In some cases, the price literally is persecution from the government - imprisonment, and occasionally even martyrdom. But all pastors, even here in the United States, will have to pay the price of criticism, the price of verbal attacks. And just to make this a little more personal and self-revealing, I have personally experienced repeated attacks on social media and on some popular podcasts. When blogs were popular, I was blogged against for several years. There was a Christian preacher in my city who, when Christian radio was an actual thing and people listened to Christian radio, repeatedly attacked me on the radio. These attacks were mainly around Vineyard Columbus's strong stand for immigrants in our city and for racial diversity in our church. In the course of a month, I received two death threats on my voicemail. And I'm just an ordinary pastor in a country that respects religious liberty. But alongside of the critical emails and verbal attacks, to be a pastor means that you pay the price of late night phone calls and long vigils at a hospital with the family of a dying spouse or father or mother or child. To be a pastor means that you pay the price of dear friends leaving your church, and even the betrayal of trust by fellow leaders and other staff. To be a pastor means you pay the price of working long and hard for less pay than most professionals with similar education receive..

Scott and Hannah, I remind you that as you have said "yes" to your calling as pastors, and as you take your ordination vows, you are saying "yes" to following

in the footsteps of a suffering Savior. You are saying “yes” today to paying the price of leadership.

What is a pastor? A pastor is first of all an elder. Second, a pastor is someone willing to pay the price of leadership.

**[SLIDE #]** What are the roles of a pastor?

**[SLIDE #]** A pastor is a shepherd.

Peter says in verse 2,

**[SLIDE #]** Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve [1 Peter 5:2, NIV]

There are a host of different giftings that people bring to the pastoral office. Some people are great preachers. Some are evangelistic. Some bring administrative gifts to bear. Some pastors are wonderful counselors. People become pastors from a wide variety of backgrounds. Pastors have different temperaments. Some are extroverted, some are introverted. But no matter what kind of gifting a person

has, or what kind of temperament, there is one thing that should be present in everyone called to be a pastor. Every pastor should have a shepherd's heart. In fact, if you haven't heard this before, the word pastor and the word pasture come from the same Latin root. Both come from the image of shepherding - someone who feeds, who cares for, and who's responsible for nourishing and protecting the flock. If a person does not have a shepherd's heart, even if they are gifted preachers or evangelists or administrators or women's leaders or leaders of children - If inside, they don't have a pastor's heart, then whatever else they are, they are not pastors!

What do I mean by a pastor's heart? I mean a tender and loving spiritual concern for the wellbeing of God's people. When I speak about a pastor's heart, I mean that a pastor ought to have, if he is a man, the heart of a father that wishes to bring people to Christian maturity. A pastor, if she is a woman, ought to have the heart of a mother - to nurture, to sacrifice herself to care for and minister to the needs of God's people.

It's interesting that many of the great leaders in the Bible were shepherds.

Again, same word as pastors. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the patriarchs of Israel, were all shepherds. Moses was a shepherd. King David was a shepherd when he was called to be king. Jesus calls himself the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. What God is saying is that what he wants at the heart of anyone who is going to lead in his congregation is a shepherd's heart.

Over the years, I have observed many pastors who tucked themselves away in their office until the moment the church service began. I've observed standoffish pastors. I've been to churches where there was no way for a person to actually get near to the pastor, because the pastor had a bunch of bodyguards who would shield the pastor from ordinary people. But what I have seen in Scott at the campus that he led when he was with us in Vineyard Columbus is him standing outside the door of the church, welcoming people, hugging people, laughing with people, telling self-effacing jokes about himself. Pastors ought to have the smell of the sheep on them. And what I've always loved about Scott and Hannah is that they love being with God's people. They don't rule from a position above the people of God. Rather, they live their lives among God's people.

A pastor is not only a shepherd, but, in terms of the roles of a pastor,

**[SLIDE #]** A pastor is a watchman.

Peter says in verse 2,

**[SLIDE #]** Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve [1 Peter 5:2, NIV]

The Greek word here for “watching over” is *episkopos*. It's where we get the Episcopal Church from. *Episkopos* is a compound word:

**[SLIDE #]** **Episkopos = epi (over) and skopos (see)**

Just like a telescope enables you to see far off and a microscope enables you to see small things, *episkopos* is a someone who can “see over” – a person who watches over the flock. Back in the first century, shepherds would build towers to scan the countryside to get advanced warning of dangers to the flock - of a flash flood that was coming, or predators, like wolves or lions, or bears. Shepherds were far-seeing watchmen who were aware of dangers to the flock.

And that's what a pastor ought to be - someone who is concerned about the spiritual or moral dangers that could sweep his people away. So a pastor is a person who is concerned about false teaching that will poison their church. A pastor is a person who is concerned about folks who are divisive, people who are dividing the church. A pastor is a watchman.

And finally, alongside of being a shepherd and a watchman, when we consider the roles of a pastor,

**[SLIDE #]** A pastor is an example.

**[SLIDE #]** ...not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. [1 Peter 5:3, NIV]

You know, leadership in the New Testament is primarily an issue of modeling. It's really "monkey see, monkey do" in terms of how leaders disciple others in the New Testament. Peter says to be an example to the flock in verse 3.

The most powerful learning device for an individual, especially for an adult, is not a message or a book but an example of a life - a model. People need someone to observe. People need to see Christian teaching fleshed out in another human being so that they can say, "Oh! That's the way you forgive someone who has hurt you. Oh, that's the way that you keep your faith even when everything in your life is falling apart. Oh, that's the way that you resist temptation to sexual sin. That's the way you share your faith. Now I see it." That's the way you open up God's word and teach it. That's the way you love and honor your spouse. That's the way you raise kids in a Christian family. There's something incredibly compelling about a flesh and blood example!

Listen. a pastor is not a perfect Christian. Pastors are sinners like everyone else. Pastors should never be put on a pedestal or in any way become idolized by

people in the church. They struggle with all the temptations that we all struggle with. But in addition to common temptations – pastors because of their visibility and spiritual responsibilities - struggle with temptations that are unique to the pastoral office - temptations to pride, temptations to believe that they are spiritually superior or are indispensable, temptations to people-pleasing. - to fear criticism, and to overvalue people's approval, temptations to burn out, and feeling guilty for resting.

Scott and Hannah, being pastors will expose you to unique temptations. You are not expected to be perfect Christians. But you are called to be model Christians - to be able to say along with the Apostle Paul, "Follow me as I follow Christ." Scott and Hannah, guard your hearts. Stay soft to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit. Be quick to confess your sins. Avoid becoming defensive. Allow accountability to come into your lives. Don't just build a relationship with God in order to pass it on to someone else. Build a relationship with God that will satisfy your own souls! Remain hungry and thirsty for God's Word and God's Spirit.

Here's the third and final big question that Peter answers, regarding being a pastor.

**[SLIDE #]** What are the proper motivations of a pastor?

Peter asks what kind of motives should drive a person to become a pastor?

Here's what he says in verses 2 and 3.

**[SLIDE #]** <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; <sup>3</sup> not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

In these two verses, as I wrap up today, Peter gives three reasons that a person should not become a pastor. A person should not become a pastor because they are compelled,

**[SLIDE #]** Not compelled.

A person should not become a pastor because they view it as a career.

**[SLIDE #]** Not a career.

And a person should not become a pastor because they seek control.

**[SLIDE #]** Not for control.



Let's look at these three quickly. First, you don't become a pastor because you're compelled to. Now, I do believe in divine compulsion, someone who says, "I wouldn't have become a pastor for any reason, other than the fact that God has been drawing me. I wouldn't be a missionary, except I feel compelled by the Lord. This was what God planned for my life. Divine necessity is appropriate, and once someone feels that divine necessity, they should be able to joyfully say to God, "If this is what you have for my life, I embrace it. I love it. I belong to you. I want to be loose change in your pocket, Lord. Spend me however you will. I am at your disposal!"

But I think what Peter is talking about when he looks at your heart's motivation, when he says "not because you must, but because you are willing" is that he's talking about the difference between someone who says, "Do I have to do this ministry," and someone who says, "I get to do this ministry." Do I have to go to visit a hospital to pray for a sick person? Is that part of my job description? Do I have to hang around church after services greeting people and praying for them? Is that part of my job description? The person who has a have-to mentality is not called to be a pastor. Do I have to prepare this sermon? Do I have to open my home to practice hospitality? Do I have to go the extra mile with someone who's a challenging person? If you have a have-to mentality, you're not yet a Christian leader. Christian leaders are people who don't say, I have to do this, but I get to do it. There is no greater honor in the world than to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and his church.

A Christian pastor is someone who says, “I can’t believe, Lord Jesus, that, knowing everything you know about me that you would allow me to pastor your people.” And I’ll apply this to all of you: Can you say, “I can’t believe that I get to be a small group leader, a woman's group leader, support and recovery leader, children's leader, a coach for marriage and a coach for young adults, a leader in our ministry to the poor. I can't believe I get to do the stuff that the Lord has called me to do.” A pastor is someone who serves God’s people without being compelled to do so.

A pastor is also not someone who is seeking a career. Peter says in verse 2,

**[SLIDE #] <sup>2</sup> Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve**

Ministry is not a business. Becoming a pastor is not a shrewd career move. Pastoring is not a career. It's a calling. It's so disturbing to me as a pastor to sit down with a young adult who communicates to me something like, “You know, I really don't know what I want to do with my life. I'm not sure where I'm headed, but I thought to myself why not apply for a job on a church staff? I like other Christians. I like reading the Bible. I like going out for coffee. I need a paycheck with health insurance. Why not hang out on a church staff for a while?” On the

other hand, what I love - what's been a great privilege to me over the last 20 years - is being around dozens and dozens of people who could make way more money in some other career, but who responded to a call to pastor, not because it was a shrewd career move. but because this is the life that God invited them into. Some of you may feel God's Spirit inviting you to sacrifice more lucrative careers for the surpassing value of pastoring God's people or extending God's kingdom in this world.

Pastoring is not a matter of being compelled. Pastoring is not a career and finally, pastoring is not about exercising power or control.

Scott and Hannah, you are not called to run the church or control the church but to pastor the church. Therefore, in fulfilling your calling to pastor God's flock that is under your care:

- Know the sheep entrusted to you – their wounds, their fears, their joys.
- Feed them with the Scriptures; lead them in holiness; protect them from wolves.
- Be a model of Christ-like character. Be a living sermon that people can see and not just hear about on Sunda mornings.
- Be present with the church in suffering; rejoice with them in blessing.
- Remember that the flock is not yours – it is God's flock, purchased with His own blood. Serve as shepherds under the Chief Shepherd, to whom you will one day give account.



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