

ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

MINISTRY LETTER FOR BUSY ELDERS

Practical Application

by Jack Spender

Hospitality—A Great Subject

Spanish speaking people have a saying: “Mi casa, su casa,” which is to say, “My house is your house.” It’s an expression of hospitality. In English we might say to guests, “Make yourself at home.” In any case, it’s a great thing to be warmly welcomed into someone else’s home. Of all people, Christians should be the most hospitable.

While some cultures are naturally more inclined to hospitality, knowing what to do and how to do it can be difficult for new believers or for people coming from backgrounds where family puts a premium on privacy. For the blessing of the assembly, here is an area where elders can be setting an example.

Examples from the Bible

Numerous examples of open homes are sprinkled through the pages of Scripture, both brief visits and extended stays. The emphasis is nearly always on sharing with, rather than impressing, others. One thinks of Abraham welcoming visitors to his home, the Shunnamite woman preparing a room for Elisha, the visits by our Lord to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in Bethany, and the many homes opened to Paul along the way as he journeyed toward Rome.

One of my personal favorites is the account in Luke 24 of the two disciples who met the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus and without knowing who He was, “constrained” Him not to go further that night but to come in and “abide” with them. Of course this offer included the warmth of fellowship around the dinner table where He chose to reveal Himself to them to their great delight. Weary hosts suddenly became energetic servants!

What is involved?

The word “hospitality” in the NT really means “loving strangers.” In Bible days, travel was more difficult, inns were often dangerous, so receiving travelers into the home was one way Christians could show practical love to one another. Nevertheless, Peter’s exhortation to extend hospitality “to one another” (1 Peter 4:9 NKJV) widens the scope to all believers.

Perhaps the most pointed references on this subject of the open home are found right in the list of characteristics of elders in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1. “An overseer must be . . . given to hospitality.” (1 Tim. 3:2). By placing the word alongside other requirements such as “the husband of one wife,” and “sensible,” Paul gives us to understand that this is not a minor detail of elder work, something optional if convenient, but something close to the heart of what it means to lead God’s people.

A related word, “visit” or “visitation”, should be noted. Not only ought we open our homes to others, but when possible, we ought to visit them in their homes. Interestingly, the most frequently used Greek word translated as “visit” is closely related to the word “episkopos” or overseer as used to describe church elders (Acts 20:28, Phil 1:1, etc.)! God visits people both in blessing (Luke 1:68) and in judgment (Luke 19:44; 1 Peter 2:12). Twice in His teaching about His intimate relationship with His people in Matthew 25, the Lord includes visiting suffering saints in the list of acts of love shown toward Himself. James makes visitation of the fatherless and widows one test of “true religion.” (James 1:27).

As for the question of how these virtues should be exercised, little need be said. A love for people and the freedom to be flexible will open the way for innumerable blessings. Creativity is the believer’s reflection of the Creator!

Benefits and Blessings

This could be a very long list, as potential blessings are huge. I’ll mention just a few. It is important for sheep to see their shepherds close up. For some, coming into a Christian home can be a new experience. Things older believers take for granted can be a revela-

tion to young believers. Over the years working with college students, my wife and I have been amused at some of the exclamations: “You wait for one another before you start the meal?” “You pray over the food,” “There’s no TV blasting so we talk to each other.....”

Seeing how Christian couples relate, how the home is furnished and decorated, even small things like a Bible or some Christian literature on the coffee table, is all part of healthy discipleship. In our efforts to equip and train young believers, we must constantly stand against the idea that Christians have a “public life” and a very different “private life.”

There are also rich benefits that come from visiting people in their own homes. People are more comfortable on familiar ground. They will “open up” in a safe environment, while they may not at “church.” Sensitive shepherds will gather a wealth of insight from seeing people in their own homes. Are there obvious needs for help or financial assistance? Are there special problems such as hurting relationships within the family or elderly parent(s) being cared for? What Bible passages or doctrines addressed in the Bible hour might shed light and bring freedom from some of the “grave clothes” of the past life? What are the next growth steps in the life of each person in the assembly? How much better we can pray for them when our knowledge moves beyond the superficial!

Of course all of this includes hospitality and visits among mature saints as well. Those who travel to Christian conferences regularly enjoy the wonderful fellowship and encouragement of sitting down around the table in the homes of God’s people.

Once in a while, God uses an open home in a way that goes far beyond what we might have expected. Our present assembly (Waterbury Christian Fellowship) began in an inner city home by no means palatial but which became known for the warmth of fellowship and loving acceptance of all who came to a small Bible study that began with 2

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Hospitality (cont.)

Discretion should be used when there is contact between the genders in private settings.

couples. Now, years later, that home is still open to the Lord's people, and it brings much joy to hear someone say on occasion: "That's where I came to know the Lord...."

Related Points

Given such a delightful subject, it seems almost out of place to add a list of disclaimers, but in a difficult day, it's wise to observe a few precautions. Normally elders should visit in plurality. Or it can be helpful for an older brother to invite a younger man to go along. A husband-wife team working together can be very effective in visitations or extending hospitality to others. Discretion should be used when there is contact between the genders in private settings.

One important use for visitation is in dealing with the sick. James lays down a principle when he advises those who are sick to "call for the elders of the church." (James 5:14). Whether at home or in a hospital, those who are laid aside should be helped to understand that they are responsible to take the initiative.

Conclusion

As stated at the beginning, Christians should be the most hospitable of all people. After all, we have something of infinite worth to share with others! If the elders of the church have open homes and open hearts, and if they will seek to visit the saints as opportunity allows, it won't be long until the practice is taken up by others in the assembly.

Observe the similarity between the words "hospitality" and "hospital"—a place of caring and healing. Many have discovered to their joy that as a group becomes known for a healing and caring spirit through the Word of God and love for people, others come in and remain, and the work grows. It is clear from the 6th chapter of Acts that this was the experience of the earliest church. 



*Jack Spender
Bethany, CT*

Biblical Foundations

by Chuck Gianotti

Paul's Final Message (part 2)

*Character:
"The aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of a person."*

Character is at a premium in today's society, much less in the church. Elders should lead by example. So Paul reminds the Ephesian elders in his farewell speech (Acts 20:17-38 NASB) of his character while with them. In the last article in this series, we looked at his outward behavior; this time we are looking at his inner composition. One dictionary lists the meaning of character as: "the aggregate of features and traits that form the individual nature of a person" (Mirriam-Webster).

Humility. First on the list, Paul says, "I [served] the Lord with all humility ..." (Acts 20:19). This seems a bit odd for a person to identify himself in this way, almost negating the very thing he is claiming! However, when one considers that humility is diametrically opposed to the natural bent of the proud human heart, especially in those aspiring to leadership, such an admission is not a veiled form of pride, but rather is a natural expression of that very thing, humility. Paul means that, although he was an apostle with the exalted privilege of being God's ambassador to the Gentiles (Gal 2:8-9), he realized deeply his unworthiness for the task.

On a personal level, he saw himself as "the foremost" of all sinners (see 1 Tim 1:15-16) who provided God nothing more than a proving ground for His perfect patience. On the apostolic level, he was keenly aware that "God has exhibited us apostles last of all...fools for Christ's sake... without honor...hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless...working with our hands...reviled...persecuted...slandered...scum

of the world, the dregs of all things ..." (1 Cor 4:9-13). Yet, he continued serving the Lord faithfully. It is not a proud statement for him to say he served in humility! Very few men would admit to humility. Like a poor man would say, "I am a man of humble means," Paul admits that from the world's perspective, he is a man of humble task, not one who spends his time in finery, pomp and self-adulation.

Being a leader of God's people is not glamorous, despite the imaginations of those who envy popular preachers and leaders of God's people. Serving is hard, and at times, demeaning work. The church needs more men willing to take the humble position in all matters, accepting as a privilege the difficult, thankless assignments the Lord gives. He alone is worthy of honor.

Fortitude. Paul had "the mind that enables a person to encounter danger or bear pain or adversity with courage" (Mirriam-Webster). He served "with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; however I did not shrink from declaring ..." (20:19-20). He was not a quitter, despite incessant harassment from the so-called "Judaizers" who dogged him at every step. Their continuous efforts to distort grace back to the Law wore him down, but he didn't stop proclaiming the life giving message of the Gospel of grace.

Solemnness. Levity was not essential to his message—the work was solemn. The Greek word is an intensification of the word "to testify." His message carried the same gravity as the testimony of the Spirit telling him that more suffering

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Paul's Final Message (cont.)

awaited in every city (vs. 23). That was a sobering message. Yet, getting the word of the Gospel to people was worth suffering for. Needless to say the message, as seen by what Paul went through, was of considerable importance.

The character trait of solemnness, has nothing to do with somberness in our church meetings. Rather it has everything to do with taking the message of grace so seriously that we are willing to sacrifice greatly to get it out to people. The elders of Ephesus, and we also, ought to consider whether our lives reflect a similar attitude toward the gospel.

Courage. Paul was never deterred by the potential for hardship or persecution. The Spirit's warning only challenged him to not give up. "Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, and a night and a day I have spent in the deep" (2 Cor 11:24-25). That was just a sampling! To the Galatians he said, "For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me" (Gal 4:15). Possibly his many hardships resulted in eye damage. Yet, he was not stopped. What courage to keep going!

Self-giving. "I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may ... testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" (vs. 24a). Solemnity, courage and self-giving are intertwined. Paul didn't make choices on a case by case basis, based on what the potential danger might be. Rather he had settled the question of self-denial at a deeper level – everything he did was overshadowed by the prior commitment to whole-hearted surrender to Christ (for example, Rom 12:1-2, Phil 2:1-5, etc.)

Goal-oriented. "...so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord ..." (24b). He knew his God-given task, and did not waver from it. He would do that until he could say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7). He wasn't just "putting in time" as an apostle. I can't imagine him saying at the end of the day, "Whew, made it without any problems." Have we as elders considered at the end of the day what was our real goal?

Compassion. Paul "did not cease to admonish each one with tears." These were different than the tears he experienced in vs. 19 where they had to do with struggling against the trials. Here he notes his compassion for the ones he came to reach, a compassion that did not abate for at least three years (see vs. 31).

Not greedy. Paul never requested money for himself (though he had no problem requesting it for others, for example, to help alleviate the poverty in Jerusalem—see 1 Cor 16:1-4). No one could ever accuse him of "being in it for the money." Likewise, elders should serve, as Peter puts it,

"...not under compulsion, but voluntarily...not for sordid gain, but with eagerness..." Nothing will undermine an elder's work faster than the impression that he is serving for his own personal benefit.

Industrious. "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner..." (34-35). Paul pulled his weight in the practical areas of life; in Corinth this "commended worker" earned his living by manual labor.

Generous. "...I showed you that ... you must help the weak and remember the word of the Lord Jesus, that he Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (35) He did more than his fair share. In fact, he gave freely to those who had needs.

Personable. His reference to tears while serving them, and their response of weeping and embracing Paul (37), and their grief at the thought of his leaving them (38) point to the close bond that had formed between them. Paul was clearly not a cold academic or distant theologian. He shared deeply with them in just about every area of life. He was very personable and the people in Ephesus felt close to him. By way of application, do the folks in our congregations see us elders as approachable? Are we developing close connections with them? Would they be sorry if we had to leave?

Spiritually real. Paul knelt together and prayed with them. This wasn't just a formal mid-week prayer meeting, the scheduled time for prayer. It was a spontaneous demonstration of the deepest level of fellowship. Notice the text doesn't say that only Paul prayed, as though he were the cleric bestowing spiritual blessing. He prayed "with" them, for he had been one with them. They prayed together—apart from the formally gathered meeting of the church. Paul was spiritually real!

In all this, the apostle modeled the character of a godly man, a disciple. It emanated out from the genuineness of his inner man. Paul saw himself as a model of Christian life and ministry (see Phil 3:17, 4:9, 1 Cor 11:1). This now was his last face to face contact with the Ephesians. However, he understood, as he did with the Corinthian believers (1 Cor 11:1), that his model of life should only be followed as it was clearly patterned after the Lord Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Ephesians, he wrote, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children" (Eph 5:1).

Fellow elders, let us pray the Lord would change us internally, so that we would become more effective outwardly in shepherding the "flock of God." 

"I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that

I may ... testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God"

(Acts 20:24a)

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It emanated out from the genuineness of his inner man.



*Chuck Gianotti
Rochester, NY*

Modeling Takes Work!

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

Even plants require careful tending. How much more our marriages, that are being observed by many around us.

Being unresponsive deeply affects a marriage. I suggest two things: plan and pray!

Fresh, alive, close, together, a team, lovers, passionate, do these words describe your marriage? Elders' wives should be working hard to have great marriages. The men, women and young people in our churches are looking to our husbands for leadership, both spiritually and practically. When it comes to relationships we have the privilege of joining with them to *model* what God intended a good marriage to look like.

If I mistreat my houseplants they begin to shrivel or the leaves turn brown around the edges. Recently I bought a plant after Valentine's day—at seventy five percent off, the price was right! A few days later the leaves started to drop. After some investigation I discovered the soil was over-saturated with water, which is not a good thing. Even plants require careful tending. How much more our marriages, that are being observed by many around us.

One survey revealed that eighty percent of men do not feel respected by their wives. God makes it clear this is something wives must do (Ephesians 5:33). Following this research in her book, "For Women Only," Shaunti Feldhahn states, "Men would rather feel alone and unloved than inadequate and disrespected." This is hard for us as women to get our minds around. As a result we may unintentionally show disrespect. What we think is good natured teasing in public (with a jab), a pattern of complaining, or a simple "motherly" reminder can cause our husbands to feel disrespected. We elders' wives should take note and work hard at respecting the man we are married to.

If we turn the marriage coin over we discover, as another writer says, "At the most basic level your man wants to be wanted." (Intimate Issues). Besides needing respect, our husbands are designed by God with a need for physical intimacy. When a man and women experience the oneness, knowledge, passion and comfort that comes from physical union, this creates a oneness that God intended. The Song of Solomon helps us understand this part of our relationship. As women we can tend to become lazy. And the "T" word (tired) is constantly our enemy. Being unresponsive deeply effects a marriage. I suggest two things: plan and pray. This area of marriage takes work, so get to work!

Our marriages are the examples those in the fellowship need. May God help each of us respect our husbands in public and respond to them in private. The congregation will notice our love. 



Mary Gianotti

Unanimity?

The question arises frequently in my travels, should elders make decisions based on a unanimous vote or on a consensus of the majority? On the one hand, one would hope there would be one mind in all things among elders, such that the Spirit would move every one to the same sense of God's leading. Certainly testimony can be given when that has happened and God's blessing was evident.

However, we elders are not perfect in our perception of the Lord's leading and thus there will be disagreements from time to time. Even Paul and Barnabas, both godly individuals, did not see eye-to-eye on the selection of their second missionary team and had to part company.

Yet, elders can't be parting company every time a disagreement comes up. So what's the solution? To expect unanimity in all matters has the effect of giving any elder veto power and can result in one man rule—the very thing plurality is to guard against! Some assemblies struggle with this very thing. To be sure, when one elder strongly disagrees, and there is a sense of his genuine godliness and concern, the others should take pause. But in most matters, a minority of elders should not consistently override the majority. If one can't live with the majority view, then that one should step down from being an elder rather than hold on to control.

For further reading, see "Decisions, Decisions" ESN Vol. 1, No. 7 and "Decisions Making in the Church." Vol. 4, No. 4. 

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CONTACT INFORMATION:

Elders' ShopNotes
c/o 27 Watchman Court
Rochester, N.Y. 14624 U.S.A.
www.bible-equip.org/esn

For English version:
E-mail: esn@bible-equip.org
Voice: (585) 350-9276

For Spanish version:
E-mail: dmasuello@sympatico.ca
Voice: (905) 294-2679

Publisher/Editor: Chuck Gianotti
Editorial assistance: Ruth Rodger
Spanish Translation: John Field
Spanish Editor: Daniel Masuello.

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"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers..."

1 Peter 5:2a NIV