



Biblical Principles Elders Who Do Well

by Chuck Gianotti

Studies in 1 Timothy 5:17-18—Part 12

In a highly debated section of Scripture, Paul addresses the quality of an elder's work. He speaks first of those elders who "rule well" and then those who "work hard at preaching and teaching." He says they are "worthy of double honor." According to Lidell & Scott's Abridged Greek-English Lexicon, the word "honor" refers to that which is given; it could mean esteem or dignity or it could mean a valuation, compensation or price. The allusions in verse 18 indicate that some sort of compensation or financial remuneration is in view: "You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages" (NASB). *Honor* in this context means, "that which is paid in token of worth or value."

It might seem odd to emphasize this perspective in a publication like ESN which so emphasizes the plurality of elders and their real work in shepherding the flock of God. Yet the Bible is replete with examples of those who are financially supported by the Lord's people while serving the Lord. Paul himself was an example of this. He wrote, "Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? ... If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (1 Cor 6:6-7a, 11). It is true that he accepted no gifts from the Corinthians, but he did accept financial gifts from others, like the Philippians.

In Galatians 6:6, Paul instructs that, "The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him." So, the principle of financial support for those who forego secular employment and give their lives to serving the Lord is well established in Scripture.

Paul's point here, under the inspiration of the Spirit, is that there may be some in the local church who are worthy of financial remuneration. Who are these? He is referring to elders, so they must be men qualified according to 1 Tim 3. They are men who *rule well*. This implies that there are varying levels of elder care that is exercised, and some do better at it than others. This may be due to giftedness, life situations or a variety of other issues. It is obvious to all who are committed to the local

church that some elders function more effectively than others.

The obvious subjective nature of evaluating the elders' work should not cause us to shy away from making this judgment. Rather, we should be very careful that our judgment of these matters is not clouded by personal agenda or sinful pride. Such attitudes would be included in Paul's warnings a few verses later when he speaks of those elders who sin (vs. 20).

Now, the phrase "especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" in verse 17 suggests the vital importance of those ministries, which we see are crucial to the equipping of believers for the effective work of the ministry (Eph 4:11-12).

This is one of the passages in Scripture where I wish more were written, but we are left to draw a few conclusions.

Remuneration Replacement

Notice, there is nothing here about hiring a job-seeker who then goes and fulfills a job description. This is not just a matter of the church providing a career choice for someone who needs to make money. In fact, the direct implication is that an elder is already doing a good job, and financial consideration is given, not as an *incentive* for his work, but as a *result* of his work. In other words, the default is that an elder is to serve in a "volunteer" role. Those who excel in their work as elders, particularly those who preach and teach well, may then be financially compensated. This is not an entitlement, for an elder is to serve "voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain..." (1 Peter 5:2). There is no contractual arrangement in view. Of course, there are the realities of a man supporting his family, which the church should take into consideration when asking a man to leave his secular work. However, wise elders and deacons can work through these things under the Spirit's guidance.

The idea is that an elder can be freed from the demands of secular employment on his energy and time so that he can become more involved in shepherding the church.

Preserving Plurality

A financially supported elder is not in

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Elders are men of influence in the family of God. It's no surprise then, that the two passages which provide qualifications for church elders (I Tim. 3:4,5; Tit. 1:6,7) devote space to the way they oversee their own families. In the letter to Timothy, Paul writes that an elder should manage his household well, especially his children, and he makes a comparison between the family and the church. In the Titus passage, Paul refers to both the wife and children, and places special emphasis on the importance of a blameless testimony of the elder before the world.

This idea of healthy household relationships of those in leadership is not new. The Old Testament records the family life of many of God's servants. Compare the tragic end of Eli's ministry "because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not" (I Sam. 3:13 KJV) with God's gracious words about Abraham "For I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice ... "(Gen. 18:19).

First let's look at the primary passages in greater detail, and then consider some practical ways to encourage future leaders, and elders with younger families.

Two Primary Passages

Insights in these brief sections can be considered in four headings: the elder's home, his family, his reputation in the world, and his relationship to the church. Since we're only dealing with four verses, let's consider them together, to avoid confusion.

First, an elder must rule or lead his household well. The Greek word used means to manage or superintend

and refers primarily but not exclusively to the family members. His home and possessions are part of his household or private domain. Later, Paul will refer to the elder as the "steward of God." Stewardship is a broad word denoting the need for skill in managing both persons and goods. It is no small assignment for a man to maintain a pleasing balance among his employment, his wife and children, his possessions, his free time and interests, and his work in the church.

As to his family, it is not required that he be married (Paul would have written "the husband of a wife") but if he is, he must be the husband of *one* wife. Some have suggested this means he must be a

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"one – woman man." His children should be under control and cared for with dignity. They must not become an embarrassment due to a prodigal or insubordinate lifestyle, but should be faithful (literally believing). Many of the words used to describe the qualifications of an elder are capable of varying degrees of understanding and it seems wise to discern the big picture of a man's character and family, rather than stumble over small details.

An elder must be blameless in his reputation before the world, his neighbors and the wider Christian community. Of course this does not mean he is sinless, but he must be one against whom no public blot on his character can be leveled. Blameless conduct and testimony are al-

ways important, but in this context are tied directly to his domestic life.

Finally, Paul makes a clear statement that if a man does not know how to order his private life, he will probably not be able to govern wisely in God's church. In other words, an elder ought to regard his home and family as a mini-congregation entrusted to him by God. Through his love, prayer, hard work and leadership, he shows to all who observe the kind of godly leadership and shepherding he would do in a larger congregation if he had the opportunity. A substantial part of the total credibility (believability) of any elder is his home and family life.

Encouraging applications

There is an abundance of advice available today and no shortage of people to give it.

Young men and aspiring elders would do well to examine carefully the source! Not all that is written in Christian literature will bear up under the light of the Word of God. Consider the

long term track record of the writer in his own home and family. Here are some ideas that this writer has found to be helpful in planting assemblies and training men for leadership over many years.

1) Your home:

Hospitality and visitation, or "others in our home and we in theirs," are important! There's just no substitute for seeing where and how people live and relate. Hospitality is mentioned twice in the list of elder qualifications (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). The personal touches of warm fellowship, frank discussion and honest sharing from the Bible can be done in the home in a way that is impossible in public. The elder must realize that his guests can gain an education in how a

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P sychologists tell us that the average woman says about a thousand words more a day than her male counterpart. If this is true, we need to be extra watchful of how we use our words as Christian women (Proverbs 17:27). As elders' wives, we need to remember that we are setting an example to those around us, whether it is positive force for good or negative force that brings others down.

In reading through the Proverbs recently, I highlighted the verses which referenced our speech. Proverbs 19:10 tells us that in a multitude of words there lacks no sin. Although "the tongue is a little member and it boasts great things", it can sometimes get us into big trouble. Once spoken, the words we utter can never be retracted. No wonder Proverbs 13:3 counsels us to guard our lips. In doing so, the writer tells us, we are guarding our life. The Lord wants to take this potentially damaging member of our body and use it for His honor and

glory, but we must yield it up to Him on a regular basis. The lips of the righteous know what is fitting and appropriate to say (10:32). The right words at the right time are like apples of gold in settings of silver (25:11). Oh, that we would grow in our ability to speak in such a gracious manner. The lips of the wise spread knowledge (15:7). We are to share what we have learned with one another. By doing so, we can help someone else avoid the mistakes we have made along the roadway of life.

Proverbs 13:2 says that from the fruit of his lips a person enjoys good things. An interesting word picture emerges when we think about this in connection with Ephesians 4:29. There we are told that we should not allow any "corrupt communication to proceed out of our mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying that it may minister grace unto the hearers" (KJV). We should picture our words as

wholesome, beautiful fruit on a platter being offered to others when we speak. As they partake, God uses our words to help those hearers grow in grace. That's an amazing thought! Do we think of ourselves as ministers of God's grace as we use wholesome, uplifting speech? Our words reveal the spiritual condition of our heart (Prov 16:23, Matt 12:34-35). Offering spoiled, rotten fruit causes great harm. Malice, envy, lying and slander are always destructive. A gossip can separate friends (16:28). Truly, death and life are in the power of the tongue (18:21).

With the Lord's help we need to aspire to be like the Proverbs 31 woman of whom it is said, "faithful instruction is on her tongue," the law of kindness characterizes her every word. Like the psalmist, we pray, "May the words of my mouth...be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" Ps 19:14.



Family Life(cont.)

godly man interacts with his family, how a meal is conducted, even how a home is ordered and decorated. It is all an open book, a teaching tool of great value in working with younger believers.

2) *Your children:*

Enjoy the Proverbs together with them! Children ought to be exposed to the book of Proverbs as a steady diet, especially throughout their younger years. I had the privilege with each of our three children to read one proverb (a single verse) every morning and consider its meaning until we had completed the entire book. This took years, but has paid large dividends as they are now "believing children."

3) *Your private world:*

Take I Peter 3:7 seriously! Dwelling with one's wife "according to

knowledge" requires a lifetime of being sensitive, listening carefully, developing communication and support skills and much more. But being co-heirs of the grace of life brings intimate fellowship into church leadership—a wonderful gift to any congregation.

4) *Embrace Accountability.*

By nature, we are self-centered and self-willed. Scripture tells us that every one of us must give account to God (Rom. 14:12), a subject particularly applicable to church elders (Heb. 13:17). Elders can learn much about the needs of the people and how to lead them by listening to them, and by accepting counsel from fellow elders and other servants of the Lord.

5) *An honest look at priorities.*

Children quickly perceive what is most important in our lives by seeing what we as parents sacrifice for. Do they see us spend quality time with the Lord, or is our prayer life only "while driving to work?" What message is sent when absolutely nothing gets in the way of a sporting event or vacation, but slight inconveniences will keep us from prayer meeting? Remember that we cannot lead where we haven't gone ourselves.

Men, let's not pattern our homes after the answer Aaron gave to Moses about the golden calf being worshipped by the people, "I cast it [the gold] into the fire, and there came out this calf." (Ex. 32:24). Molds cause things that are pliable to take shape. So it is with families. Truly, oversight begins at home.



Elders that do well (cont.)

a position *over* the other elders, for as Peter cautions, "... nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge" (1 Peter 5:3). Such an elder in view is simply one of the group of elders, equal in authority by virtue of being an elder, one who happens to be recognized as doing especially well and is honored with financial compensation. The congregation must be taught to *not* look to the financially supported elder as "The Pastor" and thereby denigrate all those who have and exercise the biblical gift of pastor (see ESN 4:5 "What, Your Church Has No Pastor?"). The gift of pastoring is not limited to one man or even to the elders.

Humble Hearts

There are dangers which Paul addresses elsewhere and which we can readily recognize, but which humble hearts will guard against. The other elders can become jealous, feeling that they themselves are "just as gifted" or "work just as hard." Verse 21 guards against partiality in viewing these things.

Spiritual Support

The other elders can abdicate their responsibility to the "paid staff." Paul is not teaching that the supported elder should take over the teaching or pastoral ministries from other gifted men. In fact, elders will often have more to do, because they can be freed up to give more time to their areas of giftedness. To be sure, those gifted at teaching and preaching should continue to do so. One elder said, "Since we have had a fulltime elder, our work as elders has

increased—and we are loving it!"

Engaged Elders

Clearly, this teaching can be and has been abused. Leadership in many churches has been abdicated to the "hired hand." However, the danger of abuse should never lead to a blanket rejection of what is taught in Scripture. A strong, spiritually engaged elder team will be aware of these dangers and deal with them if and when they arise. They will guard against one elder taking too much responsibility.

Practical Perspectives

A godly elder who has a family and responsible job is a very busy man. Add to this extended family responsibilities, personal evangelism and use of his spiritual gift. Then on top of all this is his time-consuming task of being an elder. Often, the more he puts into the work of the local church, the more something else suffers, either his secular employment or his family or personal evangelism and ministry. Or the work of being an elder suffers because of his inability to keep up with all the needs of the believers and the ministry. No amount of spiritualizing can ignore this fact that so many elders experience. I know of two elders where each has a responsible secular job, and young family. They are both gifted speakers and their teaching ministry, from the pulpit, in small group ministry as well as individual one-on-teaching, not to mention personal evangelism—leaves not much time for shepherding the flock, decision making, planning min-

istry and administration. It is great when there is a large number of older men to draw on, with fewer family responsibilities or who are retired from secular work. But many churches do not have that luxury. Certainly training more elders and the congregation stepping up to take responsibility will help. Nevertheless, the reality is that many otherwise qualified men are not willing to sacrifice their families for the long hours that are required by a completely volunteer group of elders. Finding one elder who is doing well in their midst, and financially supporting him, will free up his energies and time from secular employment to serve in the local church in a greater capacity.

To some, this discussion may seem trivial. However, important truths are at stake. It is all too easy for a church to become like a secular organization with a CEO, rather than like a spiritual family where everyone exercises his or her spiritual gifts. Too many churches still have the clergy/laity division like a two-class system. That is not what this passage is teaching.

What we have in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 is simply the admonition to free up those who are gifted and working hard at shepherding the flock of God, so that they can give more of their time and energy to the work of the Lord. This is not in any way meant to limit the ministry of others, rather it should enhance the overall ministry of the body of Christ in its service to the Master and His people. 

ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

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