



Biblical Principles A Model to Follow

by Chuck Gianotti

Learning to function as an elder is not the most important thing. More important is the elder's character. The qualifications in 1 Timothy & Titus are well-known and we have covered them extensively in past issues of ESN (see our Index of Past issues online). But a good role model is indispensable. Moreover, many elders have told me there are few of these around.

We can look, though, to the apostle Paul on this count. In fact, he invites emulation as he offers himself a living example of the kind of character needed to effectively shepherd God's people. In fact, he explicitly points to himself no less than five times as an example to follow (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1, Phil 3:7, 4:9, 2, Thess 3:7-9). This is not arrogance or a humanly deficient effort. He is simply like a parent who, when teaching a child how to tie his shoe, says, "Here, watch how I do it."

One of the more notable and, for elders, most relevant instances is found in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders found in Acts 20. Let's look over those men's shoulders and listen as Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit speaks to them.

Knows whom he serves (19)

You yourselves know ... how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews. (Acts 20:18-19 NASB)

The most singular insight into spiritual shepherding is that we need to be clear about whom we serve. Paul was clear that he was called to serve the Lord and not people. Following his example, we also should see ourselves as called to "serve the Lord" and not people. I was once given the advice by an godly, elderly woman, "Remember, you are not serving people, you are serving the Lord." There is a world of difference! True, in serving God, we do serve people. But the apostle makes his example clear—any service he renders to people is part of a larger objective, namely, the service of God. As elders we cannot forget this essential truth or we'll never be spiritually effective. If our highest aspiration is to serve people, they will let us down, discourage us, disappoint us, reject us, and most of the time they won't thank us. However, the elder who is "serving the Lord" as his highest aspiration will be sus-

tained by the Lord with the hope of being rewarded by the Master Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). Then under the guidance and direction of the Master, we serve people as his under-shepherds. Ultimately it is Him that we serve.

Humility (19b)

"... with all humility..."

If we truly are serving the Lord, humility is the natural adjunct to our lives. We are not in the place of lording it over others—that is earthly style leadership. Frequently in Scrip-

ture we are told of the importance of humility and so the elders must strive to be first in humility, strange as that may sound. We must aspire to the "height of the bended knee."

Passionate involvement (19c)

"... with tears ..."

Paul was emotionally involved. Earthly leadership requires a man to steel himself from being affected emotionally. While an elder must not be *controlled* by emotion, he should nonetheless *feel* along with the Christian's emotions. This is what we call empathy. When a believer weeps an elder should be able to weep with him or her. When a Christian is in pain the elder must learn to connect with that person in his or her pain. There is no way around it, the one who wrote the "manual" on elder ministry (i.e. Paul), is the one who displayed the example of godly use of emotion.

Personal sacrifice (19d, 23-24)

...with trials...

Elders experience a unique set of trials that the average Christian does not understand. There are pressures from people, pressures from one's own goals and pressures from the burden of the ministry. Add to this the stresses of job and family life and you begin to understand the enormous sacrifice required to be a spiritual elder. Yes, there are great sacrifices. There is no getting around this either—like Paul, an elder must be willing to accept the trials. Strength despite opposition (19e).

"... through the plots of the Jews."

One of the biggest trials for elders is dealing with opposition. This conflict may come in the form of demonic forces or by human hostility. Many an elder has spent a sleepless night tossing and turning because of conflict or challenges to his role as an elder. Brother, don't give up, you are not alone. This is standard fare for being a shepherd of

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Leadership Principles

Initiative — A Great Word

by Jack Spender

In recent years, a frequently requested subject for topical Bible messages is on commitment: how to get people involved? Many people, even Christians, are basically lazy, and would rather just let someone else do it. The “laity / spectator” mentality of some churches tends to aggravate the situation. Should elders actively address this problem, or should they just wait until the Lord provides the necessary leading and incentive to get things moving? Enter the good word “Initiative.”

One dictionary defines initiative as “the power or right to take the first step.” I found the third definition especially interesting:

“The spirit needed to originate action.” The word “spirit” was not capitalized, but does suggest

there is a spiritual side to taking a first step in a worthy endeavor.

Some time ago in an Elders ShopNotes article (July, 2005), we considered the word “accountability.” In simple terms, initiative has to do with getting something started, and accountability has to do with keeping it going. Both are important words for leaders.

Checking the Record

One cannot study the life of the Lord Jesus without seeing that He was a man of action throughout the years of His ministry. To accomplish His Father’s will, He constantly took initiative and ultimately changed the world. At age 12, it was time to be about His Father’s business (Luke 2:49); at the Jordan, no one asked Him if He would like to be baptized; He came to John and requested it (Matt. 3:13). Over the next three years, He called and trained the disciples, sought out and helped many needy people, and spoke the words He received from His Father. Always He moved according to a plan. Even in death He could say of His life: “No man takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself” (Luke 10:18). Jesus didn’t just wait for things to happen; he took steps to actively accomplish the will of His Father.

The apostles followed this example. They had received a commission that began with the word “Go,” and they went. Several passages record the initiative they took to solve problems that could stifle the health and growth of the church; (see Acts 6, 15 as examples).

Action Still Needed

Long years later, the church still has a clear mandate for action from the Lord. His message is to be taken into all the world; disciples are to be made, baptized, and taught (Matt. 28:18-20). Elders must feed and care for the flock (Acts 20:28), and gifted men are to

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equip the saints for service (Eph. 4:11-12). Now all these instructions are addressed to the will of those who are taught in the Word, and cannot bear fruit until someone takes the initiative and “originates action.” Sometimes, creative methods which embody timeless principles can change stagnation to renewed zeal.

Taking the Initiative at Home

I would like to give an example from our own experience in the work here. Not that any of us excels in initiative, but a practical illustration may bring encouragement to some.

Our home assembly had experienced growth and blessing in the early years, but inevitably, problems arose that took a great deal of time for the elders to resolve. True, things did get resolved, but the result was that feeling, well known to leaders; a mixture of fatigue and gloom. How to get growing again when so much energy was being spent fighting small fires? The devil could ignite them faster than we could put them out!

As we prayed and discussed this, we realized that it is the responsibility of elders to identify needs and problems, and then take the initiative to solve them. Ultimately the Lord pre-

sides but He has given us all resources required to do the work; we just needed to act.

Gradually a plan was laid out. We could ask each of our five elders to oversee one significant part of our assembly life. He would not “do it all;” just make certain that his area of special concern received adequate time and attention in the elders’ meetings, and he could serve as a contact person for the congregation in his particular specialty. The five areas we chose were: ministry of the Word, pastoral care, hospitality, music in the assembly, and small groups.

At this writing, details are still being fine tuned but the overall picture is very

encouraging, both for the elders and for the church. With these positive areas to focus on, there is simply not time for much

of the negative. Trials still arise, and must be dealt with, but the idea is to devote quality time to the things that will benefit all those in fellowship; not just the few that disrupt.

We are finding for example, that visits by the elders to families in fellowship can be more strategic when suggestions about who might benefit from a visit are gathered from the small group leaders and passed on to the elder giving shepherd care to that ministry. The preaching of the Word and music on Sunday are enhanced by helpful insights gained among those who extend hospitality to visiting speakers, and so on.

Conclusion

Finally, it is becoming evident that the believers are more confident to take initiative to meet needs, participate in the meetings, serve in the assembly and reach out to the lost when the elders are setting a good example. If the OT priests took no initiative in the plan that God gave for crossing the Jordan into the promised land, they might never have crossed the river. Like them, we want to dip our feet in the water and trust the Lord to roll back the waters in response to our steps of faith. It’s rewarding to see the assembly growing again!



Gazing At The Table

by Stephanie Torres

A small crowd has gathered. Those present are united in purpose, yet each face reflects something different. Some display joy, some sorrow, some complacency; some years of toil, others just the toil of recent days—and what of my own countenance? . . . probably a mixture of all of these.

My eyes paddle through a sea of faces. I'm looking for inspiration . . . Searching . . . Searching . . . My eyes settle on a saint. Her countenance beckons to me. Her head is graced with simple lace. Her lashes feather her cheeks. Her eyes are closed, but by her expression it is clear that she is beholding much more than those of us who glance hazily about. I cannot see her gaze, but her countenance reflects the sights of the beauties of heaven. Occasionally a tear escapes and travels down her cheek. Her smile radiates a balmy sweetness. Perhaps merely in response to the beaming of the One she has come to meet?

Her lips, at times, move, but not a sound is uttered. In her mind, in her heart, she is deep in conversation. Her

hands rest peacefully in her lap, motionless, but she is working. She is gathered in a crowded room, but she is alone. She is alone with her Savior. She pours her love at His precious feet, and her worship has touched me. I hear not what she says to Him. I know not what lofty thoughts of Him her mind entertains. She says nothing to me.

Our eyes never meet and yet her countenance says everything. Her countenance has effortlessly sharpened mine, echoing to me the questions: "Dear sister are you doing the same?" "Where is your focus this morning?" The sight of her worship has redirected my wandering thoughts and reminded me of the high calling I have to exalt my Savior. I thank God for her example.

As active Christian women it is easy to bring with us the cares of life to the Lord's table. Though often we may feel that our distraction exists only in our minds, we need to be aware that what we entertain internally quickly makes its way to the external. What does our countenance reveal on Sunday mornings? Do our expressions carry the

stains of daily life, or are the stains of Christ's hands and feet reflected there? How easily we become distracted, unaware that our distraction not only robs our Savior, but also the other saints gathered with us. We are individuals. The expressions of our countenance will not be identical, but make no mistake, the results of a soul completely occupied with Jesus cannot be hidden, nor can they help but touch the worship of those looking on.

May we be challenged anew even this very coming Sunday with the question: What does my countenance display? "As iron sharpeneth iron" . . . may our countenance this day be sharp, pricking other sisters looking on to do the same. How exciting to think that our example might encourage others and equally contribute to Christ's truly receiving more of what He deserves, our worship. What a privilege not only to worship our sweet Savior, but to inspire others to do the same. May we worship Him with all our hearts, and may that worship be reflected on our faces. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name" Ps 103:1 (KJV). 

Leadership Principles Removing an Elder?

One of the most difficult situations for a church to deal with is when an elder causes harm to the fellowship. One elder can be overbearing, offensive, self-willed or controlling. Or he may be offensive to visitors and demeaning to women or overly defensive. No elder is perfect, to be sure, for we all fall short of the Biblical qualifications. However, in some situations an elder can fall so far short that the blessing of God is being withheld from the church. What do you do?

One older brother says to simply let it be and pray the Lord will remove the man. This came out of an experience when, as a young man, he and another young elder pushed to have an older brother removed. The result was irreparable conflict and division to the assembly. He said he would never do that again!

Another suggests a gentle approach, such as trying to carefully nudge the elder out with suggestions of giving the title of "elder emeritus" and the "freedom" to not attend the elders' meeting.

One group of elders mounted a campaign to convince the sinning brother (who was also the treasurer) that he would be more valuable as a deacon, that they didn't want to burden him continually with the elders' responsibility as well. In the end, the difficulty was only transferred from the elders to the deacons.

Scripture speaks very directly to this situation in 1 Timothy 5:19-2, "*Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue to sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning*" (NASB).

Clearly, there is a place for passing judgment on an elder who has sinned. Of course, the sin in mind must be a grievous sin that needs corporate action (akin to Matt 18:15-17).

The real issue I am considering, though, is the question, "Who should do it?" If the elder in question is a controlling elder, then often there is a history of the other elders giving way to him. In other words, a weak group of elders. And if the

other elders do not deal with it, the rest of the congregations will be reticent as well.

Elders need to sum up the fortitude before God to discuss the problem openly with each other. This is not gossip and should not be dismissed trivially as "talking behind his back." There must be at least two or three who agree to confront the individual and then do it. This takes courage and strength as well as humility (see Gal 6:1). It would be wise to document specific examples of the incidents that illustrate his sin so you can pin point clearly what you are concerned with.

There may be charges of "power struggle" or "becoming political." But men of good character will resist the temptation to flee and will stand firm, leading in a godly way by confronting a sinning elder. And if the elders won't do it, then the only hope is that God would stir up other godly men in the church to stand up and speak with strength, courage and humility. For the sake of God's church, the church needs men of good, strong character! 

An Example to Follow (cont.)

God's people. The elder who can't stand the heat had better find strength with the Lord, or he will die in the ministry. See the example of David, another great leader of God's people: *Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God* (1 Sa 30:6).

Courage (20a, 27)

"I did not shrink back..."

With any conflict the need for courage is essential. More so with elders because the stakes are so high. Our leading and shepherding should make a huge difference in people's spiritual well-being. Courage is absolutely needed. Fear leads to procrastination, weak communication, uncertain leading, compromise and loss of integrity. People will not follow a weak-spined leader. I believe that one of the greatest impacts we have in others' lives is when they see in us a fortitude where others shrink back.

Relevant (20b)

"...declaring to you anything that was profitable."

Paul did not select his teaching material based on what he himself was interested in, but he taught with one goal in mind, namely, to preach that which would be the most profitable for the people. This required the wisdom to know *what* to teach and *when* to teach it. I image him assessing his listeners ahead of time and then devising a way to present the relevant teaching beneficial to them.

Flexible (20c)

"... teaching you publicly and from house

to house ..."

Paul could teach anywhere, he was not confined to the formal four walls of the meeting hall. He taught in large groups and small, meeting in the temple and in homes. Obviously not giving an exclusive list of permitted venues Paul was merely saying he would adapt his teaching style and location to the needs of any willing and listening audience.

Many today are like the Samaritan woman who wanted a strict understanding of "where to worship." Paul was flexible in his ministry methods. If you as an elder find a particular "method" of ministry is profitable and helping people learn, then stay with it. But remember that even a post that stays painted white, needs to get a fresh coat of paint once in a while—in effect, it needs to change the faded, dull white paint into fresh new white paint. So, too, in ministry if there is no need to change something in the ministry, it may be that it needs a "fresh coat of paint" to freshen it up.

But we should be careful not to get stuck in the same patterns out of laziness or convenience. We dare not be like the Pharisees who refused to change anything and had their theological justifications for what they did—yet missed the Spirit completely.

Non-discriminating (21)

...testifying to both Jews and Greeks..."

The Jews had a deep seated mistrust of non-Jews, yet Paul broke across the ethnic, cultural and class barriers. Today, elders should follow Paul's lead and shepherd in such a way that all people feel equally welcome and cared for. Whether black or white, male or female,

rich or poor, "cool" or socially awkward. Especially when we biblically emphasize male leadership in the church, we need to give extra attention to helping the women feel valued and affirmed in their ministries.

I have always felt that in the male-led ministry of the local church, women should find solace, affirmation and protection from a world that demeans women on just about every front. The gospel is horribly disparaged when the unsaved sense that we discriminate unfairly. Paul's example was should be ours.

Spirit-led (22)

Paul was obedient to the Spirit. Much ink has been spent in analyzing how he knew that going to Jerusalem was God's will. However, the point here is that regardless of how he knew, Paul was obedient. Despite the prospect of hardship and possible jail-time, he was just as determined as the Lord Jesus Himself was to go to Jerusalem.

Internally motivated (24)

Paul's driving goal was to complete his assignment from the Lord no matter the personal cost. He says: *"I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.* (Ac 20:24)

Modeling Spiritual Maturity

The apostle Peter takes this modeling one step further—elders are to embrace this ministry of modeling godly character to others when he says to elders, "proving [yourselves] to be examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2, 3).



ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

Editor: Chuck Gianotti
Editorial Assistance:
Ruth Rodger

HOW TO REACH US

Elders' SHOPNOTES
c/o 27 Watchman Court
Rochester, N.Y. 14624 U.S.A.
E-mail: elderssn@rochester.rr.com
Voice: 585.429.5435

CONTRIBUTORS

Jack Spender
Bible teacher

Stephanie Torres
Deacon's wife, Women's ministry

Chuck Gianotti
Bible teacher

Scripture versions are noted in the first reference in each article.

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