

CHAPTER 5

THE WORK OF THE ELDER

So far we have said some very specific things about elders:

1. They exercise the leadership of Christ in human form in the local church.
2. They are men.
3. They have both general and specific qualities and qualifications found throughout the New Testament and concentrated especially in I Timothy and Titus.

When measuring themselves against these qualifications elders should remember:

1. They are eternal in nature (necessary for every generation) but not impossible. They are very human qualities attainable by normal people.
2. They are subjective in nature and we should determine if a man possesses these qualifications and qualities to a positive (or recognizable) degree and not a perfect degree.
3. They provide a blueprint for the kind of man we want, and the kind of Christian the elder wants to become as he grows in Christ.

Let us now examine the work of the elder in the local assembly.

We, in the churches of Christ, hold to the idea that the Bible teaches us through direct command, example and necessary inference. In other words, when we want to find out what the Bible says about something we examine what it commands about that thing; what examples are there concerning this thing; are there any conclusions or suggestions that are implied by words, situations or actions that can guide us.

When determining the work of the elder this is a good system to use because all the information about this subject is not located in one place.

Direct Command

There are two places in the New Testament where the Apostles are giving direct commands and instructions to elders about their role.

Acts 20:28-35

Paul's charge to elders from Ephesus and Miletus.

²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

Guard the flock and selves. The way to attack the flock is to attack the shepherd of the flock. This is why Paul says that no accusation should be received against an elder except in front of two to three witnesses (I Timothy 5:9).

Paul uses the imagery of a shepherd who fed, led and protected the flock. Elders are to guard against false teaching and teachers whose purpose is to gather disciples after themselves. Some people are happy if they can have influence over one or two people; they do not want to lead, they just enjoy exercising power. Being alert means to watch

the teaching and the teachers ensuring that they both be pure, sound and sincere.

³² And now I commend you to God and 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.

Stay close to (aligned with) the word. Personal study and teaching leads to growth.

³³ I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes.
³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Be an example of hard work, encouragement, generosity and leadership. Paul showed them how to lead by these methods, now they must teach others to lead by these methods. Paul says that the main work of the elders is threefold.

1. Protect against false teaching and teachers.
2. Promote sound teaching.
3. Provide an example of leadership.

I Peter 5:1-5

Peter's exhortation to the elders.

¹Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

Peter repeats Paul's charge of providing leadership but gives some insight as to what should motivate:

- Lead according to God's will (word).
- Lead voluntarily (eagerly), not "have to."
- Lead with eagerness but not eagerness to get personal gain, eagerness to serve.
- Lead through example, not through the exercise of power. "Let me show you the way."

⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

This passage refers to the reward for elders, a crown of glory. The Old Testament refers to their crown as the Lord Himself (Isaiah 28:5).

- Incorruptible crowns (I Corinthians 9:25)
- Crown of rejoicing (I Thessalonians 2:19)
- Crown of righteousness (II Timothy 4:8)
- Crown of life (James 1:12)
- Crown of twelve stars (Revelation 12:1)

- Golden crown (Revelation 14:14)

I do not know if these refer to the same or different things, but I do know that the term crown of glory is only used in connection with elders. You know if the Lord gives it, it is going to be worth it.

⁵ You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

A final admonition to the younger men to be humble and express that humility through obedience to the elders. Young men tend to be headstrong in every generation so Peter teaches them how they should respond to the elders (if they want to please the Lord).

Peter repeats and expands on the idea that the work of the elders is to lead: lead by teaching and enthusiastic example.

Example

Peter and Paul are the only two that speak directly with instructions to elders. The New Testament does have passages where elders are seen doing their work and so we can use these passages to define more clearly the New Testament pattern for the work of the elder.

- They oversaw the collection of funds for the poor in the church (Acts 11:29).
- They, in concert with the Apostles, decided how to resolve a dispute over the issue of circumcision of Gentiles (Acts 15:2). There was an argument over how the gospel was to be applied and they decided this with the Apostles.

- They advised Paul on how to resolve a dispute with Jewish Christians over his work with Gentiles (Acts 21:18).
- They appointed preachers to their ministry (I Timothy 4:14).
- They teach because Paul says that this is one of their qualifications and later says that they should be honored if they work hard at this task (I Timothy 3:2; 5:17).
- They comfort, pray for the sick and the weak (James 5:14).

The picture that emerges from the examples we have in the New Testament is that of a group that:

- Teaches.
- Encourages and oversees the good works of the church.
- Helps resolve issues that threaten the unity of the church, especially when related to the application and understanding of the word.
- They develop, appoint and guide the work of the preacher.
- Provide counseling, support for those who are weak physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Note that in the last chapter we looked at the requirements of the job, in this chapter we are seeing the job description itself.

Necessary Inference

A necessary inference is a conclusion that is required by a set of facts or examples but may not be necessarily stated.

For example, the Apostles had received John's baptism. The Bible does not say that they did but all those who believed were commanded to do so at that time, even Jesus received it. All the disciples were baptized. The inference or unstated conclusion is that the Apostles had received it also.

When it comes to the elders there are other details about their work and relationship to the church that are discovered through this process of reasonable deduction:

- They served congregations in groups of at least two men per church (Acts 14:23).

Every reference to the selection of the leaders sees them being chosen and serving as a group.

The practice of having one man as the pastor or minister with a different title (bishop, cardinal, etc.) in charge of several churches, and then a committee in charge of all the churches was a model based on the Roman Empire and begun in the third to fourth century.

The New Testament church described in the Bible had two or more elders leading an individual congregation with no further responsibility or authority for other congregations. We infer or conclude from the information provided that the New Testament church had a plurality of elders and no authority beyond their own local congregation.

- They were appointed by the Apostles and in some cases by the preachers (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

We do not see them doing this here but we do see Paul telling Titus to do it and talking about having done it. There are no examples of self-appointed elders or elders elected by voting in the New Testament.

In the next chapter we will look at how elders are chosen and established today, and will end this section on elders with a profile of an elder's wife.

Summary

Elders are older men who are chosen to serve as leaders of individual congregations based on their mature spiritual character, their ability to teach, and their successful marriages and family life.

It is a humbling and demanding task and not all men are able to aspire to the eldership, but thankfully some are!