

THE MINISTRY OF A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ELDER

The New Testament employs about a dozen different expressions as descriptions of an elder's ministry. Most are general and *principial* rather than specific and *practical*. The challenge for a contemporary ministry, then, is to convert principle into *practice*. The following pages categorize and define the principles. These, in turn, must be forged into a ministry description for a modern elder that is Biblical in conception and practical in application.

KEY PASSAGES: Acts 20:17-35; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17-22; Tit. 1:19-11; Heb. 13:17;
Js. 5:14-16; 1 Pet. 5:1-4

AN ELDER'S PASTORAL MINISTRY:

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament:

"Take heed . . . to *feed*" (Acts 20:28)
"They watch for your souls" (Heb. 13:17)
"Being *examples* to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3)

II. Pastoral Ministry in General:

"Take heed (command) . . . to feed (fulfillment of command)" (Acts 20:28)

To "take heed" is defined as "*being attentive,*" "being on guard," or "keeping watch."

To "feed" is "to shepherd" (1 Pet. 5:2 also uses this word), and refers to tending a flock of sheep. This includes leading, pasturing, feeding, protecting, and tending in illness.

III. Pastoral Ministry in More Specific Description:

A. By *Practice* (Acts 20:17-35; 1 Pet. 5:3)

Paul's primary appeal to the elders of the church at Ephesus was in terms of his own example--"

"Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons" (Acts 20:18). He refers to such actions as

"Serving (slaving for) the Lord with all humility of mind and with many tears and temptations (testings)" (Acts 20:19)

"I have kept back nothing that was profitable unto you" (Acts 20:20)

"I have shewed you and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews and also to the Greeks repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20-21)

"I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27)

"By the space of three years I ceased not to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31)

"I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel" (Acts 20:33)

"These hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me" (Acts 20:34)

"I have shewed you all things, how that so laboring ye ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35)

B. By Precept (Heb. 13:17)

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls. . ."

The word "watch" refers to being awake and alert. The intent of the wakefulness seems to be for guarding from dangers to the souls of the flock.

The care implied in the command to "obey" an elder is that of giving Scriptural *counsel* and *command* when a soul is in danger.

C. By Prayer (Js. 5:14-16)

The specific situation referred to here is that of a church member who is physically sick. The prayers are for his healing. But the context also includes tender watch-care lest the sickness be chastening for unconfessed sin. In such cases, prayer must be prefaced by encouragement to "confess your faults" (*Js. 5:16*). Upon such confession "the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him" (*Js. 5:15*). This, then, is spiritual ministry to physical needs.

AN ELDER'S INSTRUCTIONAL MINISTRY:

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament:

"Apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2)

"Labor in the Word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17)

"To exhort and to convince" (Tit. 1:9)

"Admonish" (1 Thess. 5:12)

II. The Distinction Between Elders' Instructional Ministries:

A large part of tending a flock involves their pasturing and feeding. *1 Timothy 5:17* refers to a subset of the main body of elders whose time is occupied with "laboring in the Word and doctrine." According to the wording of this text all elders "rule," but a smaller portion of them devote their primary energies toward the instructional side of the ministry. Such men are often recognized by a local assembly as having a "call to preach." Timothy was such a man (*2 Tim. 1:6; 2:1-2; 4:1-2*), as was Tit. (*Tit. 1:5; 2:15*).

III. The Instructional Qualification for Every Elder:

Although all elders do not give equal attention to teaching, every elder is to be “apt to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). According to Paul’s example (Acts 20:20) and precept (2 Tim. 2:24-26) this teaching takes both public and private forms. The word “teach” means “to instruct doctrinally.” Any elder, therefore, must be able, at least privately, to give doctrinal instruction to a member of the flock.

IV. The Additional Verbal Qualification:

“Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” (Tit. 1:9)

Them which “are over you in the Lord, and admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12)

- A. To “exhort” is to “*call alongside.*” Paul and Barnabas exhorted new Christians to “*continue in the faith*” (Acts 14:22). Paul exhorted the Thessalonians “*as a father doth his children*” (1 Thess. 2:11) and called them to walk “*as ye have received of us . . . and to please God*” and to abound in these things “*more and more*” (1 Thess. 4:1).
- B. To “convince” is to “*convict.*” This word is always used in the New Testament for speaking to someone of *wrongdoing*. It means more than reprimand. It means to bring the truth smartingly home to the conscience. Paul said the “*unfruitful works of darkness*” were to be reproved in such a way (Eph. 5:11). A church elder who sins is to be rebuked in such a way (1 Tim. 5:20).

According to *Titus 1:9*, both exhortation and conviction are to be accomplished by employing “sound” (healthy) doctrine, meaning that it is the Scripture rather than *human reasoning* which an elder must be skillful in using.

- C. To “admonish” is to “*place on the mind.*” It refers to calling to a person’s attention something that he ought to think about. Paul did this in the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:31; translated “warn”) “*night and day with tears.*” It was, therefore, part of his example to the elders there. It is part of the ministry necessary to “*present every man perfect (mature) in Christ Jesus*” (Col. 1:28). And it is especially necessary with those in the congregation who are “*unruly*” (1 Thess. 5:14).

V. Special Challenges to an Elder’s Instructional Ministry:

- A. “*Foolish and unlearned questions*” which “*gender strifes*” (2 Tim. 2:23)
- B. “*Those that oppose themselves*” (set themselves in opposition to sound doctrine; 2 Tim. 2:23)
- C. “*Gainsayers*” (those who contradict what is taught; Tit. 1:9)

Further described as (Tit. 1:10-11) . . .

“*unruly*”

“*vain talkers*”

“*deceivers*”

“*who subvert whole houses*”

“*teaching things which they ought not*”

In these cases *“the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing”* (2 Tim. 2:24-25). Or he must “avoid” questions which gender strife. But such people’s *“mouths must be stopped”* (Tit. 1:11) for the good of the flock.

AN ELDER’S ADMINISTRATIVE MINISTRY

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament:

“Overseer” (Acts 20:28)

“Labor among you, and are over you in the Lord” (I Thess. 5:12)

“Rule” (1 Tim. 5:17)

II. Administrative Ministry in General:

One of the three New Testament terms for an elder is *“episkopos.”* This term is translated both *“bishop”* (as in 1 Tim. 3:1-2) and *“overseer”* (as in Acts 20:28). It means to *“look after”* something, and thus *“overseer”* is the best English equivalent for the Greek word.

The term *“over”* in 1 Thess. 5:12 means *“set over”* and implies that some official act placed an elder in such an authoritative position. The explanation of this is *“in the Lord.”* He is the one who appoints certain men to position in a church. Notice, however, that the position is one entailing *“labor”* among the flock. *“Labor”* is a term that is often used of toil in which one becomes weary, exhausted, and spent. That toil is described in 1 Tim. 5:17 as *“ruling.”* This is the same term translated *“over”* in 1 Thess. 5:12. To be *“over”* implies *“rule.”*

Much of an elder’s ministry involves superintending, overseeing, decision making, arbitrating, and administrating. In all of this he needs the *“wisdom that is from above”* (Js. 3:17). Such wisdom is described as *“pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy.”*

III. Special Situations:

A. Deciding *Doctrinal* Questions (Acts 15:6)

When the early church was divided over the question of circumcising new converts, the *“apostles and elders”* of the church in Jerusalem *“came together for to consider of this matter”* (Acts 15:6). *“To consider”* is *“to look at”* and was, in this case, a specific example of elders being *“overseers.”* The Apostles took the lead (Peter in vv. 7-11; James in vv. 13-21), and the elders played a part (vs. 22) in determining the correct doctrinal stance and communicating it in writing to the other churches (vv. 23-29).

B. Ordaining Elders (1 Tim. 5:22)

The command concerning *“laying hands”* on a new elder is given specifically to Timothy. Titus too received such a command (Tit. 1:5). Churches with a plurality of elders have traditionally included the entire presbytery in such ordinations, after the example of Timothy’s ordination by *“the laying on of the hands of the presbytery”* (1 Tim. 4:14). The word *“presbytery”* is simply another form of the word *“elder,”* so that a *“presbytery”* is a *group* of elders. Before ordaining an elder they must give consideration to his qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9), making special inquiry into both *“sins”* and *“good works”* which have characterized a man (1 Tim. 5:24-25).

AN ELDER'S MOTIVATING CONSIDERATIONS

I. The Person who chose him to be an elder

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers . . ." (Acts 20:28)

II. The Price Paid for the flock

" . . . feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

"Oh then, let us hear these arguments of Christ, whenever we feel ourselves grow dull and careless: 'Did I die for them, and wilt not thou look after them? Were they worth my blood and are they not worth thy labour? Did I come down from Heaven to earth, to seek and to save that which was lost, and wilt thou not go to the next door or street or village to seek them? How small is thy labour and condescension as to mine? I debased myself to this, but it is thy honour to be so employed. Have I done and suffered so much for their salvation; and was I willing to make thee a coworker with me, and wilt thou refuse that little that lieth upon thy hands?'" (Richard Baxter, The Reformed Pastor, pp. 121-22).

III. The Presence of Wolves

"Grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch . . ." (Acts 20:29-30)

IV. The Promise of Reward

"The elders which are among you I exhort . . . feed (shepherd) the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint but willingly; not for filthy lucre but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." (1 Pet. 5:1-4)

AN ELDER'S PASTORAL MINISTRY

Pastoral Ministry in General

"Take heed . . . to feed" (shepherd; tend the flock; Acts 20:28)

Pastoral Ministry in More Specific Descriptions

(1) By practice (example; Acts 20:17-35; 1 Pet. 5:3)

(2) By precept (Heb. 13:17)

(3) By prayer (Jam 5:14-16)

Practical application of the pastoral ministry

- (1) Pray for assigned people once a week (record sheet available)
- (2) Visit assigned people once a year (record sheet available)
- (3) Hosting assigned people in home once a year (record sheet available)
- (4) Visit applicants for membership
- (5) Counsel as requested
- (6) Attempt to pray with assigned people on Wednesday night
- (7) Show concern during times of testing or crisis.

AN ELDER'S INSTRUCTIONAL MINISTRY

The Distinction Between Elders' Instructional Ministries

"Especially those who labor in the Word and doctrine" (1 Tim. 5:17)

The Instructional Qualification for Every Elder

"Apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2)

The Additional Verbal Qualifications

"To exhort and to convince" (Tit. 1:9)

"Admonish you" (1 Thess. 5:12)

Special Challenges to an Elder's Instructional Ministry

"Foolish and unlearned questions" (2 Tim. 2:23)

"Those that oppose themselves" (2 Tim. 2:25)

"Gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9)

Practical application of the instructional ministry

- (1) Teaching in adult Sunday school classes
- (2) Developing position papers on major doctrinal or practical issues
- (3) Developing men for leadership through men's ministry
- (4) Meeting once a month for personal growth and enrichment

AN ELDER'S ADMINISTRATIVE MINISTRY

Administrative Ministry in General

"Overseer" (Acts 20:28)

"Labor among you and are over you in the Lord" (1 Thess. 5:12)

"Rule" (1 Tim. 5:17)

Special Situations

- (1) Deciding doctrinal questions (Acts 15:6)
- (2) Ordaining elders (1 Tim. 5:22)

Practical application of the administrative ministry

- (1) Oversee assigned ministries (pro-active approach)
- (2) Saturday morning meeting once a month
- (3) Other called meetings as required
- (4) Member of appointed subcommittees
- (5) Leadership in adult Sunday school classes
- (6) Ordination of men to the ministry (program in preparation)

THE SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR THE MINISTRY OF A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ELDER

**“An overseer, then, must be . . .”
(1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:6-9)**

In General Character and Conduct

“Blameless” (1 Timothy 3:2)

Literally, “unable to be taken hold of.” No glaring faults upon which critics may seize to discredit his ministry. Of each elder it must be said, as it was of Oswald Chambers, “His life verified all his drastic sayings.” 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 is the full biblical exposition of this quality, and the apostle Paul is its divinely chosen illustration (*Phil. 4:9*).

“Blameless” (Tit. 1:6, 7)

Literally, “not called in (question).” Not just that a man can justify his actions if accused, but that they are so far above suspicion as to never even be called in question.

In Domestic Relations

I. To his wife

*“The husband of one wife”
(1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6)*

Literally, “a one woman man.” Meaning, (1) in love and loyalty true to his own one wife, and (2) in marital history not a divorcee.

II. To his children

“Faithful” means “believing” children who have accepted their father’s faith. They are not “riotous” (profligate, like the prodigal son of *Luke 15:13*) or “unruly” (unarranged under their father’s authority).

III. To his entire household

*“One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity.”
(1 Tim. 3:4)*

He so superintends his household that its members are “arranged under” his leadership in a way that is worthy of others’ respect (“gravity”= worthy of respect).

“The husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:6)

“Having faithful children, not accused of riot or unruly” (Tit. 1:6)

“One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity.” (1 Tim. 3:4)

In Self-Mastery

I. Positively

(1) *“Vigilant” (1 Tim. 3:2)*

Self-protecting so as to be free from every form of intoxication.

(2) *“Sober” (1 Tim. 3:2)*

Self-controlled mentally. Given to prudent thinking. See *Ecclesiastes 10:1* for the need.

(3) *"Of Good Behavior"*
(1 Tim. 3:2) Literally, "arranged." Orderly. His affairs are harmoniously arranged. "Many a man fails in the ministry, not because he is a bad man, but because he has a genius for blundering."
(Charles Jefferson)

(4) *"Temperate"* (Tit. 1:8) Self-possessed. Literally, "holding in a power." The self-mastery over powerful passions that keeps itself held in check.

II. Negatively

(1) *"Not given to wine"* The Apostolic verdict is, "It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak." (Rom. 14:21)

(2) *"No striker, but patient"* Not a pugnacious, contentious person ready with physical or verbal blows. "Patient" is sometimes translated "gentle" (Tit. 3:3; Jam. 3:17). It is the forbearance that can retreat from the letter of the right of the law in order to preserve the right spirit. Aristotle described it as that which corrects and moderates strict justice.

(3) *"Not a brawler"* "By long forbearing is a prince persuaded, and a soft tongue breaketh the bone." (Prov. 25:15) Not given to fighting. "The servant of the Lord must not strive (fight); but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves . . ." (2 Timothy 2:24)

(4) *"Not soon angry"* "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God." (Js. 1:20)

(5) *"Not self-willed"* Literally, "not self-pleasing." Not selfishly hedonistic.

In His Loves

(1) *"Given to Hospitality"* Literally, "Loving strangers." An early Christian writing, The Shepherd of Hermas, explains that an elder must be "a man who gladly and at all times welcomes into his house the servants of God." A man with an "open heart and an open house." (William Barclay)

(2) *"A lover of good men"* Literally, "a lover of good" (all good things).

(3) *"Not covetous"*
"Not given to filthy lucre"
(1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7) Literally, "not loving silver." Such a man will not govern for gain.
He is not eager for gain, especially that obtained in base ways.

In His Virtues

(1) *"Holy"* (Tit. 1:8) Reverences what is sacred. The opposite of a light, flippant, profane spirit toward sacred things.

(2) "Just" (Tit. 1:8)

Meets his obligations. See *Job 31:6-32:1* for the detailed lifestyle of a righteous man.

In His Ability to Handle the Word of God

"Apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2)

Able to instruct others doctrinally. Can be done either publicly or privately (*Acts 20:20*), but does not require his laboring full-time in the Word (see *1 Tim. 5:17* for the two divisions of responsibility among elders).

"Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers." (Tit. 1:9)

Has the ability ("may be able") to exhort. Has the ability to speak persuasively enough to bring conviction to those who "speak against" ("gainsayers") correct doctrine.

In His Christian Experience

"Not a novice" (1 Tim. 3:6)

Not a neophyte (one newly come to the faith). Has been a Christian sufficiently long enough to have been tested and experienced in the demands of living the life of a believer.

In His Testimony in the World

"Has a good report of them which are without" 1 Tim. 3:7).

Receives a good "witness" from those outside the Christian assembly.

Additional Comments

The qualifications for an elder do not make him deserving with God, but credible with people. The issue is not his perfection in these areas, but his being at an admirable level in them so that he is an inspiring role model. As the people grow, the elder's demands on himself must increase. He must raise his own level of personal expectation. A leader gets out in front and stays there by raising the standards by which he is willing to be judged. A certain amount of healthy discontent with his own life will spur his pursuit of Christlikeness throughout his life of leadership (see *Phil. 3:12-15* for Paul's example and exhortation).

"There is something so fearfully responsible in entering upon this work with incompetent abilities, that the man can scarcely have felt any serious concern for his own soul, for the immortal interests of his fellow-sinners, or for the welfare of the Church of God, whose mind has not been more or less exercised upon the ground of personal unfitness. When we see the most "able Minister of the new Testament" that the Church has ever known, deeply penetrated, and indeed well-nigh overwhelmed, with the sense of the "necessity laid upon him"--we may well be ashamed, that with qualifications far inferior, our sense of obligation should be less accurate and constraining.

"It is not supposed, therefore, that such an office can be easily filled. It demands not merely some, but many, nay, all excellences, in happy combination. To fill the Ministerial office with a degree of satisfaction and benefit commensurate with its capabilities, or with the desire of a heart awake to its importance, we must be all that it demands--men of God, perfect, completely furnished to every good work. This is an elevated standard. He that aims highest will most approximate to it." (Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, pp. 24, 30-31)