

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

- A. “above reproach” (1 Tim. 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).
- B. “above reproach” (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

- A. 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.
- B. to his children “Believing” children who have accepted their father’s faith. They are not “dissipated” (profligate, like the prodigal son Luke 15:13) or “rebellious” (unarranged under their father’s authority).
- C. to his entire household
“one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity” (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 children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.” (Tit. 1:6)
“. . . One who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity.” (1 Tim. 3:4)

In Self-Mastery

Positively

- A. “temperate” (1 Tim. 3:2) Self-protecting so as to be free from every form of intoxication.
- B. “prudent” (1 Tim. 3:2) Self-controlled mentally. Given to prudent thinking. See Ecclesiastes 10:1 for the need.
- C. “respectable” (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)

- D. “self-controlled” (Tit. 1:8) Self-possessed. Literally, “holding in a power.” The self-mastery over powerful passions that keeps itself held in check.

Negatively

- A. “not addicted to wine” (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7) The Apostolic verdict is, “It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles” (Rom. 14:21).
- B. “not pugnacious, but gentle” (1 Tim. 3:3) Not a pugnacious, contentious person ready with physical or verbal blows. (Tit. 3:3; Jas. 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.
- C. “peaceable” (1 Tim. 3:3) “By forbearance a ruler may be persuaded, and a soft tongue breaks the bone” (Prov. 25:15). Not given to fighting. “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition...” (2 Timothy 2:24-25).
- D. “not quick-tempered” (Tit. 1:7) “...the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God” (*Jas. 1:20*).
- E. “not self-willed” (Tit. 1:7) Literally, “not self-pleasing.” Not selfishly hedonistic.

In His Loves

- A. “hospitable” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8) 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).
- B. “loving what is good” (Tit. 1:8) Literally, “a lover of good” (all good things).
- C. “free from the love of money” (1 Tim. 3:3) Literally, “not loving silver.” Such a man will not govern for gain.
- D. “not fond of sordid gain” (Tit. 1:7) He is not eager for gain, especially that obtained in base ways.

In His Virtues

- A. “devout” (Tit. 1:8) Reverences what is sacred. The opposite of a light, flippant, profane spirit toward sacred things.
- B. “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

“able 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 which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (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 new convert” (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 reputation with those outside” (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).

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 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 5:17–22; Titus 1:19–11; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:14–16; 1 Peter 5:1–4

An Elder's *Pastoral* Ministry

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament

“Be on guard . . . to shepherd” (Acts 20:28)

“They keep watch over your souls” (Heb. 13:17)

“Be *examples* to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3)

II. Pastoral Ministry in General

“*Be on guard* (command) . . . *to shepherd* (fulfillment of command)” (Acts 20:28)

To “be on guard” is defined as “*being attentive*” or “keeping watch.”

To “shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:2 also uses this word) 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—“You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time” (Acts 20:18). He refers to such actions as . . .

“Serving (slaving for) the Lord with all humility with tears and with trials (testings)” (Acts 20:19)

“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable” (Acts 20:20)

“...teaching you publicly and from house to house,²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:20–21).

“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27).

“for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears” (Acts 20:31)

“I have coveted no one’s silver or gold or clothes” (Acts 20:33).

“...these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me” (Acts 20:34).

“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.’” (Acts 20:35).

B. By Precept (Heb. 13:17)

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over 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 (James 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” (Jas. 5:16). Upon such confession “...the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him” (Jas. 5:15). This, then, is spiritual ministry to physical needs.

IV. Practical Application of the Pastoral Ministry

- A. Pray for assigned people once a week (record sheet available)
- B. Visit assigned people once a year (record sheet available)
- C. Hosting assigned people in home once a year (record sheet available)
- D. Visit applicants for membership
- E. Counsel as requested
- F. Attempt to pray with assigned people on Wednesday night
- G. Show concern during times of testing or crisis

An Elder's *Instructional* Ministry

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament

“Able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2)

“work hard at preaching and *teaching*” (1 Tim. 5:17)

“to *exhort* and refute” (Tit. 1:9)

“*Give instruction*” (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 Titus (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 “able 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 which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” (Tit. 1:9).

Those who “have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction,” (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 would his own children” (1 Thess. 2:11) and called them to walk “as you received from us . . . and please God” and to “still more” (1 Thess. 4:1).

B. To “refute” 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 deeds of darkness” were to be reprovved 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 “give instruction” 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 complete (mature) in Christ” (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 ignorant speculations” which “produce quarrels” (2 Tim. 2:23)
- B. “Those who are in opposition” (set themselves in opposition to sound doctrine; 2 Tim. 2:25)
- C. Those “who contradict” what is taught; Tit. 1:9)

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

- “rebellious”
- “emptytalkers”
- “deceivers”
- “upsetting whole families”
- “teaching things they should not teach”

In these cases, “the Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, 25 with gentleness correcting” (2 Tim. 2:24–25). Or he must “avoid” questions which gender strife. But such people “must be silenced” (Tit. 1:11) for the good of the flock.

VI. Practical Application of the Instructional Ministry

- A. Teaching in adult Sunday school classes
- B. Developing position papers on major doctrinal or practical issues
- C. Developing men for leadership through men’s ministry
- D. Meeting once a month for personal growth and enrichment

An Elder's *Administrative* Ministry

I. Expressions Employed by the New Testament:

“Overseers” (Acts 20:28)

“Diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord” (1 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 as “*overseer*” (1 Tim. 3:1–2; 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 for 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 from above*” (Jas. 3:17). Such wisdom is described as “*peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, 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 the elders*” of the church in Jerusalem “*came together to look into this matter*” (Acts 15:6). “*To look into*” 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 “*appoint elders*” 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 hands by the presbytery*” (1 Tim. 4:14). The word “*presbytery*” is 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 deeds*” which have characterized him (1 Tim. 5:24–25).

IV. An Elder's Motivating Considerations

A. The Person who Chose Him to be an Elder

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. . .” (Acts 20:28).

B. The Price Paid for the Flock

“ . . . shepherd the church of God which He 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).

C. The Presence of Wolves

“. . . savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert. . .” (Acts 20:29–31).

D. The Promise of Reward

“ . . . I exhort the elders among you . . . 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; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Pet. 5:1–4).

V. Practical Application of the Administrative Ministry

- A. Oversee assigned ministries (proactive approach)
- B. Saturday morning meeting once a month
- C. Other called meetings as required
- D. Member of appointed subcommittees
- E. Leadership in adult Sunday school classes
- F. Ordination of men to the ministry (program in preparation)