

ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

MINISTRY FOR BUSY ELDERS

Practical Application

by Jack Spender

The Crown of Glory

It is heartwarming to note that the chief writers of the NT epistles, Paul, James, Peter and John all have something to say about elders. Paul writes to help us identify them; James, the practical man, pictures them standing ready to help at a moment's notice; John, the beloved apostle, addresses problems in the church introducing himself as "the elder." But it is Peter, the apostle commissioned by the Lord Jesus to feed His sheep, who pens words of encouragement to fellow shepherds everywhere.

A Classic Passage for Elders

In a brief passage occupying only 4 verses (1 Peter 5:1-4 KJV), Peter begins with an exhortation and ends with a promise. And what a promise! The Shepherd over all shepherds will come and reward His faithful servants with a glorious eternal crown and His own approval. In light of what we know about New Testament churches and their struggles in that day, we can hardly imagine what joy a letter from the very apostle Peter himself would bring to disheartened elders in churches throughout the empire. In this world, shepherds don't normally wear crowns.....

Elder Rule; the Norm for Church Leadership

Consider how Peter might have introduced himself to church leaders. He might have reminded them of his years with the Lord and consequent spiritual authority. But in addition to the statement at the beginning of the letter that he was an "apostle of Jesus Christ," (1:1) he now describes himself simply as an elder among elders (literally a "co-elder"). There is nothing here of superiority such as the "presiding bishop" of modern usage. One thinks of his reply to Cornelius in earlier years when that Roman dignitary attempted to fall before him in worship: "Stand up, I myself am also a man." (Acts 10:26). Dr. Wilbur M. Smith used to say with a twinkle in his eye "What words are these from the first Pope?"

If there was anything extraordinary by way of credentials to which Peter might appeal, it was that he witnessed

the sufferings of One greater than any to whom he wrote, and also that he would share in the coming glory (cp. II Pet. 1:16). Many were facing hard times of rejection and loss, and wherever a company of believers gathered, they were like the harmless and vulnerable sheep of a flock, living in a world filled with dangers. But God would always ensure that some of the brothers would quietly rise to the challenge and work together to care for the sheep. As a team, they too must be men of compassion for suffering, and men of hope looking forward to the glory awaiting. Peter addresses elders as men who would be working simply "among you."

Timely Exhortations

The first charge Peter gives to elders is to feed or shepherd God's people. This entails not only the supply of spiritual food, but the balancing counterpart of "taking the oversight" - a work that both implies and requires spiritual authority. Elders are not self-appointed, but serve with the backing of Him Who "made" them elders, as Acts 20:28 declares.

Two other points should be noted. Peter did not call them "shepherds," but used the verb form meaning "to feed" or "to do shepherding work." This is important, though often misstated as we sometimes hear of "elders," "overseers," and "shepherds" being three synonymous descriptions of church leaders. Actually, the only individual called a "shepherd" in connection with the church, is Christ Himself as in vs. 4, "the Chief Shepherd." Peter had spoken earlier of Him as "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." (2:25NKJV).

Scripture carefully avoids making any spiritual gift an essential requirement for eldership. In Eph. 4:11, we do read of gifted men, "the evangelist,"

"the pastor," and "the teacher." But in relating these gifts to spiritual leadership in the church, the Spirit of God has required only that they be "apt to teach," (I Tim. 3:2), willing to "shepherd the flock" (as in this passage), and willing to "do the work of an evangelist." (II Tim. 4:5), thereby emphasizing the work and not the gift.

The second point is that the actual work of feeding, tending or shepherding sheep is a broad work with much more involved than simply offering food, as any shepherd would know. Attention to a healthy diet requires making sure that the flock is getting an adequate supply of spiritual nourishment, exercise, rest, sunshine, protection and so forth. This in turn suggests the many labors required to build and maintain a local assembly. Shepherding work is about people, but it is also very much about attention to their environment.

Accordingly, this work among the sheep must be done in the right spirit, as under the watchful eye of the Chief Shepherd Who, although unseen, is always present whenever the flock gathers. Three pairs of words bring out the heart motive for all shepherding work. Note the emphasis on the heart, the mind, and the example.

First, while pressure ("constraint" KJV) may arise from influential people, serving the Lord must not come from some external compulsion, but from a willing heart within. Second, elders must not be motivated in their work by the desire for material or financial gain, ("The hireling.....does not care about the sheep" John 10:13) but rather, they must serve from a ready (lit. "eager") mind.

Third, there can be no grasping for power or the control of others; something clearly forbidden by the Lord: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them.....But you shall not be so." (Luke 22:25). It helps to remember that they are not our sheep, but God's sheep, and they have been "allotted" (NASB) as to stewards. And so people are to be led toward Christ-likeness with the gentleness of a patient, godly example. All this is but to imitate

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The Crown of Glory (cont.)

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the willing heart, eager mind and gracious example of the Chief Shepherd.

Later (vss. 5-8) Peter will speak of how this example becomes a life pattern for others to imitate. He exhorts those younger in the faith to display the graces of submission and self humbling in their relationships, of controlling anxiety personally by casting all care upon the Lord, and by constant vigilance to spiritual warfare brought on by the enemy of souls. Every elder must remind himself that his attitude and conduct are essential mentoring tools for younger disciples looking on.

Reward Ahead

In NT times - and ever since - elders have been ordinary men, often with families, homes to care for, and vocations to work at. How can any man find time in such a demanding world to "take care of the church of God?" (I Tim. 3:5). It is only possible through love. One of life's lessons is that love will find the time and the way to accomplish what nothing else could. There is something about the "love of God shed abroad in our hearts" that energizes elders to visit the saints, labor in the word and doctrine and sit through lengthy planning meetings,

despite it being sometimes a thankless job. In the words of one old writer: "He says not to Peter, Art thou wise or learned or eloquent? But lovest thou me? Then feed my sheep."

Elders may not have all the material possessions or pleasures of the man in the world; they may not move here and there at their own pleasure, but they do know one very important promise: the Chief Shepherd is about to return, and He brings with Him rewards that unlike earthly attractions DO NOT FADE AWAY!

In that regard, the timeless words of missionary Jim Elliot are perfectly suited here: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." The epistle had begun with an inheritance that does not fade (1:4). Now it closes with a crown that does not fade.



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Biblical Foundations

by Chuck Gianotti

Paul's Final Message (part 3)

The battle for the church often takes place in the minds and souls of the shepherds of God's people.

Imagine having had the apostle Paul teaching for two whole years in your church, visiting in your homes, working with his hands alongside of you. You would have observed the intensity of his eyes, heard his laugh, smelled his sweat, seen him pray and pondered his teachings. Would you have wanted to hear the play-by-play account of his conversion experience outside of Damascus? How about his first time meeting with Peter and John?

When Paul's years of ministry in Ephesus came to an end, it must have been a difficult time for the believers and the new elders there. After his departure and the rest of his third missionary tour around the northeastern Mediterranean, he made one last brief visit with the elders, at nearby Miletus. He wanted to impart one last message before leaving, never to see them again. That is the context for this final speech of Paul to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-35 NASB).

A Weighty Injunction

In this third part of our study of Paul's farewell message, he leaves them with sober warnings. The weightiness of this is anticipated in how he describes his time with them:

- "You yourselves know ..." (18)
- "I did not shrink back ..." (20)
- "Solemnly testifying ..." (21)
- "I am innocent of the blood of all men" (26)
- "I did not shrink from declaring ..." (27)

The work of serving the Lord and His people is serious stuff, requiring focus, intentionality, spiritual exertion, courage and a sober attitude. Paul was a mentor who leveled with his protégés in no uncertain terms. As for intensity, he lays out four imperatives:

- "Be on guard for yourselves..." (28a)
- "Be on guard ... for the flock" (28b)
- "Be on the alert" (31)
- "Help the weak ..." (35)

Guard Yourself

The first thing to get right is the guarding of oneself. This is because the greatest obstacle to being an effective leader of God's people is one's own temptations and sinfulness. As elders, we must realize that selfishness, insecurities, fears and other fleshly attitudes limit our effectiveness. Pity the man who thinks he need not worry about falling—he does not know his own soul! "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor 10:12).

The battle for the church often takes place in the minds and souls of the shepherds of God's people. Our enemy knows the truth of Zechariah 13:7, "Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter." This messianic prophecy refers to our Lord Jesus, but draws on the general principle. If the shepherds fall, the impact on the whole flock is great. Therefore, we must guard ourselves, men! We can't guard anything else if we fail at guarding our own souls.

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The Crown of Glory (cont.)

How can this be done? 1) First, we must be tenacious with ourselves. We can't allow ourselves any exceptions to what we would expect of others. 2) We need to allow other elders to give us honest feedback, without being defensive—and that is very difficult! An old proverb says, “In every criticism, there is a kernel of truth.” There may be something God is trying to teach us through those we trust: “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov 27:6). 4) We need to be in the Word and in prayer. The battle is supernatural and our weapons are not of this world (2 Cor 10:3-6). We need to regularly invite the searching eye of the Lord, as David's words reflect, “Search me, O God!” (Psalm 139:23).

What is it that elders should guard themselves against? In addition to sub-Christian attitudes and behavior, in context we need to guard ourselves against falling prey to false teaching. We elders are not immune to embracing error. That's why Paul later commended them to “the word of His grace” (vs. 22). The emphasis is on “word” and “grace.” Being rooted in the Word of God in all it teaches is essential. But Paul particularly pointed out the importance of holding to the doctrine of grace—he referred to it at the beginning of every letter he wrote! Grace must saturate our doctrine, or else it is not the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The minute we loosen our grip on grace, we begin to tighten our embrace of law! We must guard ourselves against becoming legalistic in our churches. Unfortunately, in the history of the Ephesian church, they held onto right doctrine, but eventually left their first love (Rev 2:4), thereby falling from grace. So we elders, if we learn from their example, must begin by guarding our own hearts from legalism by tenaciously embracing grace as a way of life.

Guard the church

Second, as elders guard themselves, they must then guard the church. Why? The church is God's precious possession, the value of which is directly proportional to the value of His own death (vs. 28). Guard it from what? False teaching, propagated by those Paul described as wolves. There will be men who intentionally draw away believers from grace into all manner of legalisms and religiosities. Paul makes it quite clear that, “These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23).

There is a constant pull away from sound doctrine, which leads to a crumbling church with little fellowship, evangelism, love and devotion to the Lord.

Be alert

Third, elders need to be vigilant to be always on the alert, to spot such teachings before they become widespread and affect the Christians. This is not paranoia, but a sober necessity. Satan is on the prowl for whoever he can devour (1 Peter 5:8), and

an alert shepherd will be on the lookout for the subtle deceptions, elusive twists of small areas that lead to major departures from the truth. Often wrong doctrine comes with the right words, but hardly noticeable shifts in the meaning of those words. For example, one denomination agrees with the words, “A person is saved by faith in Jesus Christ.” Sounds good—until it is discovered that to them “faith” includes “acting” in faithful ways—which is just another way of saying that salvation comes through human efforts of acting faithfully.

How do we become and stay alert? By teaching right doctrine on a regular basis. Practical application to life issues is important, true, and I strongly recommend that our teaching be relevant to the problems of today's audiences. But, teaching solid doctrine is essential to giving Christians a solid foundation on which to grow in all the other areas of life. Things like the trinity, the deity of Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit, the doctrines of judgment, grace, justification, sanctification, the substitutionary atonement, the centrality of the cross to daily living, to name a few, are absolutely essential. Understanding these helps the flock to not be drawn away by false teaching, and to build on a solid foundation of truth.

Help the weak.

Finally, lest elders become unbalanced, “Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies” (1 Cor 8:1). Right doctrine for the sake of doctrine itself, is nothing but a clanging cymbal, on the order of scratching fingernails on a chalk board. Paul urges the Ephesian elders to “Help the weak...” (vs. 35). Some churches suffer from pride of doctrine, boasting about their fidelity to God's word. Yes, the Lord may have graciously revealed a particular truth to your group that the rest of Christendom may have neglected or rejected. But without love, that is absolutely nothing! Paul, consistent with his teaching elsewhere, does not neglect doctrinal truth. But in holding to truth, we are empowered to love others, particularly those in need.

Truth is not the thing that brings blessings, but acting on the truth in love by helping those in need – that brings blessings (vs. 35)! That is why when Paul first met Peter and John, around the time of the first doctrinal crises of the early church, Paul records, “They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do” (Gal 2:10).

Love in action was just as important as right doctrine. Right doctrine without love is vain. Love without right doctrine is baseless. One without the other renders both useless. Both together bring blessing. So, elders, guard yourselves and the whole flock of God! 



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1 Corinthians 8:1

Meeting the Lord "Up There"

PUBLISHING
INFORMATION

"Come on, let's go!" Jon would holler from above as I privately thought of ways I might hurt him if I survived.

My attitude and my "view" about climbing a difficult trail had been affected by seeing the throne and the One sitting on it.

My husband and I are blessed by a friendship with a very godly and gifted couple who own fishing cabins in the foothills of Connecticut. During a stay there many years ago, their adolescent son offered to bring Paul and me on a hike up a "hill." Although I was "pleasingly plump" at the time, and did not have the right gear for such a hike, we agreed enthusiastically.

The drive to our starting point was lovely. Quaint colonial houses dotted the scenery enhanced by a variety of trees indigenous to the Berkshire Mountains. We were accompanied by my daughter, a teen at the time, and her girlfriend. It promised to be a pleasant morning.

Our trek started with tramping through high grass, fraught with prickles, and continued past radio towers that led into some woods. Before I knew it, I heard the familiar and unwelcome sound of buzzing insects. Furthermore, the temperature and humidity seemed to be rising quickly and the fact that I was already fatigued (being out of shape), it didn't take long before I discovered that I wasn't enjoying this journey. Jon, our friend's son, continued undaunted by my "disabilities" and complaints.

As we walked and sweat, the black flies blinded me and the mosquitoes were draining my blood supply. I mentioned quite frequently my need to stop and rest. My husband was my encourager and support as some unruly language made its way through my mind. Everyone giggled to watch me slide down a completely vertical "hill" in my tennis shoes, getting covered in dirt with each restart. "Come on, let's go!" Jon would holler from above as I privately thought of ways I might hurt him if I survived.

I followed my leader all the way to the summit, having withstood the branches that my companions pushed out of their way, only to have them snap back at me behind them. Itchy, bloody, dirty, sweaty and bruised, I made it...and it was incredible!

The humidity seemed to evaporate as the trees parted and revealed the sky. The air was cool, beautiful and clear. We saw gorgeous plants while Jon found juicy wild berries for us to gorge on. The hawks were gliding just a few feet above us and we looked out over rolling hills for miles. The itch and thirst and frustration were behind me as I felt a deep calm and peace overshadow me. As I spent time witnessing the beauty of God's creation I sensed that I was where He wanted me to be.

It's a lot like that with life, isn't it? We climb and slide down, getting beaten up, knowing that Heaven waits for us and pain will become a distant memory. But I am discovering that we don't have to wait to physically arrive there.

Colossians 3:2 instructs us to, "Set your affections on things above...." Philippians 4:8 tells us to, "think on the true, beautiful, pure, lovely..." in other words, "heavenly" things. It seems almost impossible at times. But as I pray, my hiking story illustrates that even though I had no less mosquito bites, no less weight around my middle, no fewer bugs as we descended the hill, something had changed. My attitude and my "view" about climbing a difficult trail had been affected by seeing the throne and the One sitting on it.

We have the opportunity each and every day to meet our Lord "up there." As Brother Lawrence prayed in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, "O my God, since Thou art with me, and I must now, in obedience to Thy commands, apply my mind to these outward things, grant me the grace to continue in Thy Presence; and prosper me with Thy assistance. Receive all my works, and possess all my affections." 

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"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers ..."

1 Peter 5:2a NIV