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ELDER RESPONSIBILITY

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I. Introduction

In identifying the responsibilities of elders, it would have been convenient if one of the New Testament authors, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had provided a complete list of such responsibilities, along with an elaboration of what each entailed. However, a review of the Biblical passages on Church leadership reveals that the Holy Spirit did not move the biblical writers in that direction.

On the other hand, we are not left without significant input on what God’s expectations are for the leaders of His Church. When studying the passages that address elders, it is discovered that the Holy Spirit has provided a number of descriptions and directives that, when examined individually and then drawn together, reveal a mosaic of the responsibilities that God has assigned to these leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to identify and elaborate on these descriptive terms, with the purpose of understanding how they profile the responsibilities of the leaders of the Church.

When studying these descriptions of elders, it is important to note that they are general. There is little elaboration on most of the responsibilities, beyond the sharing of the descriptive term itself. It is also valuable to note, however, that, as a result, the Church is provided with a flexible structure that is able to be adapted to the different historical and cultural environments in which the Church has existed. To each local assembly belongs the flexibility to identify how they can best fill their roles and duties in light of their own time and culture.

There appear to be ten descriptive terms that bear the duty of instructing God's people on the responsibilities of elders.

II. Leaders

The identification for elders as leaders occurs in several key passages on Church government, including I Timothy 5:17; I Thessalonians 5:12; and Hebrews 13:7, 17.

There are two Greek words that are translated "leader" in these passages: *proistamenoï* (in I Timothy and I Thessalonians) and *agoumenoi* (in Hebrews).

The first word, *proistamenoï*, means "to rule, to have charge over, to manage." The word speaks of leadership and authority. The verb is used with some helpful elaboration in I Timothy 3:4-5 in regard to an elder's responsibility towards his family. There Paul explains that "he must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the Church of God?)." Here Paul equates leading with a man's responsibility to manage his household. Included in this, by way of Paul's elaboration, are the aspects of control and care.

The second word, *agoumenoi*, means "to lead or go before, to go first, to lead the way." The verbal picture is of one who is leading a group of people in a particular direction. The aspect of authority is clearly stated in Hebrews 13:17 where the people are called to submit to those who lead.

The source of the authority of elders as leaders is clearly stated in I Thessalonians 5:12, as Paul describes them as "those who have charge over you in the Lord." The authority is delegated to the elders from the Lord's authority. It is in this light that the people are held accountable to submit to this authority. Because of this elders will be held accountable for how they use their authority (Hebrews 13:17).

Elders, then, are leaders in that they are delegated authority and responsibility to rule and lead God's people. They are to maintain control and provide care as leaders. They are accountable to God for how they lead.

III. Overseers

This word is used synonymously with “elder” as an alternate title for the Church’s leaders (Titus 1:7; I Timothy 3:2; Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2).¹ The Greek word, *episkopoi*, was used in secular language to speak of a foreman or a supervisor. Thayer defines the word to speak of “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are rightly done.”² To build on Thayer’s definition, in light of the scriptural use of the word, “rightly done” would mean “rightly done in regard to biblical principle.” The responsibilities encompassed in this word would include providing direction, ensuring coordination between efforts and individuals, and making sure that every one is working together to accomplish the purposes that God has for the Church.

IV. Stewards

Elders are described as “God’s stewards” in Titus 1:7. The word, *oikonomos*, spoke of a servant who was given significant responsibility by his master to direct the activities and individuals of the master’s home or business. “Particularly, one who [had] authority over the servants or slaves of a family to assign their tasks and portions. Along with this was the general management of affairs and accounts. Such persons were themselves usually slaves The *oikonomoi* also had some charge over the sons of a family, probably in respect to monetary matters”³ From passages like Luke 12:42-44 and Luke 16:1ff, we see that a steward was responsible to manage the other servants, the household activities and the finances. In this he bore delegated authority from the master. Thus the steward was accountable to manage the household in accord with the master’s wishes, and would be rewarded or chastised based on this criteria. This description of the elders’ role brings into their responsibilities the accountability to fulfill the administrative requirements of the Church.

V. Shepherds

The metaphor of Israel’s leaders as shepherds is frequently used in the Old Testament. This same picture is used of New Testament elders in Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28; and I Peter 5:2.⁴ The basic message behind the imagery is that, as a shepherd cares for his flock, the elder is to

¹ The word is used both as a noun (Titus 1:7; I Timothy 3:2; Acts 20:28) and as a verb (I Peter 5:2)

² Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Zondervan, 1974

³ Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament. *Oikonomos* can also speak of a person given a specific charge to protect a specific thing or carry out a specific task, but, in that case, the object over which the charge is given is usually specifically identified. Here the word is used absolutely, speaking of the broad responsibilities of a household steward.

⁴ Our practice of calling leaders “pastors” is in accordance with this metaphor, in as much as the title “pastor” is derived from the Latin word for shepherd.

care for the people God has placed under his leadership. Ezekiel 34:1-10 provides a more detailed view of the expectations that God has of one to whom He has entrusted this shepherding role. The passage shares these responsibilities from a negative perspective, in that God through Ezekiel is indicting Israel's shepherds for not fulfilling their duties. In verse 2, shepherds are expected to feed the flock, which is consistently used as a metaphor for teaching spiritual truths. In verse 4, the leaders are to strengthen the sickly and heal the diseased, providing a picture of ministering care and restoration of those who are spiritually struggling with sin. Further, verse 4 addresses the responsibility to bring back the scattered and seek the lost, charging shepherds with the duty of keeping the individuals placed under their care in fellowship with the Church, not allowing them to wander away from their relationship with other Christians. Then verse 5 calls on leaders to protect the sheep from people and situations that can harm them, which accords closely with Acts 20:28, as Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders as shepherds to protect the flock from savage wolves.⁵

VI. Soul Watchers

In Hebrews 13:17, leaders are given the responsibility to “keep watch over” the souls of those placed under their authority. The verse indicates that they are accountable to God for the spiritual well-being of His people. The language is reminiscent of the charge given to Ezekiel in Ezekiel 3:17-21 to be the “watchman to the house of Israel.” There he bore responsibility to faithfully deliver God's messages of warning to both the righteous and unrighteous of Israel as they departed from the proper path. While the individuals were responsible for how they responded to the message, the watchman was responsible for having delivered it.

VII. Teachers

The elders have responsibility to provide for the instruction of the congregation in God's word. In Ephesians 4:11-16, elders are identified as teachers. In this role they are to “equip the saints for the work of service to the building up (edifying) of the body of Christ.” That one of the primary tools for this effort is teaching becomes clear by the stated goal (“until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature that belongs to the fulness of Christ”) and the stated result (“we are no longer to be . . . carried about by every wind of doctrine”).

Scripture does not require that every elder have the gift of teaching. While every elder is to be able to teach (I Timothy 3:2), Titus 1:9 elaborates that the measure is that an elder must “hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” While the forum for such teaching

⁵ See also Zechariah 11:16.

can vary from the pulpit to one-on-one discipling, the priority of teaching for Christian development certainly requires that each elder be engaged in actively using this ability in his ministry. The example of the apostles in the Jerusalem Church in Acts 5:42 would include the proclamation of the gospel under the responsibilities of teaching.⁶

VIII. Christlike Examples

In I Peter 5:3, elders are required to be “examples to the flock.” In line with Paul’s challenge in I Corinthians 11:1, elders should be deliberately setting examples for those in the body based on their own following of the example of Christ. They need to model in their own lives those qualities for which they would hold the flock accountable. Careful, deliberate “exemplifying” serves as both an aid to learning and a guard against hypocrisy. In I Timothy 4:12, Paul specifically pointed out several areas to Timothy in which he needed to provide an example: “. . . in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.” Also, this means that the Elders have the responsibility to communicate the Gospel to the unsaved community (2 Tim. 4:5).

IX. Admonishers

In describing qualities for which leaders should be appreciated in I Thessalonians 5:12, Paul includes the practice of “giving admonition.” [The NAS translates *nouthetountos* as “give you instruction.” However, the Greek verb *noutheteo* is more specific than our English word “instruction.” *Noutheteo* carries the idea of verbal correction. It assumes that there is some error that needs to be verbally set right.] Paul demonstrates the priority of admonition in the proper development of Christians in Colossians 1:28, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.” His expectation that elders would practice admonition clearly comes out in Acts 20:31, “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.” The most extreme form of admonition is church discipline.

For admonition to be most effective requires that elders be close enough to the people to know what’s going on in their lives, and care enough to take on the difficult task of confronting them when they fall into sin.

⁶ In Acts 6:4, the apostles identify their priorities as “prayer and the ministry of the word.” The phrase “ministry of the word” is a term that is unique to this passage. In seeking to understand the breadth of activity that the phrase covered, it is helpful to reference Acts 5:42, where the activities of Peter and John are characterized as “teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.”

X. Guardians

One of Satan's most effective tools in opposing Christ's work through His church is to attempt to mislead the church through false teaching. The elders of each local assembly have responsibility to guard against the intrusion of false teachers. Paul directed the elders of the Ephesian church to show diligence in this area, as he charged them in Acts 20:28 to "be on alert for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He has purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure 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." These false teachers spread corrupted doctrine with the purpose of drawing an assembly away from following Christ, to following them.

In this regard, elders bear responsibility for what is taught in their assembly. They need to hold teachers accountable, identifying and correcting error, ultimately silencing those who will not correct their error (I Timothy 1:3).

XI. Men of Prayer

In Acts 6:4, as the apostles were proposing to delegate responsibility for the feeding of widows to the first group of deacons, they stated that their priorities needed to lie in devoting themselves "to prayer and to the ministry of the word."⁷ As well, James, in 5:14f, specifically exhorts anyone who is sick to "call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord." These two passages bring prayer into the domain of responsibilities borne by elders. As those delegated authority and responsibility from the Lord, it is necessary that the elders continually seek His mind as they endeavor to carry out His will. They also should be seeking His provision for the church and those individuals in the church.⁸

⁷ A study of the responsibilities of apostles in the early Jerusalem church suggest that they served as the "elders" of that congregation until formal elders were established. From the formation of the church in chapter 2 until elders suddenly appear in 11:30, the apostles appear to be providing all leadership. Following their appearance in 11:30, elders work side-by-side with the apostles in addressing the question of Gentile circumcision in chapter 15. Until finally, in 21:18, when Paul brings the gift of the Gentile churches to Jerusalem, there appears to be only one apostle in Jerusalem, James, and the rest are elders.

⁸ While James 5:14 addresses only prayer for healing, this specific prayer for the Lord's provision for the needs of His people suggests that it is an example of a more general entreaty that elders should be making on behalf of the congregation. Also, the encouragement in verse 16 that "the effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" suggests that the prayer for healing in verse 14 is not so much the exclusive domain of the elders, but that elders are representative of righteous men whose prayers will accomplish what is needed.

XII. Summary

In preparation for this summary, it may be good to draw attention to biblical principles regarding individual gifting and delegation in light of the fulfillment of elder responsibilities. While elders have been given overall responsibility for the accomplishment of ministry within the assembly, they are not called to do the entire work themselves. The ministry of the church is built around the exercise of the gifts that God has given to each individual “member” within the body. Each member should be shouldering a share of the load, based on their gifting and capabilities. The elders are to use delegation (Acts 6:1-6) and oversight to see that the work is done through combined and coordinated efforts of the entire body.

As the biblical descriptions and directives for elders are studied, an understanding of God’s expectations for elders can be clearly compiled. They are to lead, care for and teach the church.

To the elders is given the responsibility to lead the church. In this role they are to seek the Lord’s will for their assembly and faithfully apply it to the needs of the people. They are to determine priorities, set direction, and coordinate the ministries of the congregation to accomplish the purposes that the Holy Spirit has marked out for the church over which they have been placed. Such purposes will be a combination of the Spirit’s instruction as presented in Scripture regarding the responsibilities of every assembly and the specific will He has for that particular assembly in their culture and opportunities. Their leadership also involves the accountability as stewards, bearing responsibility for the overall administration of the church, including management of the assets and finances.

Elders are responsible to shepherd the flock. This role charges them with the care of Christ’s sheep. They are to be aware of and contributing to the spiritual well-being of each of the people placed under their care. From the positive aspect, they are to provide for the feeding and nurturing of the congregation, ensuring that there are opportunities for instruction in and application of God’s word. From the protective aspect, they are to seek to safeguard the sheep from those things and people who would harm them. When sin threatens a believer’s spiritual walk, they are to lovingly give correction. When a lamb wanders from the needful fellowship of the flock, they are to seek them out and draw them back into the assembly. When someone in the congregation suffers need, physically or economically, they are to direct the resources of the assembly to meet that need.

Elders are to teach the congregation. From the pulpit teaching of the assembly, to the formal settings for instruction, to the small group settings, to the individual counseling, the elders are to ensure that the opportunities are provided for scripture-based, wholesome teaching. They are to provide for “equipping of the saints for the work of service until we all attain to the unity of the faith and to the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature to man, to measure of the stature that belongs to the fullness of Christ.” They are to make certain that the “whole counsel of God” is presented to God’s people. And they are responsible to safeguard the church from false teachers and their teaching.