



## Elder Qualifications Being Elder or Doing Elder?

by Chuck Gianotti

“Many men want to *be* president, but very few want to *do* president,” says Steve Sample, president of the University of Southern California. He continues, “Some of the unhappiest people I know are those whose aspirations for a high-level leadership position were finally satisfied, and who only then found out that they didn’t really want to do what it is that the position required.” (“The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership,” Joey-Bass Publisher, 2002, p. 160).

Most elders I know really do want to do elders’ *work* and many have a passion for it. However, sometimes people outside of the elders group can have the wrong impression of what it is all about. This can lead some to desire the position rather than the work of being an elder.

Could it even be that some are unhappy with being an elder because they have discovered that it was not what they thought it would be? Possibly somewhere along the line a sanctified, but unguarded heart gave way to a worldly notion of what leadership in the church is about. Such a mindset sees visible leadership in the church as having power, prestige, and perks. And there is the danger that these things can be desired more than doing the actual work of that elders.

### Elders and Power

Sometimes eldership is seen as a “power” position, where one can finally wield decision-making authority, receive respect from other Christians and “get the inside scoop on what is happening around the fellowship.” One elder wryly refers to the “Sanhedrin” of the local church! The idea of “power” positions entails those offices or roles that exercise control or official influence over the lives of others.

I recently heard someone refer to the elders as the “center of power” in the church. This kind of thinking and terminology reduces the Biblical function of elders to the level of political theory with its subtle implications of selfish ambition, control struggles and personal rights.

However, this is not the tone of scripture when describing elders. Peter, who certainly had a propensity for taking control of a situation, cautioned elders against “lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” (1 Peter 5:3 NASB).

The power-center of the church is the Holy Spirit working through those who are fully submitted to His leading in their lives and ministries! And that may or may not include the elders, depending on who is walking closely with the Lord.

One does not need to be an elder to have a significant influence in the church. Each believer has a direct line to the Master Shepherd. If God can turn a king’s heart, He can certainly turn the affairs of the church!

Certainly, when elders make decisions that

affect the whole church body, one could call that “power” in the sense of having authority to make the decision. However, elders are to guard the flock and this means making decisions that will affect everyone for their good, according to the Lord’s leading. For example, elders may decide the topics of ministry, speakers, decisions regarding doctrinal error, small group leaders, who facilitates the meetings, etc.

But with decision-making comes enormous responsibility. Elders will have to give an account to the Master Shepherd someday for their leadership. It is *His* church, not *ours*; we are accountable to Him. The center of power resides not with us, but with the true Head of the church. This requires the humility to be sensitized to the Holy Spirit’s leading, and not to just assume that our decisions are automatically identical to the Lord’s guidance.

Desiring the position of elder because of the “power” involved is extremely superficial. One of the most difficult aspects of being an elder is submitting to God’s will, particularly when things don’t go “our way.” The man who seeks the elder position to get power will soon discover that he has very little *spiritual power* from God to validate his ministry and credibility as a spiritual leader.

### Elders and Prestige

Yes, there is prestige (or “honor”) in serving as an elder. The dictionary defines “prestige” as “a person’s high standing among others; honor or esteem.” Biblically, this honor is to be associated not with “being” an elder, but with

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“doing” elder work: “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” (1 Tim 5:17).

In the general sense, believers should honor all who serve sacrificially: “Welcome him [Epaphroditus] in the Lord with great joy, and honor men like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for the help you could not give me.” (Phil 2:29-30 NIV). But, what is the proper biblical balance to this issue of honor? Does it feed a person’s pride? Doesn’t this work against humility?

An obviously wrong response to these questions would be to divert attention away from our own secret desire for honor by withholding honor from those God has told us to honor! In that case, envy, insecurity and lack of faith in God’s blessings on our part are the real issues. Maybe we secretly want to be honored—and if we don’t get it, then we don’t want anyone else to get it either.

Another wrong response would be to not honor anyone, for that would take away from their reward in heaven. But regardless how “spiritual” this sounds, it flatly contradicts scripture! Some

(Continued on page 4)

# Traditions and Customs

Ever heard (or said) any of these: “I have my special seat in the chapel.” “We expect a Christmas or Easter message on those holidays.” “The communion must use a certain bread or cup(s).” “Church meetings must be held in the chapel building.”

Traditions—everyone has them but we don’t often discuss them. After all, doesn’t everyone know that “the way we do things must be the right (only) way”?

Tradition or custom which is universal among human beings can be a great servant or a cruel master. Many sayings and songs have described the joys and sorrows of life’s repeated behaviors. But one old saying goes:

Tradition all mankind to slavery brings;  
That dull excuse for doing stupid things.

In the hit musical drama, “Fiddler on the Roof,” the main character struggles with major family decisions in the light of tradition. In Bible times, the Lord Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for preferring their own traditions to the commandment of God (Mark 7:9 KJV). As a child I remember how often one would hear in the assembly those two well-worn expressions: “We’ve never done it that way,” and “We’ve always done it that way...”

Yet tradition has its favorable side as well. Paul reminds the Thessalonians, “Therefore brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (II Thess 2:15).

The subject has profound implications for the life and health of the church. The word literally means “the handing down of opinions or practices from generation to generation.” A story will illustrate.

There was a little boy who asked his mother why she was cutting the end off the ham before cooking it. “I don’t know, but your grandma always did it when I was a girl,” was the reply. When visiting grandma, the boy again asked his question. “Well, dear, I don’t know why, but I learned it from my mother. Why don’t you run upstairs and ask great grandma?” Once again the boy posed his question to a very old lady. With a twinkle in her eye she replied: “Oh, that was just because I couldn’t afford a pan large enough for the whole ham, so I cut the end off to make it fit.”

In order to shepherd people effectively, elders should keep some basics in mind about this whole matter of custom and tradition. From various Scriptures, we can make some deductions:

- 1) This subject has the potential to evoke some very strong emotions; e.g. Gal. 1:13-14.
- 2) Scripture never declares that traditions in themselves are evil. In fact they seem to be an inevitable part of cultures, families,

churches and individuals.

3) God’s word must always take priority over human traditions (Mark 7:13).

4) When based on or designed to honor Biblical principles, traditions can be helpful to the spiritual life. (One should study the closely related subject of the strong and weak brother in Romans 14).

5) When elevated to a status of equal authority with Scripture, traditions become a snare. (Mark 7:7) (This is exemplified in many groups, like Roman Catholicism).

6) Enforced traditions can become legalism. Legalism is commanding what God has not commanded.

What can a church do to keep traditions in their right place, that is, to keep them in the place of servants, and not allow them to become masters?

Traditions can sometimes give us a false sense of comfort that all is well, that we are doing the right thing, when we have predetermined that the “right thing” is what is convenient for us to do. Traditions can also prevent us from thinking too deeply about things which might convict us if we thought more about them more deeply. They can become idols if we begin to trust them for our security. Idols take the place that rightfully belongs only to God as the One who keeps His people secure.

Every theological opinion or action in our lives must be subjected to the light of scripture, especially those that are repeated throughout life. We may have strong desires to practice things that we have received from our fathers, and we have liberty to do so under grace. But we must always be watchful lest our liberties be misused. We may become so taken with our traditions that we impose them on others and so, in effect, bring the church under law—our law! Or they may become “set like cement” in our thinking, thus making us unapproachable or unable to change and so quench the Holy Spirit’s work among us.

No matter how many times we have done something, and no matter how many years we have done it, it cannot be changed from tradition to God’s word. It cannot increase in authority, or be enforced upon others. And believers who express their obedience to the unchanging principles of God’s word in ways different from ours cannot be judged as less spiritual or less pleasing to God.

One of the glories of the NT church is having the liberty that comes from autonomy. Most denominations are replete with traditions which are binding upon all of “their” churches. Can it be that many of our local churches who claim to be based solely on Scripture, are making the same mistakes by withholding fellowship from true brothers over things that are really just traditions? Has

the living Spirit of God Who would breathe life and vitality into our local fellowship become so restricted by our rules that our meetings are little more than “the whirr of religious machinery” and, in effect, rendering us to be like a rigid denomination?

Someone will say, “But aren’t we to separate from evil in order to maintain fellowship with God?” Yes, but we must be sure that the evils from which we are distancing ourselves are specifically designated as such by the Scriptures; not simply practices that go against something we have embraced for years and have become comfortable with.

Think of the benefits of knowing the difference between God’s commands and man’s traditions, and then having the freedom to change with regard to the latter. Christians far and near can be truly loved because they belong to Christ—we can have fellowship with them. Of course we may not be free in our conscience to join them in every project but that is something very different from accepting them as brothers and sisters in the Lord.

To be open-minded, flexible and able to see things through someone else’s eyes—these are marks of grace as we mature. Churches that grow have learned the lesson of Proverbs 14:4, “Where no oxen are, the crib is clean; but much increase is by the strength of the ox.” Working with spiritual babes can be messy work. As people are saved and added to the church, they bring all sorts of baggage (including many traditions) from the past. How wonderful if they find in the assembly a spiritual home that doesn’t just tolerate them but really accepts them. And who knows, we might just learn something from them in the process!



## From the Q-Files

### *On Problems in Ministry*

*Fruitfulness* and *fruitlessness* both require “cutting”. If you are going to be cut, you might as well be fruitful. (John 15)

### *On Defining Your Problem.*

If communication is a problem in your marriage, it doesn’t mean the marriage is bad, just the communication is bad. Define the problem well. The same is true in the church.

### *On Resolving the Problem*

The answer existed before the problem in God’s time table and economy. Christ was slain before sin even happened. In fact, Christ was the answer to our sin problem before the universe began. What ever our problem, we need to find God’s answer.

from A.R. Bernard Sr.

# Renewed to Serve

by Ruth Spender

As the lazy days of summer give way to a more rigorous fall schedule and we resume the responsibilities of another school year, are we adequately prepared for the work that is before us? In the last issue of Wives' Corner, we learned that the summer can be a spiritually draining time because of the many distractions that keep us from spending quality time with the Lord. Now, many programs are starting up again and we need to get back on track with our batteries recharged, ready to serve. Our spirits need to be renewed so we can be *effective* servants, not just those who go through the motions of laboring with our husbands, teaching Sunday School, leading women's study or being involved with discipleship.

How do we discern God's will in how to make the best use of our time? How can we serve without feeling frazzled? John 15:1-2 reminds us that the Lord is the vine and we are the branches. Our connection to Him is crucial for fruitful service, but are we abiding in Him? Do we hear His voice? Are we experiencing His strength to do His work? Are we truly being fruitful in our ministry, not just busy? How do we find the answers to these questions?

Many years ago, a Godly, older believer gave my husband and me some simple, yet profound advice that has helped us "stay the course" through the years. "Do not leave the Lord's presence in the morning until He has given you a gem from His Word that you can

meditate upon throughout the day". This has had a tremendous impact on our service for God. Meditation is the vehicle by which our minds are renewed and our lives are changed into the image of His Son. It is an important way to spend time with God and it is vital to our spiritual health. Through it we are shown where change is needed in our lives and we are given direction in the way that we should go. The Lord understands we do not have hours to spend read-

*How can we serve without feeling frazzled?*

ing and praying each day, but Psalm 1 tells us that we are blessed as we meditate in the law of the Lord day and night.

As we run errands, wash dishes, fold laundry or find ourselves awake in the middle of the night, we can mull over, think about and muse upon some Biblical truth or spiritual principle we have found in our quiet time. As we apply God's truth to our daily walk, we will see our lives change in the very areas where we have the greatest deficiencies. God has promised to meet our needs (Philippians 4:19). One of His primary tools for accomplishing this task is the living Word of God. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will experience His guidance,

power, peace and so much more. In fact, you will be amazed what you are able to accomplish when you are operating in His strength, not your own. It is possible to run with rest, to be busy without being stressed.

My husband and I had the privilege of visiting this same dear saint shortly before he went to be with the Lord at age 96. He spoke with a sense of fulfillment of his life of service for the Lord. Isn't that our heart's desire when we come to the close of life's journey here? Hebrews 13:7 (NIV) tells us to "... consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." How much we can learn from older Godly Christians that would be of practical help in our day to day life!

We all have many needs that we face in our personal lives, our families and our assemblies. We can be easily overwhelmed and weighed down by a big "to do" list, but Matthew 6:33 reminds us that as we seek to make the Lord our first priority, He will take care of everything else in our lives. He will show us those areas where He has called and equipped us to serve. He will show us those things which should be done in a day and those things that can wait. He will be free to work in our lives in miraculous ways.

As we seek His Way each morning, meditate on His Word and go about His Work in His strength, we will be partners with Him in doing His work in this world. And we will know real joy in serving.



## Leadership Principles

# When People Make Awkward Suggestions

by Chuck Gianotti

What do you do when you have worked long and hard in developing a new ministry or you have struggled to solve some critical bottleneck in your planning, and someone comes up with a "shoot from the hip" suggestion to modify things? And they want an answer immediately! Being a very focused individual, I often react to strongly, but I know that a snap response doesn't go over well, especially if it is negative. Grace, as always, is the key to added strength and quality in your leadership. Grace allows you to learn from others, even in the situation just described. And it is a gracious response that will build the person up rather than leaving him or her thinking you are stubborn and won't listen to others.

First, train yourself to think of such suggestions in a positive way. The person genuinely thinks his or her suggestion will be an improvement. Remember what it was like when you were not the leader and you had a suggestion you thought was brilliant. Ask yourself how you wanted to be treated when your idea wasn't

going to be implemented? Here are some suggestions on how to respond:

1) Appreciate the fact that the person is more than a "yes-man", unless you have the notion that no one else is as "brilliant" as you. In reality, leading ministries of "yes-men" can get very burdensome, because all the responsibility of leading "blind" followers rests on your shoulders alone.

2) Never make a snap decision about the suggestion offered, you need time to evaluate it. I tend to say something like, "Thanks for the idea, could you give me some time to think about it so I can give it a fair evaluation? I'll get back to you on it." No one likes his or her idea shot down immediately—that conveys a lack of respect. The point is to affirm the person and give the idea a chance by real consideration.

3) A good thing to do may be to ask the person why he wants his idea implemented? How would it improve things? Has he given it real thought? This will help you determine

how much the person has invested in the idea, how important it is to him. In some cases, people throw out ideas and don't even think about it again. It would be a waste of your time and energy to spend much further thought on it yourself.

4) If after thinking about it for a while, you find the idea is not workable you may have to say, "No." But now you have had some time to discern how best to phrase your response so as not to offend or discourage the person. Most people won't have a hard time accepting a "no" if they believe you have given it an honest evaluation and a reasonable explanation. But a "no" response too often will eventually cause others to lose confidence in you.

The main point is to respond to people's suggestion with respect, giving a thoughtful, clear and cogent answer. As people realize you are open to their input, your ministry plan just may well end up much better off!



## Being Elder or Doing Elder? (cont. from page 1)

might feel that honoring a person will tempt them to pride. It may, but it may not. We simply must get beyond the juvenile jealousy that prevents us from giving honor where honor is due. It is not up to us to judge another person's pride, for there is plenty enough to keep us busy searching our own hearts in this regard. We must be careful that our human notions don't lead us to violate clear commands of scripture to honor others.

How does an elder handle it if he does receive honor? He could respond with a false show of humility. That's what I call the "Ah shucks, 'twert nothing" routine. But that can sound disingenuous. False humility is that behavior which intentionally presents itself as being humble. Another wrong response to honor is outright rejecting it. But that is like refusing a gift at Christmas time—its an insult to the giver.

It seems to me the right response to being honored would be to have the attitude Jesus indicated in Luke 17:10, "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'" The Biblical basis for being an elder is because God has so directed you. If doing the work of elder is something you were "told to do" by God, then "doing elder" is a matter of obedience—it is not about the honor of "being elder."

To put it another way, if you are an elder because it was *your decision* to become an elder and a result of *your aspiration* for the associated honor, then you will never be satisfied with the *honor* of being an elder—plus you will make a lousy elder!

If you truly know that you are, at best, simply an obedient servant doing what your Master has told you, then you can have a true heart of gratitude for the honor which you know you don't deserve. Your thoughts or words might be like this: "I am only doing

what God has commanded me to do. Don't we have an amazing God that He can use even someone like me? If anything of worth has been accomplished in my ministry, it is simply the evidence of His grace working through me. In the same way that I thank God for His gracious, undeserved salvation, I thank God for honoring me as an elder, undeserved as it is. He deserves all the credit."

Isn't that the essence of Paul's thought that, "God considered me faithful putting me into service ... I was shown mercy ... and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant ... Now to the King ... be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen"? (1 Tim 1:12-17)

Becoming an elder to gain human prestige is superficial. True spiritual honor is experienced only by the man who works not for his own honor, but for the honor and glory of God. Whether or not honor comes through human recognition, you know by faith that when you do the work of elder well, you are satisfied not with the human prestige, but with the honor that comes from the God who has commanded you. Such honor is deeply fulfilling.

### Elders and Perks

There are some perks to being an elder. Some of you may laugh as you read this, for you can relate more readily to Paul's comments in 1 Cor 4:9, "I think God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world ... to men."

But there *are* perks to being an elder, at least to the superficial perception of a worldly mindset. Elders "get to do" much of the "upfront, visible stuff", giving announcements, controlling or chairing meetings, being given places of preference, being treated better than the average Christian in the pew, getting named in the bulletin, etc.

I remember the president of a para-

church group who came to meet me at the chapel building one day. He literally stepped over a young brother who was repairing the front door. Brusksly ignoring him, this "esteemed" leader strolled through the building, and upon finding me, warmly greeted me and acted like I was an old friend. The young man at the door, a new believer, later told me what had happened and was quite upset about it. Disingenuous as the show of friendliness by the "esteemed" leader was, the reality was there—I was treated better than the young brother. Though I may eschew such treatment, and point out the hypocrisy to the individual, the need to do so proves my point. Being a leader in the church sometimes means you are treated better than the average Christian.

Sometimes this favorable treatment may be understandable, like one church that asked for volunteers to provide child-care for elders with young families so they could go visiting as husband and wife. Now *that's* a perk!

Such things, however, should never be the motivation for being an elder. Jesus said that He came "not to be served, but to serve" (Matthew 20:28). At times elders will be served, in order to help them in their work. We don't want to be like Peter who responded poorly when the Lord wanted to serve him by washing his feet.

So there you have it—the privileges, power and perks of being an elder. Seeking these things will make you a miserable elder, because you will not really get what you are looking for. Yet, Paul still asserted, "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." (1 Timothy 3:1). It is good to desire the "task" or "doing" of elder work. This will bring the privilege of being God's under-shepherd, the power of God's Spirit working through you, and the perks of God's blessing in your work.



## ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

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