



Editor's Note

With the United States elections past, we must remind ourselves that, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases" (Prov 21:1 NIV). Free democratic societies can choose their leaders, but ultimately God rules over the affairs of men. Granted, there are mysteries connected to God's permissive will, but we know that His sovereign will always prevails. Therefore, we join in with the psalmist who declares, "Some

trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:7).

Inside you will notice an inclusion, the second in a series dealing with Bibliology, that is, how we know the Bible we have is the word of God and is true (see ESN January Vol. 5, No. 1).

Inside you will find two articles dealing with widows, an easy to overlook ministry. We take a special look at the unique situation of helping widows whose husbands had been elders.



Leadership Principles

Once An Elder, Always An Elder?

by Jack Spender

Sometimes we encounter an assembly that is limping along with little in the way of pastoral care or leadership effort, and hope is about gone. Inquiring about the elders, we hear a sad story of advancing age, absence due to travel, etc., and then this comment: "But you know, 'Once an elder, always an elder.'" Is this a Bible truth or a man-made tradition? The question is worth some thought, because it ultimately brings us back to the nature and authority of assembly leadership.

First, some cautions. There are many fine elders who pass through times of reduced activity for reasons too numerous to list such as health, family and employment constraints. These things are part of the normal course of life; and long-term faithfulness despite trials is heart warming. Others believe that although advancing age prevents their involvement in the meetings of the elders, they can still provide advice and counsel, and add their voice in time of crisis such as when doctrinal or moral error threatens the church. This too is commendable.

But what about those situations where an elder has lost all desire to do the work, or is unable to do the work because of increased inflexibility or declining mental faculties that sometimes accompany advanced age? Perhaps a man no longer qualifies according to the guidelines given in I Timothy and Titus, or becomes increasingly absent for long periods of time? Also, what about a brother who moves into the area from a distant city and proclaims that since he was an elder "back there," he is still an elder here? Is he an elder wherever he goes? Are there biblical precedents for limiting the duration of a ministry for which no limits are spelled out? Is it wrong to expect an elder to "step down" under certain situations?

Turning to the Old Testament instructions about ministry in Israel, it is interesting to note that the Levites were permitted full involvement in their sphere of work only until age fifty (Numbers 8:25, 26). After that, they could function in a supportive role among their brethren, but the days of active duty were over; the work was to be passed along to younger men.

In the New Testament, there are no instruc-

tions about the duration of eldership. Certainly where Scripture is silent, we have liberty to decide. So we are really seeking to understand what is best for the church. If we study the call of Paul and Barnabas for missionary service in Acts 13, we find no hint about time limits. Yet when these men had labored in the work for some time, we read: "And from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled" (Acts 14:26 KJV). Apparently Paul and Barnabas felt the freedom to decide how long they should remain on the field before returning home. This has nothing to do with "quitting," since Luke refers to the work as being "fulfilled."

In I Timothy 3:1-8, Paul instructs Timothy on the qualifications for elders. The literal rendering of verse 1 is helpful: "If any man aspires to oversight, he desires a good work."

It does not say that if anyone aspires to oversight, he desires a good position. This is because the basis of eldership in the New Testament is recognition of *work*, not the attaining of a *titled position*. Writing to the very young assembly at Thessalonica, Paul exhorts the believers: "Know them who labor among you and are over you in the Lord, and admonish youand to esteem them very highly in love for their works sake" (I Thess. 5:12,13). It would be pointless to exhort people to know who their leaders are if it were simply a matter of knowing the names of those upon whom a title had been conferred!

Back in I Timothy 3, Paul goes on to show how Timothy (and we) might recognize elders at the local level, and he repeats this in Titus chapter 1. A careful study of these passages would show that a man's character, his family life and his spiritual capacity to function must all be prayerfully evaluated. A summary conclusion seems reasonable: A man may function as an elder in the church if he desires the work and meets the qualifications. If he loses the desire or becomes disqualified, he can not be considered an elder, and should give place to others who can do the work.

Because the matter of recognition by the congregation is at the heart of the process, it stands to reason that a brother must not expect to be recog-

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What about an elder who has lost all desire to do the work, or is unable to continue?

Biblical Foundations

Honoring Widows

by Chuck Gianotti

Hands down, the telltale characteristic of a church that is genuinely following Jesus Christ is found in our Lord's upper-room comment, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). Our Lord wasn't concerned just with reputation, but with reality that fosters that reputation. This was a necessary adjunct to his immediately preceding command: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another." (John 13:34).

While insuring that our doctrines are sound and our principles of gathering are biblical, we must not fail in this area of love—for if we do so (particularly with the most needy) we FAIL as a church—period!

Before I became a Christian, ironically, I thought of the church as being largely populated by old women, so when I became a Christian, to be a part of a younger congregation was a "validation" of the church's relevance for people like me. However, God does not disparage older women. Have you ever noticed how often the God talks about widows in Scripture? He repeatedly points them out for special consideration. In fact, a major test of our true spiritual temperature is how we treat widows: "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress ..." (James 1:27 NASB).

God's attitude toward widows in OT

God is concerned about practical justice for widows (are they being treated fairly). "For the Lord your God ... executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing" (Deut. 10:17-18). He is concerned that their basic needs of life are provided for. "When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for ... the widow, in order that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands" (Deut. 24:19).

The Lord is particularly defensive on behalf of widows, that they be treated well and that we have a heart for them. "Thus has the Lord of hosts said, 'Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion each to his brother; and do not oppress the widow or the orphan, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another'" (Zech 7:9-10) To treat widows otherwise is considered by God to be evil.

It is true that these commands were given in the context of the OT theocracy where there was no governmental program for social security or old age pension, but the picture comes through clearly that God holds His people responsible for the quality of life

for widows. These commands, however, assume the primacy of family in supporting those in need within their ranks. "Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you" (Exodus 20:12). This fourth commandment was fundamental in establishing the family as the building block of Hebrew society.

Those outside this protective familial context, however, are not to be overlooked. If we remove the modern day politically correct perspectives, we can see some obvious implications for a rugged society reflected in Old Testament times: 1) there were probably many widows (because of the devastating affects of war on the male population) and 2) these widows in many cases would be at a distinct economic disadvantage in an agricultural society where economic prosperity came by the sweat of the brow.

God's attitude toward widows in NT

We see in the New Testament times, that a concern for widows continued among the people of God as the new church in Jerusalem grew. Believers began sharing their wealth and food was distributed to those in need (Acts 4:32-37). In time, an inconsistency in this distribution arose along ethnic lines (Acts 6:1-6). Because the apostles held firmly to the love principle of John 13, they committed to finding a solution to the problem as a high priority. A practical plan was drawn up which resolved the issue, so that *all* the widows were being helped.

Immediately after this incident the writer of Acts records that, "The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem" (6:7). Could this be the point of Jesus' statement that, "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"? This demonstration of love, so uncharacteristic in the culture of that day, was a tangible validation of the gospel message—it really does change people and thus provides a strong attraction to people of the world.

The apostle James in his ever practical application of spiritual truth, emphasizes the indispensability of reaching out to widows (along with other needy people: "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (James 1:27).

The church's responsibility

So important is this care for widows that Paul addresses the subject extensively in his "church leadership manual" (1 Timothy 5:1). He teaches his young protégé about treating others across the universal human distinctions: age (older and young) and sex (men

and women). Then before addressing older men (or elders) in 5:17-22, he pauses to talk extensively about widows in 5:3-16. In both cases, he focuses on honoring those who deserve honor. The same Greek word is used in each, and means to *honor, regard, reverence*. And in both cases, at least some financial or material support is in view.

Paul outlines a number of principles for guiding the church in fulfilling this mandate.

Family has the primary responsibility

If a widow has children or grandchildren, they should look after the needs of the widow, and not burden the church (5:4). Four reasons are given:

- 1) Piety ("fulfilling one's religious or spiritual duties") begins with those closest to you, in the home (5:5—see James 1:27),
- 2) This is an opportunity to repay parents for the obvious sacrifices they made for the children (5:5).
- 3) This is acceptable to God (5:5).
- 4) To *not* do this makes a person worse than an "unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8—see Mark 7:10-13).

Widows who qualify for church support

Who qualifies for being financially supported by the community of believers? Paul outlines the criteria. She must be alone, not having children or grandchildren and a true believer who is characterized by prayer (5:5). She should not be someone characterized by a self-indulgent lifestyle ("wanton living") (5:6). She must be elderly (5:9). Interestingly, the age Paul uses (60 years old) is close to that adopted in the US and Canada for retirement

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From the Q-Files

Oh, do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.

Roman soldiers were required, as far as possible, to return to Rome once a year from wherever garrisoned to renew the oath of allegiance to the Emperor. The soldiers of every nation must salute the Roman colors from time to time or be guilty of treason.

Attendance at the Lord's Supper is the Christian's salute to the blood-stained banner of the King of Kings.

There has never yet been a man in our history who led a life of ease whose name is worth remembering. *Theodore Roosevelt*

Ministering to Widows of Elders

by (name withheld)

When the phone rang for the *umteenth* time one afternoon, my frustration at the frequent interruptions must have shown on my face. Later, my ever-patient husband said, "Honey, one day the phone will stop ringing and we'll look at each other and wonder what happened." That time has come, the phone has stopped ringing. But he is not here to wonder what happened. He is with the Lord and I am left to wonder alone.

My husband was an elder in our assembly and just about everything that occurred in the church was at one time or another routed through our home. Sometimes it felt like Grand Central Station, but it was a wonderful life, full of satisfying ministry to people we loved in a church we had been part of since before we were married.

Recently a dear brother asked my thoughts as to how elders can help the widows of fellow elders. To do that is to try to remember how I felt and what helped. The first few months are still foggy in my mind. I went about the business of living, hanging on to the Lord for dear life and not doing much else. Clearly much of what I offer will also apply to anyone who has lost a life partner, not just those whose husbands were elders.

Understand the change in status

Losing one's mate feels like being sawn in half, with all the raw edges, jagged and painful. Everything but the memories are gone and the one left behind is forced to cope with handling life alone. It is especially difficult for a wife whose husband has been heavily and visibly involved in ministry. Her identity has been so closely tied to his that when the Lord takes him home, she often has to rediscover who she is as an individual. She must redefine her gift and sphere of influence, how she will spend her time—even how she will identify herself to others. Once, well into the first year after my husband died, I was introduced to someone from an assembly in another state. My first words were, "I'm _____'s wife," knowing that they would recognize his name, just as I had done for years.

Areas of ministry that I once shared with my husband, such as entertaining and visitation, are now limited. Even going to church meetings, once a source of joy, is now difficult. Favorite hymns bring tears. In over 40 years, I had never sat alone in church. For months I could not bring myself to sit where we always had, it was too painful.

But perhaps the most unsettling thing for me was the feeling that I was no longer in the center of activity. It was like suddenly being flung from the hub of the wheel to somewhere way out on the periphery. Our home had bustled with activity; we had a keen sense of purpose and prayed together about problems and

plans. I knew all the new people by name and had entertained them in our home. I knew the plans for future ministry and outreach, who the coming speakers were. Suddenly I knew nothing and it was a great shock. I felt disconnected, isolated and useless in the assembly I love—like moving from Grand Central Station to a very narrow shelf in a dark closet.

Now, even after several years, I am trying to process this while dealing with the lingering effects of grief. Looking back at the first year, I now know that I had all the symptoms of depression, though at the time I didn't label it such. I simply didn't care about much, especially in the area of taking

The most unsettling thing was the feeling that I was no longer in the center of activity.

care of the house and yard. In talking with others who have had similar losses, this seems to be a common response.

How can the church minister to these needs?

After the initial period of grieving, which may vary with each person, it would be a blessing to gently and sensitively draw the elder's widow back toward the hub of ministry. There is still much that she can and should be invited to do but she may not be comfortable initiating it. While some visitation may be inappropriate for her to do alone, perhaps she could go with another sister to visit shut-ins, the sick or elderly. Call and ask her to pray about situations in the assembly that can be shared without breaking a confidence. Ask her input in areas of the assembly she used to be involved in, if appropriate. In a word, acknowledge that her years of service with her husband were not wasted and that she still has value in the assembly.

Take the time to call and visit, especially in the early months, and show a willingness to listen and understand. Talk about her husband and the impact he had on the assembly and in individual lives. People often are hesitant to do that, fearing that it will dredge up pain and tears. But it is vital. She is thinking about him and it really helps to have others acknowledge his contributions or just mention his name. Pray with her and for her. Assess the support she has from family and friends. Be aware of physical needs, especially around the house and find ways to help, perhaps involving the deacons or other volunteers. This is clearly

an added burden for elders already giving 110%, but imagine the relief to a widow who is worrying about who will put up her window screens or fix a leaky faucet. This will be particularly important during the first year or so, but in the case of an elderly widow, it should probably be an ongoing concern, especially if she has no family close by.


Finances

Although it is less common now than in previous generations, some women have never handled the finances, never dealt with checkbooks, bills and budgets. Those whose husbands were in full-time service or who ministered the Word in many locales will likely experience a great reduction in monthly income when he passes away. Life insurance checks (if there is insurance in place) may seem a huge hurdle as most have never handled a large sum of money before. What does one do with that and to whom does one go for help and advice? For some the temptation to spend large amounts of money may be a very real problem, one closely associated with the grieving process.

Caring elders need to be aware of these situations and gently ask how to be of help. Is there enough money? What are her resources and expenses? Are there large outstanding debts, particularly medical bills and mortgages? Is she capable of handling the finances or does she need help in learning how to budget and balance her checkbook? Knowing that she is under the care and protection of elders who truly are concerned will be a real source of comfort, as well as security.

Children

Younger widows may still have children in the home. Becoming a single parent is a tremendous challenge, especially when the entire family is grieving and trying to adjust to their immense loss. Wise elders will make themselves available to help (or find others who can), whether it is for guidance, perspective, or simply the practical needs involved in having to be several places at once. Pray for the family and let them know that you are praying. The child who has lost a beloved father may be angry at God and needs to be able to express that to someone who can handle it gently and wisely. Depending on the ages of the children, this also may be a long-term commitment, but a very necessary one.

Time does heal the broken heart but the care and concern shown during the first months of grief will be a tremendous comfort and encouragement and will not be soon forgotten. Moreover, it may make all the difference in whether an elder's widow quietly slips into a place of non-involvement or feels vitally connected to a caring body of believers. 

nized in one place because he was once recognized somewhere else. This is in keeping with the autonomy of the local church; the authority of its leadership (humanly speaking) does not derive from any place outside of the local congregation.

Over the years, I have had the privilege to visit a large and healthy assembly in the Southern US in a Christian retirement community. Christians have come to live there from all over the USA and Canada. Many of the men had served for years as elders in the assembly “back home.” But when they come to a new area and a new assembly, they humbly take their place under the watchful care and work of the elders in their new assembly. Of course, some may aspire to eldership, and in time become recognized by the local congregation, but this will only be because they have again taken up the shepherding work of the elder and earned the respect and recognition both of the flock, and of those already in leadership. Over the years there has been a lovely display of God’s grace and humility in this biblical plan for renewing of church leadership.

In conclusion, we can be confident that there is no biblical authority for the statement “Once an elder, always an elder.” Rather, an elder is one who is known by his work, and it would be good for the church and a mark of humility if elders would turn over the work to younger, qualified men when they themselves are no longer able to carry it on. This will encourage the development of the younger men of the assembly, and protect the church from that unseemly professionalism found wherever men grasp at or seek to retain titles and honor which they no longer merit.



age. The widow must be a “one-man” kind of woman (the structure of the underlying Greek is identical to that found in the qualification for elders (“one-woman” kind of man 1 Tim. 3:2). In other words, she was a devoted and faithful wife, not flirtatious in any way. Further qualifications included her reputation for good deeds, child-raising, hospitality, humble servant attitude, etc. (10). She should not be self-centered, a busybody or a gossip.

As with the qualifications for elders, many of these things are not black and white, but require godly discernment in evaluating widows for being worthy of support.

Practical ideas

The scripture does not outline the extent of support that should be provided, but it is clear that financial or material support is in view. In today’s world (especially in North America), government support programs, personal savings and investments, pensions and life insurances may provide much if not all of a qualifying widow’s needs. But for some there may be little or nothing. For these, the local church has a responsibility. Sometimes the solution is regular financial support either through an established benevolence fund or through making the needs known to the Christian community on a regular basis.

The church can provide material support in the form of home and car maintenance, transportation, visitation. Also, it is easy to forget about those widows who are home-bound or in nursing homes. Widows of fulltime workers have unique financial needs, for when the husband dies, unfortunately the financial support connected with his active ministry is greatly reduced.

Practically speaking, the church might appoint a benevolence team that will be

charged with discerning the real need and available resources. Yes, there may be some that take advantage of “the system.” I recently heard of one woman who showed up at church once a month to collect her “widow’s check”. There will be many judgment calls and much grace is needed. But godly elders and deacons will be able to find solutions similar to the way their ancient brothers did in Acts 6. The important thing is that the church be characterized by love, particularly toward those with the greatest needs—true widows.



Fingertips To Lips

In France, there once lived a poor, blind girl who obtained the Gospel of Mark in raised letters and learned to read it by the tips of her fingers. By constant reading, these became callous, and her sense of touch diminished until she could not distinguish the characters. One day, she cut the skin from the ends of her fingers to increase their sensibility, only to destroy it.

She felt that she must now give up her beloved Book, and weeping, pressed it to her lips, saying “Farewell, farewell, sweet word of my Heavenly Father!” To her surprise, her lips, more delicate than her fingers, discerned the form of the letters. All night she perused with her lips the Word of God and overflowed with joy at this new acquisition.

Tan, P. L. (1996, c1979). *Encyclopedia of 7700 illustrations: [A treasury of illustrations, anecdotes, facts and quotations for pastors, teachers and Christian workers]*. Garland TX: Bible Communications. This was also the source for the quotes on page 2.



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