



Editor's Note

As we enter our 7th year of publication, we are encouraged by the many responses to this ministry. Our mission remains the same as when we began, "to provide positive encouragement and practical teaching for elders who seek to shepherd God's flock in the local church."

We make no apology for the belief that the work of shepherding the flock of God is not invested in one or two ordained clergy, but in a plurality of men raised up by God to sacrificially function as His "undershepherds."

However, this results in men that are committed to Biblical eldership and have responsible fulltime jobs, have families and are involved in various ministries—in other words, quite busy! If that describes you, then it is for you that we publish ESN. Some men have been thrust into the role of elder with little or no training. The busy elder has precious little time for self-study and further training. Much of the practical teaching for pastoral leadership is contained in resources that are

directed at the traditional "Pastor" of a traditional church, so is limited in its applicability to working elders.

In ShopNotes, we want to provide helpful how-to's that are practical for shepherding the congregation. You may notice we do not as a rule address doctrinal issues or controversial topics, particularly those that divide believers and churches. There are many good resources that address such topics, and at times we recommend such resources. In addition, the scope of this ministry precludes the necessary space to do justice to such topics.

This being our first issue of the year, we include an updated index of past issues. The entire archive of 37 issues is available on-line at our web-site (see back page for address). Or you can write us for a CD which contains the entire archives for a cost \$15 US. We have included an article from one of our early issues to whet your appetite. Enjoy!



Biblical Foundations

Watching Over the Teaching

by Chuck Gianotti

How can elders effectively shepherd the flock of God, when the spiritual gift of teaching is encouraged at all levels involving many teachers? Between children's ministry, small groups, Sunday preaching, women's ministries, seminars and conferences, there are many individuals involved with different styles of teaching and preaching, and varying emphases on doctrine. What criteria should we use to ensure good spiritual teaching while avoiding suffocating strictness or uncontrolled leniency for the teachers?

Elders do have the responsibility to watch over the teaching ministry of the church: "*Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood...be on guard...*" (Acts 20:28b, 31a NIV). Paul gave this instruction while warning about those who will distort the truth (20:30). He expands on this in his letter to Timothy where he outlines the telltale trouble signs to look for:

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith. The goal of this command is love,

which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm (1 Timothy 1:3-7).

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While Timothy was to "command" others concerning these things, it is not hard to imagine him contemplating how his own teaching measured up.

Based on this admonition, here are some questions that may help us first evaluate our own teaching, as well as the teaching of others.

1. Am I willing to tackle difficult issues (vs. 3)? "*I urged you ... to command.*" There is no point to further instructions unless we first have the courage *and* commitment to do the tough job of confronting error. Most people do not like confrontation, but an elder must do it when required, communicating in unequivocal terms.

One church had a sharp controversy over the issue of God's sovereignty versus man's free will. Emotions were heated and words contentious. The elders, unwilling to confront the parties involved or to take a stand on the issue, opted for the weak action of simply

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This article is taken from our very first issue of ESN (Nov. 1999, Vol.1, No. 1).

Leadership in the Christian assembly of the first century was provided by the more mature men in the congregation called elders or overseers. In the New Testament, this fact is never presented as one of several options, but is clearly the norm. The origin of elder rule can be traced back to the wisdom and experience of the elders of Israel and to the elders of the synagogue in our Lord's time.

By design, the whole idea was to spread the work load, bring different gifts to the table, provide safety in numbers (to protect against the concentration of power in one man), to ensure a smooth transition within leadership, and most of all to reflect the truth that those in authority are also accountable, not only to God but among themselves.

Questions

But where do elders come from? How do they emerge? Most would answer that they are called by God and recognized by the people. In principle that is true. But whether one is laboring in an established assembly, or planting in a new field, the question as to how elders are actually obtained is central to providing quality care for God's people and thus for the success of the work.

We will search the NT in vain for a simple list of steps. There are no examples given in which an elder is added to an already established and functioning leadership. Clearly, we must seek out the principles for obtaining qualified leaders in a congregation and try to understand what help can be rendered by those who already have some responsibility among God's people.

A General Pattern

A quick reading of the book of Acts will yield three observations. First, a transition in the leadership of the church took place from apostles at the beginning, to apostles and elders in the middle of the book, to elders alone in the newer churches, as required by the growth of the Church and the passing of the apostles.

Second, there is both a divine work

in this process "...the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers..." (Acts 20:28) and a human side "And when they had appointed elders in every church ..." (Acts 14:23 KJV).

Third, in agreement with the general tenor of all Scripture, God works first and man responds in obedience to what God is doing. Thus there is more to the expression "the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers" than simply saying that

*And when they had appointed
elders in every church....
Acts 14:23*

God ratifies man's choice. Rather, God initiates the process in accord with His purposes and promises to meet the needs of His people.

Details

In I Tim. 3:1-7 we find two important criteria for men who would serve as elders: there must be a desire for the work (vs. 1) and certain character and family qualifications must be met (vss. 2-7). Putting these together with Acts 20:28 we have the following progression:

- God works in the heart.
- Desire to serve grows in the individual.
- The desire manifests itself in the life, both in character and in work.

But what about the response of the congregation to all of this? From Paul's charge in I Thess. 5:12 "...know them who labor among you and are over you in the Lord..." we understand that the congregation has a responsibility to "know" (i.e. to observe, learn about, recognize) their leaders. But how does this work out practically?

Acts 14:23 is a help. Paul and Barnabas were on a return visit to new assemblies. The elapsed time would have allowed the saints to note the spiritual work of some in their number.

One can picture Paul pointing with his hand to indicate those who clearly were functioning as shepherds in the flock. The word in Greek means "to

appoint by lifting the hand." Considered in context, this cannot support either an elaborate ordination ceremony or a congregational vote, as the reference is clearly to Paul and Barnabas. As Wm. Hoste observes: "There is something grotesque in the idea of Paul and Barnabas electing by a show of hands" (*Bishops, Priests and Deacons*, p. 48).

Conclusion

Our teaching must be clear that God works first and then His people respond. This is true not only for those who are being prepared to lead—in desire, in qualifications, and in seeking to do the work—but also as we help the saints, through the eyes of experience, to recognize the ones God is fitting for service. The exact method through which such pointing out takes place is not the point. That practical help is provided surely is.



From the Q-Files

The Count of Monte Cristo conveys to his arch-nemesis de Villefort: "What I am saying, Monsieur, is that your eyes are fixed on the social organization of nations, which means that you only see the mechanism and not the sublime worker who operates it. I am saying that you only recognize in front of you and around you those office-holders whose accreditation has been signed by a minister or by the king and that your short-sightedness leads you to ignore those men whom God has set above office-holders, ministers and kings, by giving them a mission to pursue instead of a position to fill. This weakness is inherent in humans, with their feeble and inadequate organs." *Alexandre Dumas, "Count of Monte Cristo" (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), p. 474.* The call to be an elder is similarly a call to a work, not to a position.

John Adams, the 2nd President of the United States wrote: "When I see my brothers at the [law] bar here so easily making fortunes for themselves and their families . . . it requires as much philosophy as I am master of, to determine to persevere in public life, and engage in a new scene for which I fear I am very ill qualified." *David McCullough, "John Adams" (Simon & Schuster: New York), 2001, p. 176.* How much more do elders sacrifice great amount of time and energy for the sake of God's work, when they could be attaining more of the world's money, goods and leisure!

Guard Your Words

by Mary Gianotti

Under the clear plastic of my desk blotter I have some personnel treasures and reminders. There are family pictures, a book mark with a verse on it that my husband and I chose thirty years ago for our wedding, and a few encouraging statements. The latest addition to the collection is a statement by Chuck Swindoll, "Always guard your words when your husband is going through hard times." It's short, to the point and biblical.

As elders' wives we find ourselves in a much different situation than most other women in our local fellowships. We are married to men compelled to give more time, energy and concern to people in the local church. Their calling is to be shepherds of God's people. There are times when the sheep don't cooperate, are critical and generally cause hard times for your loved one.

Psalms 141:3 should be our prayer: "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips" (NIV). When we don't make this our prayer, we may add to our husbands' bur-

den when dealing with specific situations. Here are three ways that can happen: 1) We may think a particular conflict he is experiencing provides us with an opportunity to "help" them see their fault in the matter. It may seem like the perfect opportunity to prove that we are right about something. 2) The difficulty

"Always guard your words when your husband is going thru hard times."

at hand may springboard the conversation to unrelated issues that bother us as wives. This will only compound the difficulty, 3) We can become judgmental towards our husbands' critics, which doesn't help him in balancing love with strength. None of this is helpful to his shepherding God's people.

Notice the psalmist prays that the Lord would guard what he says. Imagine the hand of Jesus gently covering your mouth, whispering in your ear, "Stop! Don't say that!" During stressful

situations it is the Lord's work in our lives that will stop us from saying emotion filled, hurtful, foolish things. The second part of the prayer is a request to "keep watch over the door of my lips." Having a door keeper in ancient Israel meant twenty four hours a day of protection. How blessed we are to have the God of heaven willingly stand guard over our mouths.

In the decision to have the Lord guard our words we are choosing a protecting attitude toward our husband, thinking of what is best for him in any particular situation, and thereby helping him in this most important God-given work of being an Elder.

"He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity" (Prov. 21:23).

"He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin" (Prov. 13:3).



Watching (cont. from page 1)

suppressing it—they ruled that no one was to teach on either the sovereignty of God or the responsibility of man! They not only missed the opportunity to clarify doctrine, they also prevented the church from having any teaching on two important subjects of God's truth.

2. Is my teaching true to Christ? "... not to teach false doctrines any longer. None of us believes he himself is guilty of false doctrine; we generally believe our own opinions and interpretations are right. If not, we would change our views. I don't believe, however, Paul is referring to differences of opinions or legitimate interpretations. Literally, he warns against "other" doctrine, that is, other than what has been accepted. He later relates this specifically to the Lord, "... anyone [who] teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching..." (1 Timothy 6:3). Also, in Galatians 1:8-9 he talks about those who preach a "different gospel." While at times it may be refreshing to communicate solid truths using a variety of terminology for a new generation, the truth

never-the-less *must* be clearly stated and solidly line up with a high view of Christ. One young fellow, in his frustration with the lack of fruit in the church's evangelism, boldly proclaimed, "We need to redefine the gospel." Elder antenna's went up and the man was confronted. He explained that he meant the way that we do evangelism needs to change. However, the words he used conveyed wrong doctrine. Elders' need to be aware of such shifts of meaning to the words being taught!

3. Do I avoid hearsay? "... nor to devote themselves to myths." Do I quote stories or statements passed around on the internet without validating them for authenticity or credibility. One young man teaching a youth group used an outlandish "statistic" to support his point. When questioned about his source, he referred to a national magazine whose enquiry and reporting is known more for its gossip than journalistic integrity.

4. Do I avoid minutia? "... and endless genealogies." Extracting minor points and expounding beyond what is warranted in the Biblical text, to the exclusion of the obvious meaning and purpose of the passage lacks credibility—not to mention that it wastes everyone's time. Apparently there were some in NT times that majored in dissecting either the biblical genealogical records or else their own personal genealogies—all with an effort to distinguish themselves as having a certain corner on truth.

Recently, a world class ice-dance couple made their mark by being the first to execute a unique routine in competition. They reportedly said that if that is all they accomplished then that was enough for their career. Do I secretly have a similar desire to "make my mark" by coming up with a unique, obscure "truth" that no one else has discovered yet? Do I endlessly bring up my pet peeves or my own particular corner of truth? We dare not be like the Pharisees who concerned themselves with tithing mint and dill—but neglected

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the weightier things.

5. Does my teaching build up God's work by faith. *"These promote controversies rather than God's work—which is by faith."* Put simply, are people lifted up by my preaching? Or do they feel beaten down with guilt? This does not mean we should be "men-pleasers" looking for "amens" to lift ourselves up. However, it is the Holy Spirit's job to bring conviction, not ours. I occasionally teach a homiletics (preaching) course where the students must give two 15 minute sermons to the class. Invariably, the first message a novice preacher gives is one of criticism and correction. There seems to be no vacuum when it comes to telling people they are doing something wrong. The students so often need to be taught how to speak with grace and to use their messages to exalt Jesus Christ. Even Paul in his chastisement of the Corinthians says, "... we preach Christ crucified...I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 1:23, 2:2). Then he spends the rest of the book showing them how the "Christ crucified" should make a difference. The message of Christ is not one of condemnation, but of forgiveness and grace—not a pressure to keep the Christian laws, but an urging to live free of sin by God's grace through faith.

6. Is the goal of my teaching "love, from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith." A pure heart means I am not preaching or teaching for ulterior motives, like "getting back" at one of the listeners, or trying to sound


scholarly or impressive. A good conscience means I am not misrepresenting the Biblical text, or embellishing my illustrations, or saying one thing with my words, but implying something else. A sincere faith means I really believe what I am teaching, and am incorporating it into my life.

7. Am I communicating in a way that people understand? *"Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk."* One preacher had someone say after a sermon, "That was really deep." The preacher asked, "What specifically did you learn from it?" The listener said, "I don't know, but it sure was deep!" To my embarrassment that preacher was me—but my preaching at that point was not deep, it had simply muddied the waters! If people cannot specifically state what they learned, then maybe I have not communicated well. In effect, it was "meaningless talk." To be sure, sometimes the listener's heart or mind is distracted, or sin may be blinding an individual. But, as communicators of God's word, we must not too easily assume the problem is with the listeners; we need to take responsibility for the clarity and cogency of my message.

8. Do I know what I am talking about? *"They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about..."* Teaching and preaching requires hard work and study. Studying what others have to say about a topic or passage of Scripture can be helpful in identifying blind spots in our study or

perspective, but the thinking of others should never replace the work of personal study of the Word and prayer.

9. Am I humble in my teaching? *"... or what they so confidently affirm."* You have probably heard about the preacher's writing in the margin of his sermon notes. "Weak point, pound the pulpit harder!" People are often impressed by a confident preacher, but our goal is not to impress! False teachers usually exude confidence rather than humility. However, it is consummate humility to admit a lack of understanding or knowledge when we don't know something, or when Scripture is not clear about something. Such an attitude ultimately has more influence on others than over-confidence because humility speaks of credibility.

The above list of warnings will help us be on guard for ourselves as well as the whole flock of God (Acts 20:28a). Each of the above represents a choice we must make when we attempt to communicate God's Word. The wrong way is far easier. The right way requires humility, grace and the hard work of studying and communicating God's Word as His anointed messenger. These should help us evaluate our own teachings as well as the teaching of others in the flock God so passionately wants to guard. 

ELDERS' SHOPNOTES

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