

# 1

## THE NOBLE TASK OF THE ELDER

1 Timothy 3:1 calls the work of the elder “a noble<sup>1</sup> task.” One implication of this verse is that an elder is to be engaged in work and not merely to hold an office or achieve a certain status. The work of the elder is, however, a work of honor, a noble task, in the kingdom of God.

### What Is the Work of the Elder?

The task of the elder is alluded to in 1 Timothy 5:17, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” From this we see that the elder’s task is directing the affairs of the

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<sup>1</sup> καλός: Pertaining to a positive moral quality, with the implication of being favorably valued—‘good, fine, praiseworthy.’ ‘the good shepherd is willing to die for the sheep’ Jn 10:11. ‘they have a deep concern for you, but their intentions are not good’ Gal 4:17. (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1996], 741.)

church. We often use various verbs to describe this function: ruling, managing, overseeing, caring for. The Greek word used in this passage, *prohistemi*<sup>2</sup>, joins two concepts to make up the full meaning of the word—the concept of leading and the concept of caring for.

Those who exercise rule in the church are leaders. God's people have always had leaders, both good and bad. Moses led the people out of Egypt and became a deliverer in obedience to God's own leading. Saul, the first of the kings, was also a leader, but failed to lead the people in obedience to God. Nehemiah came later to lead the people who had been in captivity to rebuild the nation. The apostles, likewise, were leaders in the early church. But they were not without their occasional leadership problems. For instance, Paul found it necessary to rebuke Peter for having been double-minded about God's complete acceptance of the Gentile believers as worthy table partners for Jewish believers.

The church today needs godly leaders who are able to guide the church into the will of God using the truth of Scripture. God's people struggle as aliens in a hostile world and without good leaders are subject to being led astray. They constantly face ethical decisions that require the guidance of spiritual men. Even if their leaders do not know the answers to all the questions they confront, they still can provide the maturity and wisdom that helps members of the flock make their way in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> *προϊσταμαι*: To so influence others as to cause them to follow a recommended course of action—to guide, to direct, to lead. (Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 1, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. [New York: United Bible Societies, 1996], 464.)

Leadership in the church is more than answering questions and setting courses; it is demonstrating the power, concern, and presence of the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ. Many Christians are in need of the healing, the shepherding, the discipling, the disciplining, and the model that a leader of God's people has been set apart to give. The people need to see Jesus Christ demonstrated to them in the lives of their leaders. They need to see Him as head of the church and head of their lives. They need to see Him as King of kings whose Word must be heard and obeyed. They need to see Him as the Great High Priest whose love and being is their ultimate resource in life. They need leaders who can lead them into the fullness of a life of faith.

Those who rule in the church not only lead the people, they also care for them. The word "rule" suggests much more than merely directing or leading. It conveys the meaning of helping and caring as well.

Jesus Christ is the most magnificent and perfect example of a caring person. He showed what it meant to care for the people of God by taking up the task of a servant. As He taught His disciples, He made certain they understood this fact. "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26b-28).

This passage, beginning at 20:20, deals with a number of very common but unchristian motivations and emotions: pride, self-importance, envy, and the constant striving for

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recognition and prestige. Jesus dealt with these things by bringing the world's way of valuing things into sharp focus. He pointed out that the world's leaders accomplish their goals by lording it over other people. But in the Kingdom of God it is different. Those who follow Jesus are to accomplish their goals by taking up the role of the servant. By means of His life Jesus demonstrated exactly what it means to be a servant of the people of God.

Jesus demonstrated one important thing about servanthood: a servant does not act on his own. A servant acts on behalf of his Lord. Jesus constantly demonstrated to the disciples that it was the will of the Father that guided and directed Him. He lived according to His Father's will. He died according to His Father's will. We who follow Him must do the same.

His life is the perfect example of service. He healed scores of people, fed the multitudes, taught countless thousands, and still had time to hold an infant on His lap. He stopped a pressing crowd to reach out to a little man clinging to a tree. He took time to tell a Samaritan woman, an outcast from the perspective of the Jews, how she could find forgiveness of sins and a new way of life. He saw all of mankind lost and hopeless and He wept for us and offered Himself on our behalf.

The apostle Paul also gives us a biblical example of servanthood in his ministry: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship from

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God that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known.” (Colossians 1:24-25).

Paul made a similar point with the elders at Ephesus: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house...” (Acts 20:18b-20).

Among the many elders I have been privileged to know, several stand out as good examples of servant-leaders. One man was a bank vice-president. He had the reputation among business and financial people of being transparent—one could see his motives and concerns quite clearly and they always corresponded to what he declared himself to be. He was always busy with his career, yet he took time to get to know the people in the church by name, including the children. Because he was always a friend and gracious advisor to many members of the church, they turned to him when important decisions had to be made or serious crises had to be met.

At one particular congregational meeting the church became divided over an issue. The discussion generated a great deal of heat. Near the end of the meeting this servant-leader led the church in God-honoring prayer. He then spoke with the congregation about their need to give careful consideration to the leadership of the leaders in this matter. He encouraged them to weigh the advice of the Session but also to vote their consciences. As the vote was taken it was clear that there were

still differences of opinion. But most of the heat had been dissipated and the church maintained a visible and genuine unity. In this man, servant-leadership was well exemplified.

Everything elders are and do becomes a test of servanthood. If their leadership appears to be exerted by means of manipulation or raw force, even if such is only an appearance and not a reality, their noble task is compromised and their reputation as servants of God is tarnished. Only when leaders are being true servants and are being perceived as servants is the leadership they provide going to be truly honored and respected.

Congregations usually perceive leadership in the church to be one of the three kinds listed:

**Non-leadership.** This is obviously a category of leadership that is dysfunctional. The appointed leaders are not perceived as carrying out their responsibilities, whether they think they are or not. In a situation like this, unofficial leadership emerges to fill the void.

**Royal leadership.** This type of leadership is similar to the role of the absolute monarch—he rules with force and by decree. This is not to say that all forms of royal leadership are improper but to recognize some of the regrettable tendencies in leadership modeled after human kings. Elders who tend to rule in this fashion are often characterized by a desire to dominate and overpower others with their opinions and desires. They appear to be men who have been granted certain prerogatives which they choose to exercise.

**Servant-leadership.** This is the form of leadership that is compatible with the noble task. Servant-leaders are usually perceived by the members as legitimate because their love and care for the members are evident in their actions. They are strong leaders; not domineering ones. The form of servant-leadership gives credibility to those who rule in the church.

A striking example of the contrast between royal and servant-leadership is seen in King Rehoboam of Israel (1 Kings 12). When Rehoboam took office, two groups advised him concerning the manner in which he would rule. The first group (made up of elders) counseled him, "...if you will be a servant to this people today ... they will be your servants forever." (verse 7). The second group (made up of younger men) suggested that he rule with force, harsh discipline and even heavier taxes. Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders and followed that of his contemporaries. The sad response of the people is summarized in verse 16, ending with the words: "So Israel went to their tents." Rehoboam's decision to be a royal leader rather than a servant-leader led to the division of the kingdom.

Servant-leadership is a high calling. A servant-leader is not someone who is subject to the whims of the congregation, but he is responsive and responsible. He is a servant-leader because like the apostle Paul he has become a servant of the church by a commission from his Lord (Colossians 1:24-25).

The full meaning of this calling to servant-leadership becomes clear as we consider 1 Corinthians 4:1. Paul has just chided the Corinthians for their divisions based upon attachments to

various human leaders. They were giving glory to the humans God was using to accomplish his purpose. Paul points out these leaders were not important; it is the Message that is important. The leader is merely a servant of the Gospel.

## **Who Should be an Elder in the Church?**

We know already that the church is to be ruled by elders. We know also something about the nature and quality of servant-leadership. But how do we determine who in the congregation is to be set apart for this noble task?

Today's church is not lacking in leaders of one kind or another. In many congregations there are leaders who are not elders, but still very influential. These include people who make large financial contributions, the enthusiastic advocate of a particular cause, and some dynamic or charismatic personalities—both men and women. These are not necessarily elder candidates even though they may be leaders in some respect.

Elders emerge within a congregation by doing naturally the tasks that comprise the work of the elder. As mature men begin taking on one or more tasks of shepherding and overseeing the flock, of being Christ-like examples to the people, of guarding the church against the dangers and threats that come, of working to help the members grow in grace, then elder-candidates have emerged. You will know them because their



families are Christ-centered. You can identify them because their own lives are Christ-like. You can rest comfortably in their leadership because they show a knowledge and grasp of the truth of Scripture and its doctrine and they clearly manifest gifts of the Holy Spirit.

To put it a different way, you ask the question about such an elder-candidate: “What exactly is he lacking?” If the answer is simply, “He is lacking ordination to his task and the office that goes with it,” then you can be certain that you do have a genuine candidate for eldership. The change that ordination brings includes the formal and official responsibility of elders for God’s flock and accountability to God for their use of their gifts in the church. Until elders are ordained, the flock is not able to recognize their official role as shepherd or to be in submission to them. Until they are ordained, natural elders are not able to exercise authority and carry out their full range of responsibility in the church.

Qualified elder-candidates may well need training before they assume the office, but they are already practicing elders even though they have not yet received ordination. By doing the work of the elder they exemplify what the apostle Paul means by “seeking the office.” In this way the church sees that such a person has been called by God to the noble task of eldership and can take the steps necessary to prove his gifts and qualifications and eventually ordain him.

1 Timothy 3:1 declares that the work of the elder is a noble task. To rule in the church as a servant-leader is a high calling before God. As 1 Timothy 5:17 reminds us, those who do

this job well are worthy of a double honor. Those who are set apart to this task are to be respected. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 reminds the church to “respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” Hebrews tells us “...imitate their faith” (13:7) and “...to obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you” (13:17). Peter tells the elders that, if they are good shepherds of the flock, they “...will receive the unfading crown of glory.” (1 Peter 5:4).

The Holy Spirit has provided elders a clear description of what is expected of them. He makes it clear their task is hard work. But he also declares it is a noble task. He provides the strength and motivation for the elder to persevere in this high calling.

## **Background Reading**

I have developed a rather full picture of the calling and responsibility of the elder in two previous books. The chapters indicated below will help fill in much of what I would like to review in this chapter but space does not permit.

*The Practices of a Healthy Church*, Donald J. MacNair, (P&R, 1999).

Read chapter 6, “The Making of a Shepherd,” pages 119-150.

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Read also chapter 7, “The Elder’s Official Responsibilities,” pages 151-170.

*The Living Church*, Donald J. MacNair, (Great Commission Publications, 1980).

Read chapter 5, “The Living Church and the Elder.”

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What two dimensions of rule are there in the eldership?  
(If you have time, do a word study of *prohistemi*. This will require the use of some Greek reference books and a little knowledge of Greek, but the results will be eye-opening and very helpful as you learn the biblical meaning of “rule.”)
  - a.
  - b.

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2. Describe to someone else what you think constitutes good, effective, and biblical leadership using examples from Scripture, if possible. Ask for evaluations of your model and be ready to evaluate other models using criteria from the Bible.

3. Give six examples of a servant-leader (ways in which he would lead) and contrast his approach with leaders who try to lead using secular rather than Christian principles.

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4. How do you know an elder-candidate when you see one?

5. The task of the elder is a “noble” one. Explain why the word “noble” well describes the work of an elder.

6. Do you think the biblical concept of the elder is well understood in the church? Explain your answer.

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7. How can we improve the situation of question number six in our church?