

Background, Qualities, and Functions of Elders in the Church

Dave Bland
Harding School of Theology

Introduction

Churches in the Restoration Movement have always valued the place of elders. We understand the role they played in the early church as Paul established churches throughout Asia. Later he returned to each one to appoint elders, believing a healthy body of elders essential to the pastoral care of the local church (Acts 14:23). Paul continued to address the topic throughout his ministry, particularly in the Pastoral Epistles. The quality of such leadership was vital to the church's well-being and future. Healthy leadership continues to play an essential role in churches of the twenty-first century.

Churches, big and small alike, know that a healthy congregation needs strong leadership. That strong leadership begins with a plurality of elders leading, guiding, and shepherding the body. The lack of an eldership may indicate a congregation is either in the beginning stages of developing or is still an immature body lacking spiritually qualified individuals. Even for churches who have elders, those elders may have been chosen for the wrong reason, chosen exclusively because of their business success, wealth, or dynamic personality. Sometimes churches simply choose whomever they can find to serve in that capacity, regardless of their qualifications.

Despite the value we place on the role of elders, a lack of understanding the background, qualities, and function of elders is still prevalent. In this essay, I want to address these three elements essential to a healthy eldership.

The Biblical Background of Elders

Those unaware of the background the role elders played in Israel's history might naturally assume that Paul himself was responsible for creating the role for the early church. Others are aware of that historical background but maintain that New Testament (NT) writers created a new description of them and their responsibilities. Benjamin Merkle states his conclusion this way, "It appears, therefore, that the Christian office of elder was not directly borrowed from any of its predecessors. The New Testament church borrowed the title, and the official status that came along with that title but defined for itself the specific duties that those who held this title performed."¹

However, strong evidence points to the contrary. The role of elders in the NT is a direct descendent of elders in the city gate in the Old Testament (OT). The qualities Paul mentions in the Pastorals did not come only from direct divine revelation to Paul. Nor did Paul think these up himself. Paul relies on a rich tradition that flows out of Israel's experience with elders in the city gate.²

Timothy Willis has investigated the OT background and details three distinct categories of men in Israel designated "elders."³ The first category is sometimes referred to as the "elders of Israel" (see, Exodus 24 and Numbers 11). This was a representative body for the entire nation. This body eventually became the Sanhedrin sometime after the Babylonian Exile. The second category is known as the elders in the king's house (see Gen 50:7; 2 Sam 12:17; 1 Kings 12:6-15; Psa 105:22). These were men who offered advice to the king. Obviously after the fall of Jerusalem and the cessation of the monarchy, this group faded away. A third group of elders known from the OT were the elders of the city (Deut 19:12; 21:2-8; Josh 20:4-5; Ruth 4:1-12; Prov 31:23). It was in the city gates where decisions were made; male leaders gathered to discuss

¹ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 72.

² Everett Ferguson notes the following: "Since elder was already a title or position in Judaism, when it was adopted by Christians, there was already a definite concept in mind." *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 322.

³ For a detailed treatment of this, see Timothy Willis, *The Elders of the City: A Study of the Elders-Laws in Deuteronomy* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 8-13.

the issues and pass down decisions. It is this group of elders that appears to be the institutional ancestor to the elders Paul prescribes in the Pastorals.

Who were these elders in the city gate? Willis did an ethnographic study of contemporary kinship-based communities in the Middle East to discover the characteristics of their elders and then compared that with descriptions of elders of the city in the OT.⁴ He discovered striking similarities between the two. The contemporary kinship-based communities shed light on the role elders took in ancient Israel. Some of the common characteristics of elders in these contemporary communities include the following:

- 1) He is a senior member of a large extended family.
- 2) He is wealthy, but also generous and hospitable.
- 3) His character exemplifies the standards of ethics and morality which the community esteems most highly.
- 4) He is well-versed in his people's "secret knowledge" (religious practices, customs, and history).
- 5) He is known in the community for his oratorical skills, especially his skill of persuasion.⁵

A good example in the OT of a city elder is Job (Job 29:7–10).⁶ Before one can really understand and appreciate the qualities for elders mentioned in the Pastorals, one must read and study Job 29. This chapter sheds light on the qualities of a city elder. As Job looks back on the days when he served in that role, he describes his character and life. He was a man of wealth, possessing livestock and orchards (29:6; see Deut 32:13f). However, he was generous and hospitable with his wealth (29:12–16). His children respected him, and his household was in order (29:5). Others respected and showed honor to him, which also indicates he was experienced; he was not a novice (29:7). The former days as an elder were a time of service, when he showed hospitality and generosity (29:11–20). Wherever he went, he had a good reputation (29:9–10).

⁴ Willis, *Elders of the City*, 19–31. Willis' investigation included "more than three dozen ethnographies describing contemporary communities in the Middle East and Africa," 25.

⁵ Timothy Willis, "Elders in the Old Testament Community," *Leaven* 2/1 (Winter, 1992), 11. This list originates from Willis' dissertation, "Elders in Pre-Exilic Israelite Society" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1990), 158–65.

⁶ Willis, "Elders in Pre-Exilic Israelite Society," 165ff.

He was listened to because of his ability to speak and influence others with his words (29:21–22; also 29:8–9, 11).

In Job chapter 31, Job continues to list the virtues that characterized his life: not lusting after other women (31:1), honesty with fellow humans (31:5), did not pursue another man’s wife (31:9), treated servants with dignity (31:13), provided for those in need (31:16), did not trust in his wealth (31:24), did not hate his enemies (31:29), and so on. These chapters in Job (29 and 31) serve as an important background to the qualities of elders Paul talks about in the Pastorals. The office of elder was a rich and long respected role in the nation of Israel and throughout Jewish history. An understanding of this background provides a deeper appreciation for the qualities Paul describes in the Pastorals.

The Qualities of Elders

Often, we refer to these qualities as “qualifications.” However, “qualifications” sounds more like a list of professional credentials displayed primarily through demonstrated skills. As Willis investigates the characteristics of contemporary kinship-based elders, he observes, “These are not qualifications, but qualities which seem to thrust a man into this role naturally, in the eyes of those around him.”⁷ That same observation can be applied to the qualities Paul lists in the Pastorals. Lynn Anderson writes that the word “qualifications” is often viewed more as “some sort of ‘checklist,’ which is rather mechanically applied.”⁸ In contrast, Paul lists these as qualities which are more personal and relational in value. By identifying these qualities, Paul is not concerned so much with giving the church a divinely ordained structure “as he is trying to create a community of believers.”⁹ We sometimes lose sight of the goal toward which Paul was striving and get bogged down in the minutiae of the list.

⁷ Willis, “Elders in Pre-Exilic Israelite Society,” 162. Willis, in a later article, calls them “characteristics.” Timothy Willis, “‘Obey Your Leaders’: Hebrews 13 and Leadership in the Church,” *Restoration Quarterly* 36/4 (1994): 319.

⁸ Lynn Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep: Spiritual Leadership for the 21st Century* (West Monroe: Howard Publishing, 1997), 130.

⁹ Willis, “Elders in the Old Testament Community,” 12.

Elder Qualities in the Larger Context

The qualities are often isolated from the larger context of choosing elders. Yet, they are not the only elements necessary for a person to serve in this capacity. Many Christians possess these moral qualities but still would not make good elders. Two other important dimensions contribute to a person possessing the necessary qualities.

First is the gift of service. Is this man actively involved in serving? Paul maintains that the gifts we have are intended to serve others. In Ephesians, he clearly states that the gifts God gives are “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ . . .” (4:12).¹⁰ Peter exhorts his readers in the following way, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received” (1 Pet 4:10). All gifts are for the sake of serving the church. Such service is a natural prerequisite to leadership.

Leadership is the second characteristic to consider in qualifying a man to serve as an elder. It is important to recognize those who have distinguished themselves in the congregation with their service and involvement in the lives of others. Others begin to look to these individuals and follow their lead. Thus, leadership is born out of a natural sequence of events from service to leadership.

Even though leadership is a natural ability, it is still a gift. Paul lists several gifts in Romans 12:6–8. All of those mentioned, except for prophecy, are natural but still gifts from God.¹¹ One of those gifts includes leading (12:8). In Ephesians 4:7–11, Paul identifies three different leadership roles which are deemed as gifts given by God’s grace: prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers.¹² I refer once again to Peter, who describes the whole relationship between gifts and service in 1 Peter 4:10–11:

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, the English version used is the New Revised Standard Version.

¹¹ See Everett Ferguson, “Authority and Tenure of Elders,” *Restoration Quarterly* 18 (1975): 142–50. See also Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 292–96.

¹² The word for pastor is *poimēn*, shepherd. In the Greek, teachers and shepherds are closely tied together. See Markus Barth for further explanation. Barth translates the two terms as one “teaching shepherds.” Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4–6*, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 438–39.

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

The gift of leadership flows out of one's faithful service. Therefore, service and the gift of leadership provide the framework for Paul's lists in the Pastorals.

Common Misunderstandings of the Overall List

Regarding the overall use of the list, several misunderstandings remain which lead to less than desirable outcomes. First, as already mentioned, the problem has been that churches often focus on these qualities in isolation of the larger context (service and gift of leadership) in which they should be placed. In addition to this, the second misuse of the ecclesiastical list is that it is not uncommon for churches to combine the lists together in 1 Timothy and Titus along with Acts 20:28–30 and 1 Peter 5:1–4. Congregations often take all these passages and harmonize them into one long list. For example, in the book *Introducing the Church of Christ*, Rex Turner combines these texts together and extracts from them categories of negative and positive “qualifications.”¹³ Even some scholars combine the passages. Thomas Oden blends together the household lists in 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:7–9.¹⁴ Only later in his commentary does Oden acknowledge the different contexts in which Paul writes Titus 1:5–6.¹⁵

This harmonizing practice is comparable to how some scholars used to harmonize the four Gospels into one long narrative, violating their occasional nature. Like the Gospels, 1 Timothy and Titus are occasional letters. That is, Paul wrote them to two different individuals who were in two completely different church contexts. Timothy was in Ephesus, a metropolitan area with a

¹³ Rex Turner, “Each Congregation is Overseen by Biblical Elders,” in *Introducing the Church of Christ* (Fort Worth: Star Bible Publications, 1981) 76–80. H. Leo Boles also combines the qualities in 1 Timothy and Titus and organizes them around positive and negative in *The Eldership of the Churches of Christ* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, nd.), 21.

¹⁴ Thomas Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, Interpretation (Louisville: WJKP, 1989), 141.

¹⁵ Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus*, 145.

quarter million people. It takes a different kind of person to qualify as an elder in that church context than it does for a person to serve as an elder in the church at Crete where Paul sent Titus. Granted, there is significant overlap in the qualities Paul lists, qualities that apply in all church contexts. Yet, there are differences and different emphases. Paul didn't simply copy the qualities he gave to Timothy and paste them into his letter to Titus. Different contexts demanded different qualities and emphases.

This is an important characteristic for churches to recognize today. A person could well qualify as an elder in one place, such as a rural community, and not so in another, such as an inner-city context.¹⁶ Or an elder in Texas may not function as well if that same elder were in New York. The different lists in Timothy and Titus demonstrate that different church contexts demand some differences in who qualifies as an elder. This does not mean that one list should be followed over another. Rather, it simply means that churches should acknowledge that different contexts call for some different qualities.

A third misunderstanding relates to the tenure of an elder. Is "once an elder, always an elder" true? Is there a time when an elder or even an eldership should resign? To answer that question, think of the context of 1 Timothy. First Timothy is addressed to the church in Ephesus that *already* has elders (Acts 20:17–38). Three years prior to sending Timothy, Paul had already set up elders in the Ephesian church (Acts 20:31). So, Timothy is not appointing elders in a church with no elders. Instead, it appears the church in Ephesus is established and is now wrestling with current issues in the eldership or looking for additional elders.¹⁷

The issue in 1 Timothy, therefore, is not how a church is organized. Rather, it is what to look for when selecting new elders and what to do when the present elders are not who they are supposed to be. If an elder does not live up to the moral standards, if he has lost the respect of the church, then he is no longer qualified to serve as an elder. It is not true (unlike Supreme Court

¹⁶ Lynn Anderson relates a scenario presented to him about a man in rural Arkansas not qualifying as an elder unless that man owned good coon dogs. "If a man didn't have enough sense to know good dogs, how could he possibly have enough sense to lead a church?" *They Smell Like Sheep*, 133.

¹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson states, "Timothy was not, after all, put there as a trouble-shooter for no reason." *1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 75. Paul warns Timothy about appointing leaders too hastily (1 Tim 5:21–22).

justices!) that once a man becomes an elder, he is an elder for life. Addressing some of these misunderstandings surrounding the role of elders and Paul's description of them will better clear the way for focusing on some of the disputed qualities that Paul lists.

How the List of Qualities is Organized

When reading these qualities in the Pastorals, one might conclude that the ethical standards for elders are quite low: not a drunkard, not violent, not double-tongued. Keep in mind, though, that the hearers of these letters were converts from a pagan environment. The situation on Crete, where Titus was, was deplorable, as was its reputation. Paul, for example, quotes as true a Cretan prophet who described Cretans as "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12).

It is important, again, to notice that the qualities Paul lists are primarily, though not exclusively, moral qualities. They do include the quality of experience ("not a recent convert" 1 Tim 3:7) and the gift of teaching (3:2). Still, Paul is concerned not with a job description but principally with a person's character. Elders must have the character that goes with the ability to lead. Hence the expectations involve a high ideal of marriage, a serious disposition, self-control, the ability to relate harmoniously with others, an attitude of humility, the capability to exert a good influence on one's own family, and a good reputation in the community. These are qualities needed to provide long-term stability in a faith community. There is nothing here about the need for a charismatic personality, even though some elders may have that gift.

Different writers have categorized these qualities in 1 Timothy 3 differently. For example, Everett Ferguson groups them into five different categories.¹⁸ The first category is "character" which most fall under. The second is "experience." This man is not a recent convert. Third, is "reputation." The man is above reproach, respectable, and well thought of by outsiders. Ferguson calls the fourth category "intelligence." That is, he is apt to teach. And fifth, "domestic relations." That is, this man manages well his household.

John MacArthur categorizes the qualities in terms of the sequence of verses in which they fall in 1 Timothy 3.¹⁹ Verses 2–3 focus on the moral character

¹⁸ Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 323–24.

¹⁹ John MacArthur, *Church Leadership: 1 Timothy 3:1–13* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 44ff.

of the man. Verses 4–5 deal with his home life. Verse 6 addresses his spiritual maturity. And verse 7 gives attention to his public reputation.

Lynn Anderson puts the qualities in three broad categories and explores them beyond the parameters of 1 Timothy 3. These include “experience” (the term elder implies an older man with experience; he is not a novice), “character” (exhibits self-control with temper, finances, and desires), and “vision” (a vision to know how to equip and involve members; Anderson appeals to Eph 4:11–13 for this).²⁰

Issues Raised Over Several Qualities

Debate over the meaning of several of the qualities sometimes results in impeding the ordination process. I would like to address three of these, using 1 Timothy 3:1–7. The following are some that raise issues: above reproach (How much above reproach?); husband of one wife (What about a widower, etc.?); and the status of his children (Do all of one’s children need to be baptized? Is “children” singular or plural?).

In 1 Timothy 3, the first quality Paul mentions is that elders must be “above reproach” (NRSV, NIV, ESV). The Greek word is *anepitēpton* (“blameless”).²¹ If one understands “blameless” as meaning “perfect,” obviously, no one will qualify. Most of the major English versions translate the word as “above reproach.” The Contemporary English Version (1995), makes it clearer, “officials must have a good reputation.” This quality stands at the head of the list. The remainder of the qualities flesh out what “above reproach” means. Elders should be known for the character they possess.

The next quality by far has stimulated the most debate. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translates the Greek phrase, *mias gunaikos andra*, as “married only once.” It translates it that way all four times it appears in the Pastorals (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; 5:9; Titus 1:6). The Jerusalem Bible (JB) translates it similarly: “He must not have been married more than once.” The New International Version (NIV, 1984) translates it differently but still renders it with the same meaning in three separate texts, “the husband of but one wife” (1

²⁰ Anderson, *They Smell Like Sheep*, 137ff.

²¹ The word is found only in 1 Timothy and Titus. My thanks to Allen Black (Professor Emeritus of New Testament, Harding School of Theology) for his suggestions and help with Greek transliterations.

Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). The King James Version (KJV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), and Revised English Bible (REB) translate it just slightly differently, “the husband of one wife.” All these translations emphasize the *marital* status of the leader.²²

In contrast, other translations emphasize the *quality* of the relationship between the husband and wife.²³ Thus, the New International Version (NIV, 2011), revising it from its earlier 1984 translation, renders it, “faithful to his wife.” The Contemporary English Version (CEV) translates the phrase, “faithful in marriage.”²⁴

We can place these different translations into two categories. The NRSV, KJV, RSV, JB, REB, and the NIV (1984), all emphasize one’s *marital* status. In contrast, the NIV (2011) and the CEV translations emphasize the *quality* of the husband’s marital relationship. In other words, it is the difference between the history of one’s marital status versus marital faithfulness to one’s present wife.²⁵

What are the implications of emphasizing the *marital* status and translating the phrase, “married only once” (NRSV)? Some have suggested this quality was originally directed to the practices of polygamy rampant in the first century. However, Sydney Page offers good evidence that polygamy was not an issue for Jews under Roman rule.²⁶ Another implication is that “married only once” means one is disqualified if his wife dies, and he chooses to remarry. This raises a further question: Can he continue to serve if he chooses to remain single?

I can only respond to the latter question by offering an example. At the church where I served as a preacher and minister for twenty-one years, a long-time elder, Jack P. Lewis, served for four decades. When his wife, Annie Mae Lewis, died, he planned to resign. However, the elders strongly encouraged him to stay on for the sake of the congregation. The congregation deeply

²² Sydney Page, “Marital Expectations of Church Leaders in the Pastoral Epistles,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 106.

²³ Page, “Marital Expectations.”

²⁴ Other translations also follow suit. See Easy to Read Version (ERV, “faithful to his wife”); New Living Translation; (NLT, “faithful to his wife”); The Message (“committed to his wife”).

²⁵ Page, “Marital Expectations,” 113ff.

²⁶ Page, “Marital Expectations,” 107–8.

respected him. And many members sought him out as the one they primarily depended on for advice. When one has gained the reputation and respect he had, it was extremely important for the sake of the congregation that he continue, which he did.

What are the implications of emphasizing the *quality* of the present relationship and translating the phrase, “faithful to his wife” (NIV, 2011)? “Faithful to his wife” implies that if his wife dies and he chooses to remarry and remains faithful, he is qualified to continue to serve as an elder. Paul is not opposed to such a one remarrying, as several passages in his letters indicate.²⁷ Therefore, a man whose wife dies and who chooses to remarry (or even not to remarry) continues to qualify as an elder.

Where does that leave the issue of divorce? If Paul is addressing a moral issue, then the question of divorce is a moral one. Was the man or the woman unfaithful to their spouse? Jesus makes a distinction in Matthew. If one divorces his or her spouse, except for the grounds of adultery, and marries another, that is immoral. Therefore, if a husband’s wife is unfaithful, then he is free to remarry (Matt 5:32; 19:9; see also 1 Cor 7:15). There seems to be a distinction between those who have acted immorally in divorcing and remarrying and those who have not. Again, it appears that the “married only once” translation would seem to disqualify a person regardless of the reason for divorce.

Weighing all the options as well as how Paul and Jesus respond to both issues of remarrying after a spouse’s death and the response to divorce, the NIV (2011) represents the better translation of the Greek phrase, *mias gunaikos andra*, in 1 Tim 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6. And that is “faithful to his wife.” It is a quality applied both to elders (3:2) and deacons (3:12).

What seems to give this translation even more weight is the change the NIV (2011) made. While the NIV (1984) translated the phrase as “the husband of but one wife” in 1 Tim. 3:2, 12 and Titus 1:6, in 1 Timothy 5:9, it translated the exact same phrase regarding widows (except for a change of gender) as “faithful to her husband.” Later the NIV (2011) changed the translation of the previous three appearances of the phrase to “faithful to his wife” to be consistent with 1 Timothy 5:9.²⁸ Paul’s concern is a moral issue and the best way

²⁷ See 1 Cor 7:8–9; Rom 7:1–3; 1 Tim 5:14.

²⁸ Thanks to Allen Black for pointing this out to me.

to understand the phrase is that this leader is a husband who is faithful to his present wife.

I want to address one more in the list of qualities that is often debated. That is how a man “manages his whole household well.” The debate revolves around the behavior of his children as well as the number of children. Since this quality parallels Titus 1:6, it is appropriate to bring it into the conversation here. Paul writes Titus saying that the qualified person is someone “whose children are believers, not accused of debauchery and not rebellious.” Remember that Titus is in Crete where the churches were young and coming out of pagan religions. So, these characteristics describe an elder’s children as respectful, submissive, believers, not wild or rebellious. All these terms refer to the *behavior* of children and not their *status*. In the company of these terms the best translation of “believer” (*pistos*) is “faithful” or “trustworthy.” Whether they are baptized believers is not the issue. These children are respectful and, like their father, have a good reputation in the community.

The other issue related to this is the number of children an elder must have. Can a person be an elder with just one child? Some may have a legitimate point when maintaining that a man with two or more children better prepares him to serve the diversity of personalities in a church. I am not convinced having two children makes a significant difference in one’s ability to lead a church. However, we would be naive in believing that raising one child does not present its own unique challenges.

In addition, the word “children” in Scripture sometimes is used to refer to one child. Genesis 21:7 records Sarah giving birth to Isaac saying, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?” In 1 Timothy 5:9–10, the church is admonished to put a widow on its list to support if, among other things, she is “one who has brought up children.” That does not imply if she has only one child she should not be cared for. When someone asks, “Do you have children?” The response can be, “Yes we have one.” The term is inclusive whether it be one or more children.

Even though it is important to work through the issues involved with some of the qualities in the list, it is necessary to keep the bigger picture in perspective. Sometimes when the discussions get too bogged down in debating what some of these qualities mean, the main purpose of the list is overlooked. The primary focus of the list is on the character of the man. Elders are men of

integrity, responsible, loving, self-controlled, hospitable, caring, good listeners, spiritually mature, with a good reputation, and leading strong families.

The foundation upon which an eldership stands is its character and reputation. Still, neither the qualities nor the historical background gives much insight into the function this body is called to fulfill. This is the final element I now wish to address.

The Function of Elders

New Testament Terms for this Leadership Role. One way of understanding the function of elders is to look at the different terms the New Testament uses to describe this leadership role. Generally, the New Testament uses three different terms (which sometimes overlap in meaning) to imply a variety of functions. In some instances, they are referred to as “overseers” or “bishops” (*episkopoi*, Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 3:2; 1 Pet 5:2) which suggests some administrative responsibilities. Leadership means being able to help organize people and resources. The elders do not do all the organizational tasks, but because they are overseers, they have a vested interest in administrative types of activities. Some elders possess this managerial gift. Others have a difficult time fulfilling that function. Still, that does not necessarily disqualify them, because they hold other gifts necessary to fulfill the role of an elder.

Elders are also called “shepherds” (they are urged to “shepherd” the flock—*poimainō*, Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2).²⁹ This, among other things, involves the ability to relate well with others. It calls for someone willing to invest in others’ lives. The shepherd is one whom others feel comfortable being around and coming to with problems. Some elders are better at fulfilling this role than others.

Often this body of leaders is referred to as “elders” (*presbyteroi*, Acts 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Jas 5:14; 1 Pet 5:1). Clearly no single function is assigned to this term. But the word implies a person with age, experience, and wisdom. These are men who can share wise counsel with others. Some elders are better at doing this than others.

²⁹ Cf. *poimēn* in Eph. 4:11 and the implication of *archipoimēn*, referring to Jesus as chief Shepherd, in 1 Pet 5:4.

There are a variety of tasks. However, a congregation should not expect all elders to be equally gifted in every task, just as no one expects all members of a congregation to be equally gifted in every ministry. The eldership is a gifted body just like the church. That's the beauty of a plurality of elders. God desires a multitalented body of elders more than a multitalented elder. For example, someone can be an elder who, for physical reasons or because of age, does not have the energy to make it to all the meetings and be constantly out among the people. His responsibility as an elder may be more narrowly focused. For many years at the church where I served, one elder was quite ill. Yet he spent hours on the phone every week calling members, encouraging, and inquiring about how they were doing. He focused on his gift of shepherding. Individual elders usually excel at specific strengths. Yet when those individual gifts come together, a synergy is created in the eldership. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Whatever functions they carry out, elders are called on to do so without force or compulsion (1 Pet 5:1–5). As Willis discovered among contemporary kin-based leadership, the ability to communicate effectively is an important leadership quality.³⁰ Willis claims that the rhetorical skill of elders in elder-led communities is often seen as most significant for determining their effectiveness as elders.³¹ By implication, this is also an important quality for elders in the Christian church. Again, not every elder equally shares this gift. But as a body they are gifted communicators and persuasive leaders. They do not lead through mandates or by coercion.³² It is this quality that leads to their most

³⁰ Willis, "Obey Your Leaders." Though not explicitly referring to elders, Hebrews 13:17 speaks of the posture leaders take in leading the church. At the end of his exhortation, the writer of Hebrews admonishes his readers, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls and will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you." Willis argues that the word *peithesthe* in verse 17 should be translated "persuade." So rather than the phrase being translated "obey your leaders," he maintains it should be translated, "be persuaded by your leaders." Yet, his translation is easily debated. See BDAG (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich) *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), which translates the word "obey" based on the verb that follows in verse 17, "submit."

³¹ Willis, "Elders in Pre-Exilic Israelite Society," 160, 162.

³² After looking at how the NT uses the Greek word "authority," Jack Lewis concludes, "that though the nouns and verbs for 'authority' are used for God, the devil, Jesus, the earthly rulers, the apostles, an evangelist, and even for ordinary Christians,

fundamental task: the spiritual formation of a body of believers through teaching and the effective communication of God's word. Paul devoted much of his work to fulfilling this mission.

The Spiritual Formation of the Congregation. The NT does not spell out line by line the specific functions of elders. However, because Paul commissioned others to follow up on his work, his role in nurturing congregations serves as an important model for the central task of elders. Timothy and Titus served to continue Paul's work. As James Thompson says, "The role of Paul's co-workers provides an important model for all leaders, indicating that others share in Paul's work by extending the ministry he began. Consequently, the goals of Paul's ministry become the goals of all church leaders."³³

Paul's ministry was about the spiritual formation of a community of believers. Paul introduces the ethical section of Romans by admonishing the Christians to present their bodies (plural) together as a living sacrifice (singular) to God which is their spiritual worship (Rom 12:1–2). Individual Christians come together to form one spiritual body. However, as Thompson observes, because of "self-seeking individuals and diverse interest groups" the challenge was great.³⁴ Thompson argues persuasively that the consistent feature of Paul's letters "entails abandoning self-centeredness and progressing in familial love."³⁵ The test of different social and ethnic groups coming together is "their capacity to exist as family within the community of faith . . . and [Paul] assumes that Christian transformation includes continuing progress in learning to live within the family of faith."³⁶

Paul's goal was the transformation of the corporate community into the image of Christ, so that they may put off the old self of anger and wrath and slander and greed, and clothe themselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forbearance (Col 3:1–15). Paul's task is the task of

they are never once used in connection with the discharge of the function of an elder." See Jack P. Lewis, *Leadership Questions Confronting the Church* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1985), 11.

³³ James Thompson, "Paul, the Elders and Spiritual Formation," in *Good Shepherds*, ed. David Flerer and Charles Siburt (Abilene: Leafwood Press, 2007), 33.

³⁴ Thompson, "Paul, the Elders and Spiritual Formation," 43.

³⁵ James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 153.

³⁶ Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 153.

shepherds. Shepherds are called to participate with God in transforming a community of diverse believers into a spiritually well-dressed congregation.

The Role of Instruction. One of the primary ways elders fulfill their task is through teaching and instruction. Especially in Timothy and Titus, Paul emphasizes the teaching role (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:2). Notice in the list of qualities in Titus how much space is devoted to describing the need for an elder to teach and admonish: “He must have a firm grasp of the word that is trustworthy in accordance with the teaching, so that he may be able both to preach with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it” (1:9). They are to teach “sound doctrine.” This phrase is used only in the Pastorals. It is a medical metaphor meaning “healthy instruction.”

Even though healthy instruction involves refuting false beliefs and myths (Titus 1:10–14), the bulk of Titus is devoted to moral instruction about proper behavior in the Christian community. It is concerned with teaching Christians how to behave with one another (Titus 2:2–10). The instruction involves self-control, delayed gratification, kindness, reverence, love, and respect (Titus 2:10–15). Christians do all of this because of what Christ has done for them. He has suffered and died; he was crucified and raised (Titus 2:10–15). Christians live by a code of conduct that “adorns” the gospel (2:10, NIV [2011]). The healthy instruction of elders and others they call on to assist them results in a spiritually well-dressed faith community.

Different elders are gifted in different ways of instruction, some more toward a formal classroom context, some toward an informal, one-on-one context. But all elders teach by example in the way that they live. Collectively they fulfill this responsibility. They all are students of the word; they know what the Christian life calls for.

Conclusion

The office of elder is not a status position, a role in which one receives recognition and accolades. Rather, it is an unglamorous role of noble service. One may not see much success in this servant role. As God’s servants, elders deal with a lot of failure, with messed up lives, with those whose lives appear lost. They deal with the undesirables, the unlovable, and the difficult people.

The aim of an elder is not to move upward in status but downward in service. Such was the case with Michael Faraday. He was a well-known

chemist and physicist in the nineteenth century, known worldwide. His book *Fundamental Researches in Electricity* is now a classic in science, according to Herbert Pratt.³⁷ Since his death, twenty-three major biographies have been written about his life. He was quite an influential person.

Faraday was also a member of a Church of Christ in London. In 1840 he was appointed an elder in that church. Three years after being appointed, he was dismissed. It seems that he had been chosen by Queen Victoria to have lunch with her at Windsor Palace. In complying with her request, Faraday missed a Sunday worship service. The congregation did not accept his reason for the absence and declared that he was no longer fit to serve as an elder.

Very few churches today would dismiss an elder for one absence from a Sunday service. If they did, most churches would end up leaderless! Yet, what was most impressive about Faraday's dismissal was his subsequent behavior. He continued to worship and work in the church as faithfully as ever, and seventeen years later he was reinstated as an elder. There is no indication that Faraday was striving to regain the office, or that his ego was involved in these years of service. He was not using the church for any sort of self-advancement. He worked and served because of a strong sense of responsibility and commitment. God blesses elders like Faraday because of the integrity of their lives.

Anyone who attempts to serve is destined to incur the disapproval of others in the church. Amid rejection and failure, Faraday continued to serve. Such service often involves inconvenience, suffering, and rejection. Jesus said, "He who is greatest will be servant of the least." It is in the posture of servant and shepherd that the influence of an elder resides.

³⁷ See Herbert T. Pratt, "Brother Faraday," *Restoration Quarterly* 31/4 (1989): 219–29.