

Ethical Concerns of Godly Elders

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Our assignment is a fascinating and needed study. We are to look at the “Ethical Concerns of Godly Elders.” Since the word “ethical” comprehends the idea of a standard for conduct and moral judgments, we are looking at a standard of conduct for elders in the Lord’s Church. This implies the idea of observing how they ought to behave when complying with that standard.

Please understand our assignment is *not* to consider the qualifications of elders. We are to look at *how elders are to conduct themselves* in different areas of their work according to the only standard we have, the Bible. The *kind* of men they are to be can be summarized as men who have the right ambition, the right kind of home, a good disposition, courageous, compassionate, men who are peacemakers and not a trouble makers, men who are spiritually-minded and not materialistic, men who have demonstrated leadership ability, who are men of the “book,” who can work with others, and those who keep themselves informed of brotherhood issues.

ELDERS ARE STEWARDS

Inspiration affirms elders are viewed by God as “stewards.” Paul wrote, “For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre” (Titus 1:7). The definition of the word translated “steward” means:

The manager of a household or of household affairs; esp. a steward, manager, superintendent, (whether free-born, or, as was usually the case, a freed-man or slave) to whom the head of the house or proprietor has intrusted the management of his affairs, the care of receipts and expenditures, and the duty of dealing out the proper portion to every servant and even to the children not yet of age (Thayer 440-441).

Vine (1097) adds “primarily denoted the manager of a household or estate.” This being the case, the “household affairs” here described can refer to nothing less than the care and keeping of the local

congregation which was committed to them as stewards of God's spiritual house when they accepted the responsibility of being elders in the New Testament Church.

The thrust of what is presented in Titus 1:7 is simple: The possessions (the Church) of another (Christ) is given into the hands of elders to look after, to manage, to superintend. This does not suggest that elders are the owners. Quite the contrary, they are entrusted by God with His flock, to see after, to care for, to manage. Therefore, elders have responsibilities and obligations to God as well as to the members of the local congregation of which they are overseers.

Elders Are to Be “Watchers for Souls”

In his speech to the Ephesian elders, Paul said, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). Notice, they are to “take heed” for themselves, for the flock, and “feed” the Church.

The Hebrew writer emphatically states this very thing, that is, elders are *watchers* for souls. He writes, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that *is* unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). According to Thayer (9), the word translated *watch* means “to be sleepless, keep awake, watch...to exercise constant vigilance over something (an image drawn from shepherds).” Vine (1224) says the word “is used metaphorically, to be watchful...The word expresses not mere wakefulness, but the watchfulness of those who are intent upon a thing.”

The thing for which they are to watch is clearly stated. Paul said, “for they watch for your souls” (Hebrews 13:17). They are spiritual shepherds, they are to lead and our responsibility is to follow. They are to watch for dangers which affect the destiny of the souls of those they are to watch after, both in a positive and negative way.

In the area of that which is negative, we include such things as false doctrines and false practices. Notice Paul's words to the elders of Ephesus, “Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears” (Acts 20:31). The word here rendered *watch* is different than the previous one (Hebrews 13:17). It means

1. to watch 2. metaph. give strict attention to, be cautious, active 2a. to take heed lest through remission and indolence some destructive calamity suddenly overtake one...or lest one be led to forsake Christ...or lest one fall into sin...or be corrupted by errors, Acts 20:31 (Thayer 122).

Elders are to *watch* for souls.

God's people have faced dangers in every generation. Since the restoration movement of the late nineteenth and through the twentieth centuries, this great brotherhood has had to face the introduction

of mechanical instruments into worship, the Missionary Society, division over Bible classes, the number of cups used in distributing the fruit of the vine, the support of orphans homes, the “Change Agents,” which is a liberalism that is nothing more nor less than agnosticism. If every congregation had possessed good and Godly elders, the damage would not have been as extreme as it was.

In order for elders to be “watchers for souls,” they must possess a knowledge of the inspired word of God. They must be believers in the verbally inspired word, recognizing it as the only source of authority, intended by God to be understood by men. How can the man who knows very little about the Bible be *watchers* for souls? Can who one has no regard for the Bible as the only source of authority really be trusted to be one who watches for souls?

Elders Are To Lead or “Shepherd”

This fact is seen in Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4:11. He wrote “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers.” Look closely at the word “pastors.” This is truly an interesting word. The original word appears eighteen times in the New Testament and is translated “pastors” only in this passage. In the other seventeen places, it is rendered “shepherd.” Of this word, Thayer (527) says “a herdsman, esp. a shepherd...b. metaph. the presiding officer, manager, director, of any assembly...of the overseers of the Christian assemblies.” Shepherds of the first century were constantly aware of the surrounding circumstance. They made sure the place to which they were leading their flock was safe and secure. They would do everything in their power to remove any dangers that could cause problems to the flock. So should elders today lead the flock entrusted to them in ways sure and safe.

Elders are to “Feed” the Flock

In Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, we read that elders are to “feed” Church, the flock. Interestingly enough, the word translated “feed” in these two passages is the verb form of the noun translated “shepherd” in the previous paragraph. The verb means “To feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep...b. trop. a. to rule, govern: of rulers...of the overseers (pastors) of the church...b. to furnish pasturage or feed; to nourish” (Thayer 527). So, in actuality we can say, “Shepherds are to shepherd the flock,” or to say it in another way, “Elders Are to Feed the Flock.”

That which they are to feed the flock is “sound doctrine.” The concept of “sound doctrine” was very important to the Holy Spirit. Paul said some would not endure “sound doctrine” (2 Timothy 4:3). He also stated things “contrary to sound doctrine” was not according to “glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Timothy 1:10-11). Elders are to hold “fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Titus 1:9). The “sound” doctrine refers to that which is *healthy*. If there is “sound” doctrine, there can also be *unsound* doctrine. The “unsound” doctrine is that which is opposite the healthful teachings of Christ – the truth, the once and for all delivered faith (Jude 3).

Elders have the responsibility to see that only the *truth* is proclaimed from the pulpit and in the classrooms. When error is promulgated they have the obligation to act and act speedily. They must

encourage and admonish, exhort and convince those guilty. When all else fails, their responsibility is to lead the congregation in disciplinary action.

Elders must know what material is being taught in the classrooms, giving their blessing on truth when it is taught and refusing error. Just as they have the right to permit or reject material that is used in the classroom, so they also have the authority to determine which versions of the Bible are used in the classrooms and in the pulpit. Shepherds are to shepherd!

Other Areas of Their Work

There are many other things that we could enlarge upon, but we will just notice some of them in passing. Elders are to support the weak (Acts 20:35). They are to *admonish* (1 Thessalonians 5:12), *rule* (Hebrews 13:17), and be *mouth stoppers* (Titus 1:11). This is truly a task which God would not give to any person. It takes a special person to be an elder. It takes a special person to follow their lead.

It is only when we meditate upon the responsibilities of elders can we really appreciate what they are to do. Truly they have a monumental task and every member should be most appreciative of their work.

Undoubtedly, these are truly ethical concerns godly elders should have. Every man serving in this capacity should look closely at the things here presented and then consider if they are fulfilling their obligations as elders in the New Testament Church.

ELDERS MUST OVERSEE THE WORKS SUPPORTED

When a congregation is involved in support of other works around the world, the elders have “ethical concerns” here also. Sometimes elders are just like too many members: They think by supporting works “in the mission field,” they are relieved of their responsibility at home. Far too often, “mission work” is little more than salve for the conscience.

Elders must know the person they are supporting in the mission field is doctrine of Christ. They should be aware of his personal life as well as his reputation in the community. It is my personal conviction elders should not depend on the “monthly reports” the man sends out, but must know every aspect of the man’s life.

It is not by accident that we sometimes hear of men going into the mission field because they “are tired of fighting the brethren” or of “being under unqualified elders.” Indeed, this should tell us something! The basic thought is, once in “the mission field,” they will not be bothered by elders – they can “do their own thing!”

There are various ways an eldership can fulfill the above suggestions. First, they can “know the man.” If he is no stranger to the elders, if they know him as honest, sincere, dedicated, trustworthy, and of unquestioned character, then it is with confidence they know he is truly active in the Lord’s work.

A second thing is they can go to the place *unannounced*! So often when elders are planning on visiting a man in the field, they will warn him days, weeks, and sometimes months in advance of their arrival. If the man is dishonest, he has all the time he needs to remove or hide the things he is doing or teaching the elders would not approve of if they knew he was guilty of such. It should not be this way, but sometimes it is.

ELDERS MUST OVERSEE THE “FINANCIAL” ASPECTS OF THE CONGREGATION

By the above caption, I am not contending the elders “take over the check book.” What I am saying is, they should “provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17). Whether we like it or not, generally speaking our brethren have more questions and concerns about the *financial aspects* of the local congregation than most all of the other areas combined. They might be concerned about false doctrine and false teachers, they might be concerned about moral issues, but most especially are they concerned about what is done with the monies collected.

Simply by being honest and straightforward in monetary matters, many potential problems can be stopped before they are started. For instance, when an honest and forthright accounting is made of all receipts and expenditures, there will be no legitimate reason for questions about how (for what) the monies is spent.

Paul was aware of this very principle. Concerning the contributions the churches of Macedonia and Achaia had made for the relief of the poor saints in Judea, Paul wrote,

And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind: Avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us: Providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. And we have sent with them our brother, whom we have oftentimes proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, upon the great confidence which I have in you” (2 Corinthians 8:19-22).

Here, Paul has reference to the transportation and delivery of these funds in such a way there could be no criticism whatsoever that something dishonest or unchristian like was being done for personal benefit. Notice, this apostle said “no blame...Providing for honest things...in the sight of men” (verses 20-21). Certainly Paul saw this as an “ethical concern” which needed attention. Should elders do any less? Indeed not!

The monies collected do not belong to the elders – it is not theirs! Nonetheless, they have a responsibility, as God’s stewards, to see that monetary matters are conducted in such a way that would honor the name of Christ. There must be sure the monies collected are accounted for in a way no criticism can be offered.

Likewise, they have the responsibility to see the money is used for things scriptural in nature. This would be included in the previously mentioned sections. No support, financial or otherwise, should ever be given to false doctrine or those who advocate it.

Ethical concerns of godly elders looks closely at their conduct, as elders, according to the commands and principles revealed in God's inspired word. We pray that all elders are deeply concerned with these "ethical concerns."

Works Cited

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