

WHAT ELDERS MUST DO

1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-10

If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. (NIV)

If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. (NKJV)

If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. (NASU)

The eldership is not a state of mere **being**, but more so one of **doing**. It is more than a position with a desk and a nameplate. It is a job that entails a lot of work. The work is more than administrative pencil-pushing, too. It demands involvement in the lives of people. To emphasize and illustrate that truth Lynn Anderson wrote a book entitled, "They Smell Like Sheep."

The work of elder corresponds to the various descriptive designations for these leading men. Pastor, presbyter, shepherd, overseer, elder and bishop all say something about the work to be done.

W-O-R-K

John Caldwell, preacher at the Kingsway Christian Church in (Avon, IN) suburban Indianapolis, says their elders are required to put in 20 hours for the church every week. This is above the time they are there for the weekly gatherings of the congregation and includes such things as visitation in the homes and hospitals and personal evangelism. What is the work of an elder?

Shepherd –

Peter instructs elders to

shepherd [tend, feed] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:2-3 NAS

Shepherding or tending the flock involves many specific tasks. A catchy outline that breaks it down is "guide, guard, lead, feed." J. W. McGarvey, preeminent Bible scholar of the nineteenth century, outlined the role of shepherd this way: "The Jewish shepherd was at once the ruler, the guide, the protector, and the companion of his flock." Each of these is distinct, but all of them overlap. As McGarvey points out, the shepherd is all of these things all at the same time.

Sheep need to be guided and guarded. They are noted for straying. In fact, keeping sheep from straying is a big aspect of shepherding. Jesus told about the shepherd who, upon discovering one sheep was missing, diligently searched for it until he found it.

Seth Wilson, long-time dean at Ozark Christian College, laments a recognized weakness among our congregations. It is what I will call the infant mortality rate. Wilson writes,

"As poor and ineffective as our evangelism is, still the majority of those whom we bring in through the baptistery are lost in apostasy before they depart from this life. Now, that is true, but it is not right. Brethren, we need to be concerned."

F.W. Strong used to say, "No use pulling a drowning child out of the stream to leave him on the bank to starve to death." We are sometimes more interested in bringing people to the point of confession of faith and baptism, than we are in the matter of building them up in the life of faith. And that is primarily the work of the elders. -- Seth Wilson

The blame for the infant mortality rate in the church cannot be laid at the feet of the elders alone. We all bear responsibility, for elders are usually not only the most capable men, but also among the busiest men. The maxim is true that if you want something done you should recruit a busy person. But it is neither fair nor reasonable to expect elders who are already busy with their family and business to shepherd a flock that is scattered geographically when we do nothing to relieve them from the necessity for everyday work. I'm talking about paying our elders. Paul, writing to Timothy (1 Tim. 5:17, 18), says elders who give their time to teaching and shepherding the congregation should be paid.

Not only are sheep noted for straying, but also for their vulnerability. They need to be guarded and protected. Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders is recorded at Acts 20:28-31.

"Be on guard (*Keep watch*) for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert (*be on your guard!*) NASU

Seth Wilson says one of the hard jobs of an elder is to "unwool the wolves." It certainly requires the vigilance listed among the qualifications in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. But this is done not only through *protection*, but also by *direction* – guiding and leading the sheep in paths and places where they will not encounter danger.

Shepherd not as a *boss watching over* one's shoulder but as a *brother watching out for* one's security. Not *lording* (1 Pet. 5:3) but *leading*.

The shepherd in Ps. 23 led the sheep to water. He didn't drive them. Shepherds did this by calling the sheep by name (Jn. 10:3). He pastured the flock, leading them to grass, protecting them, and kept them from straying.

Feeding the sheep relates to the qualification that an elder must be able to teach. John 21:15 ff records Jesus' instruction to Peter to "feed my sheep / lambs."

Teach –

Demands that he be knowledgeable of the Word of God. And not that he merely possesses this knowledge, but that he is able and willing to *dispense* it in an effective and persuasive manner. Titus 1:9 says he must

"hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (NIV)

The ability to teach is not inherent in every man. But it is a skill all elders must acquire and develop. Whether in a classroom or a living room, the elder is a man who is able to systematically and intelligently set forth the gospel message, reasoning with people concerning their soul's need for the Lord and His salvation. He is well-versed in the Scriptures to an extent that he can respond to doctrinal questions and life situations (comforting the grieving, directing the wandering, lifting the fallen, correcting those sinning, etc.).

His knowledge must also be such that he is able to *refute* and *rebuke* false teachers and correct false doctrine (Titus 1:9). His task is also to exhort the believers, who, although they have been taught the truth, are being influenced by the false teachers. The picture in verse

11 is both of a bridle and a muzzle. The elder must be, as it were, the church cowboy, having the ability not only to detect false teaching, but also to effectively rein it in and muzzle it. "Whoa there, Nellie!"

This is accomplished, not only by *propagating sound* doctrine, but also by *preventing false* doctrine. Not only are the elders to *actively* teach truth, but also to *ardently* deny false teachers access by means of the public assembly. The elders must not allow false teachers any opportunity to address the assemblies of the church.

R. W. Grimsley, an elder in the church of Christ for over fifty years, writes, "Some, in trying to make up for this deficiency in the eldership, (apt to teach) try to have at least one man who can teach, and others who can look after other matters. But we may as well try to eliminate any of the other qualities in an elder as that of teaching. If not, why not? The Bible says a man 'must be apt to teach.' It also says he 'must be the husband of one wife.' According to such reasoning, if one of the elders had one wife, it would not matter how many the others had. Such an idea is ridiculous, of course."