

Feeding and Leading God's Flock

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The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor,
especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.
1 Timothy 5:17

Although it has been overused, there is some truth to the adage, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” The New Testament is clear that one mark of a healthy congregation is godly leadership. The Apostle Paul’s church planting strategy included seeing that godly and gifted men were in place to provide spiritual leadership and biblical teaching for the new churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; cf. 1 Ths 5:12). When Paul writes to Timothy about “how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God,” high on his list of concerns are the qualifications and function of pastors. The church is healthiest when its spiritual leaders function as God commands.

The godly Puritan pastor Richard Baxter also saw the connection between the proper function of godly leaders and the health of the church: “If God would but reform the ministry and set them on their duties zealously and faithfully, the people would certainly be reformed. All churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall (not in riches or worldly grandeur) but in knowledge, zeal, and ability for their work.” Baxter reflects biblical wisdom—godly and gifted shepherds are needed to guide God’s flock into spiritually green pastures and to guard them from spiritual harm (cf. Acts 20:28-32).

Yet, we live in a day where the idea of spiritual leadership in the local church has shifted from its biblical moorings. Both the church and pastoral ministry have felt the eroding influence of secularization. I share John Armstrong’s concern:

The way evangelical ministers presently deal with scriptural authority leaves them in a profoundly vulnerable position. While affirming the Bible’s authority, large numbers of pastors now see it ever so lightly (inconsequentially) in preaching popular sermons aimed at restoring the emotional and spiritual health of their flocks. They counsel with profound dependence upon the newest fads and popular psychological books while they lead with the sharpest managerial techniques of the most successful corporations of our age.¹

Here’s the sinister nature of secularization in the church—pastors still to do what God says to do (feed and lead), but they do it according to secular rather than biblical principles, and they use secular rather than scriptural methods. Complicating the problem, our American preoccupation with visible and immediate success blinds us to the fact that the church might be “succeeding” by secular standards, but failing by biblical ones. The church is larger, but is it healthier? Pastors are popular, but are they faithful?

¹ “*Semper Reformanda*” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), p. 25.

One step toward reclaiming the pastorate from this secular stranglehold is to renew our commitment to the principles taught in 1 Timothy 5:17-18, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages.’” Paul’s concern for the health of the church leads him to urge Timothy to see that faithful pastors receive appropriate honor for their ministries.

God’s plan for the church calls for godly men to direct its affairs, “let the elders who rule well.” The biblical term *elder* is synonymous with *overseer* and *pastor* (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Titus 1:5, 7). All three are used to describe those men who serve as spiritual leaders for the local assembly of believers. All elders are overseers and pastors, and all pastors are elders and overseers. We know that these are men because of what Paul says earlier in this letter about their responsibility to manage their own homes (1 Tim 3:4-5), and because Paul also restricted women from exercising authority over men in the church (1 Tim 2:11-12). The word translated *rule* “is used here of one who has been placed before, or at the head of the church, and who has responsibility in that position both to ‘rule, lead, or direct’ and to ‘be concerned for and care for’ the church.”²

Elders who excel in their duties are worthy of double honor, “elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor.” The idea of *well* is that their service meets “high standards of excellence or expectation.”³ It would be incorrect to view this as comparing one elder against another since that is not the point of the text. The sole issue is whether an elder excels in his God-given responsibilities, not that he exceeds the performance of others. The spirit of competition which marks our culture is contrary to biblical teaching on the nature of ministry (cf. 1 Cor 3:4-9). Comparisons like this are arrogant and foolish (2 Cor 10:12; cf. Matt 20:25-28).

There is some debate about what *double honor* means. Verse 18 is clear that financial remuneration is involved, and it supports this from both the Old and New Testaments. The instruction about not muzzling the oxen is a quotation of Deuteronomy 25:4, which Paul also quotes for the same reason in 1 Corinthians 9:9. Paul also quotes the Lord’s teaching, which is recorded in Luke 10:7, about the laborer being worthy of his wages. Clearly, the honor that Paul refers to in v. 17 includes a financial dimension, but how should we understand the word *double* as used here? Some suggest that it means double pay, but it is probably best to see it as tying together the ideas of respect and compensation. Elders that rule well are to be both honored and cared for financially.

The priority for elders is their ministry of God’s Word, “especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” This portion of the text has been a point of debate among the various views regarding church polity. Some view it as the basis for two classes of elders, ruling and teaching,⁴ but this reads into the text an idea which is not there. Instead of naming a second group of elders, it is further specifying which elders are worthy of double honor. Since all elders must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2) and

² George W. Knight III, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 232.

³ BDAG, p. 505.

⁴ E.g., Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, rev. ed. (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 1995), pp. 207-210.

“able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9), it is not likely that Paul is splitting the tasks here.

The key is to recognize what Paul is commending—ruling *well* and working *hard* at preaching and teaching. In other words, he isn't setting up a two-fold office; he is detailing the characteristics in elders that are to be honored. Among all elders, those that rule well are to receive double honor, and this applies especially to those who work hard at preaching and teaching. By stating it this way, Paul actually elevates the task of preaching and teaching to the place of prominence among the elders' responsibilities. This is consistent with Paul's other admonitions about preaching and teaching (cf. 1 Timothy 4:6, 16; 2 Timothy 2:15; 4:2; Titus 1:9; 2:15).

The church in the United States is facing enormous challenges within and without. We are faced with an important choice. Will we stick with God's plan for the church and its leadership, or will we adapt the church and its leadership to the culture? Gauging by the popularity of church growth strategies and marketing plans for churches, the sad answer seems to be that the American church is becoming secularized. Too often, the pastors that are applauded in our day are religious entrepreneurs and pop psychologists. Success is being defined by the marketplace rather than by the Master. God's call for pastors is to lead and feed His flock, not build a business!