

Apostolic Advice For Elders

Ladies and gentlemen, two of the more well-known verses of Scripture in the sacred text of God's Word are those of *II Timothy 3:16-17*. We hear them quoted often in preachers' messages. *"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."* The Scriptures have been revealed by God for the benefit of *"the man of God."* They are written so that men and women will be *"complete"* or *"mature,"* spiritually *"equipped for every good work."*

This is the purpose for God having revealed His Word to every Christian. Every Christian must know the Word if he is to be *"equipped"* to live the Christian life. To help the Christian be *"equipped,"* by God's grace Christ gave four *"gifts"* to the church. They are listed in *Ephesians 4*. Two of them were temporary *"gifts"* used to lay the foundation of the church: *"apostles"* and *"prophets."* Though there are men other than the original, hand-picked, twelve *"Apostles"* who were called an *"apostle"* in God's Word, the *"apostles"* of *Ephesians 4* refers to the twelve who were sent out *"into all the world to preach the gospel to every creature."*¹ The *"prophets"* of *Ephesians 4* were not the prophets of the Old Testament such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel; the *Ephesians 4 "prophets"* were New Testament *"prophets"* like *Agabus* in *Acts 11* and *Acts 19*. The church of Christ in Antioch of Syria had *"prophets"* like these in her membership. The *"gifts"* of the *"apostles"* and *"prophets"* were gone after the first century, never to return again to the church.

There were two other *"gifts"* that Christ gave to the church. Unlike the *"gifts"* of *"apostles"* and *"prophets"* that were temporary, these two *"gifts"* are permanent. They will be in the church until Jesus returns. They are the *"gifts"* of *"evangelists"* and *"pastor-teachers."*

There was a time when the New Testament church that Jesus built knew that the evangelist is the man who preaches the Word in the local assembly of God's saints and who ordains elders and sets the local church in order. This was when the church called Bible things by Bible names. In many places that man is no longer called the *"evangelist"*; now he is called the *"pastor,"* a designation for him that has no Biblical authority. The church now seems to prefer calling Bible things by denominational names. It is just one more sign that the church that Jesus built has decided to depart further and further away from Christ's design and pattern for the church; the church built by Christ and established by His Apostles needs to be restored.

¹ *Mark 16:15*

The second permanent gift Christ *"gave"* to the church is the gift of *"pastor-teachers."* *"Pastor-teachers"* are the elders, the shepherds, the overseers, the bishops. All of these words refer to the same person in the church. Although many of these men have surrendered their pastoral duties to the man who has taken for himself their function title, the *"pastor-teachers"* are still responsible for the pastoral duties whether they want them or not. No man or group of men have any authority to change the scheme of church government that Christ gave to the church. The matter of church government has been turned on its head for so long that most people sitting in the pews aren't even aware of how far the church has apostatized in this area. For those who have not departed from the old, sacred paths of God's eternal Word and for those elders who still have an ear to hear what the Spirit says, we take a brief glimpse at the advice two Apostles gave to the elders, the *"pastor-teachers."* We note first . . .

The Advice Of The Apostle Paul

Part of his advice is found in the *twentieth chapter* of *Acts* where Paul was on his return voyage to the church in Jerusalem after having completed his third missionary journey. On his way home, stopping off at the seaport of Miletus, he called for the elders of the church of Christ in Ephesus just a few miles north to come and meet with him. Before he departed from them he spoke to them eighteen verses as far as what we have written. This is the only recorded message of Paul that we have in which he spoke to Christians. It is not insignificant that it was a message to the elders.

In *Hebrews 13:17* it is written to Christians that they are to *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account."* To whomever the "rulers" this verse is referring, it surely must include at least the elders. In view of the responsibilities the shepherds have for those in their flock, it is not surprising that Paul gave the advice to the Ephesian elders that he did. Here was his advice in *verses 28 - 31*.

"²⁸Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. ²⁹For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears."

The first thing this Apostle advised the elders was that they needed to *"take heed to [themselves]."* The elders cannot take care of the sheep if they don't take care of themselves. One of the qualifications that *must* be met to be an elder is he *"must"* be *"able to teach"* the Word of God. You cannot teach something that you do not know and you cannot know what you do not read or study on a regular basis. Elders are to be men of the Word who know the Word. It is not possible for a shepherd to keep the sheep doctrinally safe if the shepherd does not know the doctrine of the Word. If I were an

elder I would want to be more familiar with the Word of God than any of my sheep. I would want to have a large library of resource materials that I could study so that I would be able to answer the questions of my sheep. I would want to teach the Word and occasionally even preach the Word to my sheep. If I were an elder who was going to answer to God, and they will, - to give an account to God for the sheep under my oversight - I would not want to stand before God and give an account for any of my sheep who I made no effort to keep doctrinally in line. Paul said "*take heed to* [yourselves]."

Then he said, "*take heed...to all the flock.*" The eldership needs to know where his sheep are and keep an eye out for one who might start straying from the flock. That is a difficult thing to do when the elder does not meet with his sheep when the sheep meet. It is not possible for a shepherd to know when a sheep is absent from the assembly if he is absent from the assembly. It is not possible for a shepherd to know that a sheep is straying doctrinally when the shepherd is not in the classroom when a sheep says something off the wall and it is evident that he is out to lunch beginning to believe false doctrines that are popular in denominationalism.

The third thing Paul advised the elders to do was to "*shepherd the church of God.*" They were to "*shepherd*" the sheep of "*the church.*" It is not the man behind the pulpit, not the deacons, not the teachers, and not the wives of any of these men who have this responsibility. It is difficult to shepherd some sheep. Some of them have a wayward spirit; they like to wander "*to and fro and [be] carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...*"² Like it or not, the shepherds have been called to shepherd all of the sheep.

Paul also said that the shepherds were to shepherd each other. There was the danger, and Paul said it would happen just as sure as God made green apples, that within their own circle of elders one or more of them would try to elevate himself over the other elders "*to draw away* [some of the sheep] *after themselves.*" No one is perfect and that includes the elders. There is always the possibility that one of the elders will get full of himself and think the church is all about him. In many congregations there creeps in a spiritual creep like Diotrephes in *III John*. He loved "*to have the pre-eminence.*" He evidently had it because John says he was able to put "*out of the church*" whoever threatened his position. Paul told the Ephesian elders to watch out that no Diotrephes arose from within their group.

Next, we note . . .

² *Ephesians 4:14*
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The Advice Of Apostle Peter

It is found in *1 Peter 5:1 - 3*.

*"¹The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:
² Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³ nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock."*

It is not surprising that Peter gave the same advice as Paul. They were both inspired Apostles of Christ; one was not inspired to say something contradictory to the other as is the common practice among those who profess to be "pastors" in today's world of religion. Today, men who claim to be God's spokesmen do not hesitate to preach and teach conflicting doctrines from behind the sacred desk where the Word of God is proclaimed. One man says faith alone will save a person; another man says faith coupled with repentance will save a person. Neither one is right. The Bible says faith, repentance and baptism into Christ is what saves a person. Not until men who claim to be of God get back to the Bible will there ever be any unity among those who say they are disciples of Christ.

Peter was in a good position to give advice to elders about the eldership. Not only was he an inspired Apostle of Christ; he was an "elder" himself. If there were ever anyone who could give sound advice to elders that needed to be heeded, it was Peter. His first tidbit of advice to elders was they were to "*shepherd the flock of God which is among you.*" They were not to "*shepherd [a] flock [or multiple flocks] of God which*" were in other places; they were to "*shepherd the flock*" which was "among [them]." There are those religious bodies who believe certain men in their denomination have authority to "*shepherd*" multiple flocks "*of God*" in several places. They are denominational "bishops," with some having the even more lofty title of "archbishop," positions that were unknown in the days of the Apostles. "*Bishop*" is a good word when it refers to an "*elder*" overseeing the "*flock of God*" that is "*among*" him, but no "*shepherd*" has any Biblical authority for going outside his own "*flock*" to "bishop" flocks that are under the oversight of those "flocks" own bishops. An "*elder*" has his hands full shepherding his own "*flock.*"

Peter advised the elders to serve. The job of a shepherd is to serve as an "overseer." He serves both Christ Who is the "*Chief Shepherd*" and the sheep of his own "*flock.*" The "*Chief Shepherd*" said in *Matthew 20:38* that he came "*not...to be served, but to serve...*" The under- "shepherds" have no better example to follow than the "*Chief Shepherd.*" The "*Chief Shepherd*" said in *John 10:11* that He came to give His life for the "*sheep.*" "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.*" Jesus called those who did "*not care about the sheep*" hirelings. They are men who when

they see *"the wolf coming...[leave] the sheep and [flee]."* There is no room in the church that Jesus built for doctrinal cowards.

And then Peter advised the shepherds in *1 Peter 5* that they were to serve *"not by compulsion but willingly."* One of the qualifications for an elder in *1 Timothy 3* is that he is to *"desire"* the ministry of a shepherd. Elders are not men who must be brought to the eldership kicking, shouting, and screaming. They are not to be elders just so there is a plurality of elders in the local congregation. It would be better that some congregations be without any elders until there is a qualified plurality. They are elders because they *"desire"* to be an elder. Men who are talked into being an elder are not qualified.

Peter also advised the elders that they are to serve *"not for dishonest gain but eagerly."* Serving for *"dishonest gain"* is not only being an elder for some money that might be derived from occupying that position in the church; it can be for the purpose of gaining prestige inside or outside of the congregation. As far as some men are concerned being an elder looks good on a resume and it will look good in their obituary. The only Scriptural reason for serving as an elder is because a man *"desires"* to serve in that function because of his love for the *"Chief Shepherd"* and because of his love for the sheep that the *"Chief shepherd"* came to save. It does not take long for a man to reveal his motives for being an elder. If he truly loves the *"sheep"* and desires to glorify the Lord by helping a local congregation to be what she has been called to be through the Word he will not have to parade himself and remind the *"sheep"* that he is an elder; the *"sheep"* will know it by the way the man serves the flock.

Peter advised his fellow-elders not to be *"lords over those entrusted to [them]."* Elders are not local *"lords"* of the *"flock."* There is only one Lord and He is the *"Chief Shepherd."* There is not an elder, including the Apostle Peter, who ever died on the cross for the soul of one *"sheep."* An elder so loves his *"sheep"* that he cares for and nurtures each of his *"sheep."* Among the qualifications of elders is he is to be *"sober-minded, of good behavior, not violent...but gentle, not quarrelsome."* We have seen all too often elders who can spew forth orders to the *"flock"* as if they are a five-star general. They have their own "general chairs" on either side of the Lord's Supper Table. Peter said elders are not to be *"lords."*

1 Peter 5:3 has negative and positive job descriptions of the elders. We have seen some of the negative and now we note a positive. The positive job description of the elders in *1 Peter 5:3* is they are to be *"examples to the flock."* They are to show the *"flock"* what it means to be faithful to Christ - faithful in their attendance, faithful in their Bible study, faithful in their giving and their praying and their serving others. Timothy was an evangelist and Paul wrote to him in *1 Timothy 4:12*, *"...be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity."* If the evangelist is to be this, why not the elders? Show me an elder who is not faithful and I will show you a congregation that will not be faithful.

The church that Jesus built has a great need for Biblically-sound, qualified elders. The church has backslidden because of bad leadership. Evangelists have ceased to preach the *"whole counsel of God"*³ and elders have ceased to do the work they have been called to do: to *"shepherd the flock of God."* This is nothing new. It was so in the days of Jesus. It is written in *Matthew 9:35-36* that *"...Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd."*

Israel had long suffered because of bad shepherds. As far back as *Ezekiel 34* shepherds of God's people failed to shepherd. The LORD told Ezekiel to *"prophesy against the shepherds of Israel...and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: 'Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.'"*⁴

If I were an elder I would want to give heed to the Apostolic advice delivered to me through the pens of Apostles Paul and Peter.

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Acts 2:36 "Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, Whom you crucified both Lord and Christ."

Acts 2:37 "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'"

Acts 2:38 "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'"

³ *Acts 20:27*

⁴ *verses 2 - 6*