

DUTIES OF ELDERS

BY B. G. ECHOLS

In times of trial, as was true when Peter wrote, every Christian needs to be in his proper place. This especially involves the leaders. At the same time, leaders must be respected and followed. *The elders therefore among you I exhort* (1 Pet. 5:1a). Much rests on the shoulders of these godly men who are to lead, feed, and guard the flock while assisting them in preparing for the trials of their faith. "Therefore" connects Peter's exhortations to what he has said earlier about persecution. When the church is under stress it is vital that the spiritual overseers maintain their activity and perform their duties. The faithfulness of the flock often depends upon its leadership. The care, or lack of it, by the elders could make the difference in the faithfulness of the saints. It takes leadership that is both competent and faithful. Delinquency at the top results in weakness down to the bottom. Pastoral care must always be of the highest quality. The term "exhort" is one of persuasion.

Peter uses three considerations as his basis for exhortation. *Who am a fellow-elder*" (5:1b). Peter does not put himself above them. He puts nothing on them that he was not ready to perform. *And a witness of the sufferings of Christ* (5:1c). Not only had he seen, but he bears witness or testifies to what he saw (Acts 1:8, 22). This was an apostle's duty. The sufferings of Christ play a significant part in Peter's thinking (1:11; 4:13). Suffering is part of Christ's way. If so for Him, it must be for us. *Who am also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed* (5:1d). This should encourage the elders in their suffering to be faithful and endure. Suffering and glory are themes bound together often by the apostle (1:11; 3:18, 22; 4:13). We all cannot be witnesses of Christ's suffering, but we all can be partakers of the glory. Christians now share in the glory of Christ, but we look forward to a more complete revelation of that glory when Christ comes back.

Tend the flock of God which is among you (5:2a). It is not the elders' flock. They are only caretakers for God. They must give an account to Him. The

flock of God is the church (Acts 20:17). There is one flock, but many elders. "Tend" means to act as a shepherd who leads, feeds, and protects. Since the flock belongs to God, the elders must treat the flock as they would Christ. To abuse the church is to abuse Christ (Acts 9:4). This impresses upon us the great need for the flock to be taught and to be together under local leadership. If brethren would draw their concept of the eldership from this picture of a shepherd rather than from a board of directors of some modern corporation, there would be fewer problems over the work of elders.

"Which is among you" limits the sphere of the elders' responsibilities to the church they serve. Their responsibility and authority does not go beyond that point. This is one evidence of the autonomy of the local churches. Each church is a separate entity governing itself according to divine instruction without acknowledging any authority of sister churches over it. *Exercising the oversight* (5:2b) means to act as a bishop (Acts 20:28). At all times much depends on the prudence and fidelity of the elders, but this is especially true in times of trial and persecution. There are three negatives to their oversight brought out in the words that follow: not by constraint, not for filthy lucre, and not as lords. God does not leave elders without guidance on how to do their work. Thus there are some positives: willingly, according to the will of God, of a ready mind, and making themselves ensamples.

They must be volunteers, and not men pressed into service by the brethren. Elders are to be examples to the flock. The flock should see in their leaders examples of willing, joyful service. The flock can help the elders by sharing with them their problems so the elders will know. The flock can also help by following the elders and by praying for them. The elders have no authority over the flock beyond that which God gives them. Thus they cannot legislate or make any laws. Certainly they cannot rightly lead the church into things that displeases God, and expect the church to follow. *Lucre is not filthy in*

CHURCH OF CHRIST

412 East King Street Shippensburg, PA 17257

itself, but becomes such when it is the sole or major determining factor in life. Elders cannot be motivated by salary although it is scriptural to support elders. They must not see in the church an opportunity for material gain (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). There are other forms of personal gain that might motivate one to seek to be an elder which are also evil: to desire to have more say so, or to gain presumed prestige and recognition for pride's sake.

They must be eager for their task of shepherding. All workers for God need to do their work with excitement and enthusiasm, giving it everything they have to the glory of God. The sheep must not be driven, but guided by example. Elders do not have authority as kings or rulers (Lk. 22:25, 26). They are not to be domineering or self-assertive in temper. Warning against such a disposition recurs in the Lord's teaching which shows that such can well be a threat and danger (3 John 9). Jesus practiced a "servant style" leadership and it is that style He wants elders to use. An effective shepherd gives his life for the sheep. Following the teaching of this verse would completely destroy the whole clergy system of Catholicism and Protestantism. It will likewise prevent the rise of such in the church.

Elders must live exemplary lives. Even in the days of the apostles, greed, cowardice, and self-assertion were present. Elders are to be models for Christians. They are to be perfect and illustrate what it means to take up the cross daily by denying themselves to follow Jesus. In humility and heavenly-mindedness, they are to mould their own lives into the form they want the flock to assume. *And when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away* (5:4). Christ as Shepherd is not a new idea (2:25). If we think of elders as shepherds, Christ must be chief for He is higher than they. Christ will return to reward those who are faithful to Him. The crown is glory that does not fade; thus it must be eternal (1:4). Faithful elders will receive a reward when the Lord returns. God does not forget what His servants do and their faithfulness to their responsibilities. This promise is a great encouragement to the elders, especially when things seem to be difficult.



Moments of Meditation...

... A good many years ago a preacher went into a town where there was not a New Testament church. He preached in a house of worship and then in the market place of the city. Soon the men of the city heard of him and invited him to address them. They thought if his religious claims seemed meritorious to them they would hear something new and learn what these things mean. But, to their dismay and confusion, he preached that they were all wrong and that he was right; that their worship was not acceptable to the God of heaven. He preached that they should believe what he believed about God. He preached that the church to which he belonged was the only true church of the living God. Such a preacher! Don't you know he hurt their feelings? Evidently they were sincere. Surely he could have made them a nice talk and got away without causing discord. What a narrow minded preacher! Who was he anyway? His name was Paul, and he preached this sermon at Athens. It did cause some stir. It did not please those religious leaders and philosophers at all. They mockingly interrupted his sermon before he was through. But his sermon pleased God! Read it again in the 17th Chapter of Acts.

— Adapted.

... If ever man has bought one of Satan's insidious lies, it surely is that "one sin just doesn't matter." There are, obviously, many problems with that bit of reasoning. For example, it assumes that the law is waved if only violated once. And beyond that, the simple fact is, we seldom violate the law "just once."

Let me tell you what one sin can do. It can ruin your reputation destroy a family Consume you with guilt Take a life Cost you the respect of your brethren Separate you from God.

But let me also tell you that one sin does not have to be fatal. You can repent and be forgiven. You can learn not to listen to Satan's lies.

— Don Truex