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Tower of Strength

**“The name of the Lord is a strong tower
The righteous runs into it and is safe.”**

—Proverbs 18:10

Appreciate Our Elders

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13,

We request of you brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

Let us once again remember how blessed we are to be led by three qualified and conscientious elders!

Who Have Charge Over You in the Lord

Although Paul never uses the word “elder” or “overseer” here, I think it’s pretty clear whom he’s talking about. Elders are the ones Christ has appointed to “have charge over” the members of His church. Peter says, in 1 Peter 5:1–3,

I exhort the elders among you ... shepherd 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.

Peter imagines the church as a flock of sheep, God as the owner of the flock, and the overseers as God's shepherds. The Bible does not depict elders as managers over a business, or directors over a program, or veterinarians who remain in their office and only come to check on the sheep when there is a problem; but rather as shepherds living "among" a flock, guiding, feeding, and protecting. An elder is a people person!

It is a great responsibility that the elders have taken upon themselves willingly, as well as fearfully and prayerfully. They realize that at the last day they shall be judged not only on how they lived their own lives, but also on the extra burden of how faithfully they managed God's sheep. Hebrews 13:17 says,

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

Now, when God tells one to lead, He tells another to submit. When the elders make decisions regarding the whole church, it is our duty to follow. Of course, we should communicate our own ideas (and if we believe the elders are leading us into sin, we must speak up, see 1 Tim. 5:19–21). But we recognize their God-given role to lead.

If the elders decide, for example, that more money shall be spent to support the work in Nicaragua, we should happily contribute. If they decide that the church will host an evangelistic meeting, we should pass out our share of flyers. If they fire the preacher, we should trust they've made that decision for the best of the congregation, and not pout or allow that preacher to split the church. If they pull one of us aside and tell us we should be careful about our bad language or immodest clothing, we should not be offended. If we are having personal spiritual problems, or marriage problems, or financial problems, we should look to them as an excellent source of pastoral care. And so on.

They hold a sacred trust. They know that God will punish shepherds who abuse the flock (Ezekiel 34:1–10). We trust that the elders themselves submit to the word and authority of Christ, and, from a perspective of experience and wisdom, guide us by example along the

same paths. They are not invading our lives in some creepy, cultish way, telling us what cars we're allowed to drive, what foods we're allowed to buy, what hours to say our prayers (that's why Paul limits their charge to things "in the Lord"). They keep watch over our souls. This is a massive and lonely burden, and we should be thankful.

Who Diligently Labor Among You

Our elders work hard. They rely on the deacons to take care of the mundane work, while they busily shepherd. They leave work when they are called upon to counsel someone in a difficult spiritual situation. They return phone calls. They visit the sick in the hospital and consider requests for assistance (James 5:14–15). They sacrifice family time to stay at the building long after everyone else has gone home to have regular meetings to discuss the work of the church, and to shepherd struggling sheep. They keep their fingers on the heartbeat of the church.

Who Give You Instruction

Their Bible-knowledge and ability to teach are part of their qualification for the role (1 Tim. 3:2). Paul says in Titus 1 that an elder must be a man who is "holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict."

Just because you rarely see the elders present a sermon from the pulpit does not mean they are inactive in teaching. They are guiding the preacher in the selection of his topics. They are teaching the Bible Lab in the back classroom. They teach on a one-on-one basis. In class and in worship, their ears are tuned to what is said, to be sure it is faithful and accurate (Acts 20:28–31). If I start preaching error, I am confident I will be confronted and rebuked.

Actually, the word Paul uses here is *noutheteo* (same as the word "admonish" in v. 14) which Vine's says has a sterner connotation than just "teaching." Instead, it refers to "the things that are wrong and call for a warning ... [it is] warning based on instruction." It's no easy task to confront wrong in another person, and our elders should be appreciated for their bravery and diligence.

Appreciate Them, Esteem Them Highly

This appreciation does not rise to the level of honor, or titles, or pride. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 23:10–11, “do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant.” Our three elders are mindful of this, and do not crave thanks or attention.

So how do we appreciate them? We thank them personally from time to time. We mention them in our prayers, both public and private. We cooperate with their efforts to lead. We submit. We give financially so money is available in the treasury to do the things that need to be done. We volunteer. We protect them from spending their time on mundane things like cleaning the building, mowing the lawn, and taking meals to shut-ins (which would be “not desirable” for the health of the congregation, Acts 6:1–6), so that they can devote themselves to the work that only they are called to do. We understand the burden they carry and do not grumble or gossip when they make a decision that we don’t like or doesn’t turn out for the best. We communicate with them early when we are having personal problems, so they can help us before it becomes a three-alarm blaze.

The word Paul uses is *hyperekperissou*, a normal root for “esteem” doubly-intensified by the addition of two prefixes, *ek-* and *hyper-*. This means we don’t just esteem them, but esteem them highly. Not just highly, but very highly! Obviously, we hold them in the utmost regard.

It seems that not many churches these days have an eldership, and those that do have one that functions only as a review board, and only when the elders manage to find some spare time from secular activities. Let’s thank God and thank our three elders for taking the role of pastor seriously. Our elders “rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17) and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

—*John Guzzetta*

Quote of the Week:

“A leader has two important characteristics. First, he knows where he is going. Second, he is able to persuade other people to go with him.”

—*author unknown*