

# First Among Equals

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*Detailed Outline*

*Part 1 of 4*

## Introduction

*“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” (1 Tim. 5:17–18 ESV)*

We are going to look at one of the most important passages of Scripture on defining biblical eldership. 1 Timothy 5:17–18 doesn’t fit with the mental concept most people have of elders. When you talk about elders laboring in preaching or teaching, or leading well, they are confused. This is because most people think of elders as temporary board members who make financial decisions or church decisions, but they don’t shepherd people. Biblical eldership is shepherding eldership.

## I. The Church’s Duty to Honor its Elders: 1 Timothy 5:17–18

In verses 17 and 18, Paul instructs the congregation to care for the welfare of elders who rule well, particularly those who labor at preaching and teaching. In the same way that needy widows had been abandoned by family members, it appears that the church’s spiritual leaders had been neglected.

### A. Honor those who lead well

1. Although all elders lead, certain elders deserve special honor because they “rule well.”
2. The verb for rule is *prohistemi*, which means in this context “lead,” “guide,” “care for,” “manage,” or “direct.” The English translation “rule” is far too strong of a translation. The NIV is very good when it says “the elders who direct the affairs of the church.” Or we could say: “those who exercise leadership well.” The idea conveyed here is that these elders exercise effective household leadership.
3. They serve with distinction or proficiency. Such elders exercise their leadership faithfully. They are good planners, organizers, and motivators. They are the kind of men who get things done and can effectively care for people.
4. Moreover, they are willing and able to give a good deal of their time and energy to the spiritual care of the local congregation.
  - a) They may have the gift of leadership:  
*“The one who leads, with zeal” (Rom. 12:8)*
  - b) The word for “one who leads” is the same Greek word as in 1 Timothy 3:5, *prohistemi*.

## **B. Honor those who labor in preaching and teaching**

The elders to whom Paul refers are identified by two qualifying clauses: “who lead well” and “those who labor in preaching and teaching.” There are two ways to understand how these clauses relate to one another.

1. The Greek adverb for especially often means: “above all,” or “particularly.”
2. The other interpretation contends that, in certain contexts, the adverb *malista* means “that is,” “in other words,” “I mean,” or “to be precise.” The elders who lead well are the same persons who labor in preaching and teaching. I prefer the first alternative, as do most translations.
3. Paul’s foremost concern is that the congregation properly honor those elders who labor at preaching and teaching. On this point there should be little disagreement.

## **C. The meaning of “labor in preaching and teaching”**

1. These elders labor in preaching and teaching. The word “labor” is a strong one. It has the idea of working to the point of weariness. It is strenuous labor in the activity of teaching or instruction.
2. Good teachers “labor” at long hours of study, preparation, and demanding teaching situations.
  - a) Teaching is absorbing work. It is mentally strenuous, time-consuming work that demands a great deal of strength and self-discipline.
  - b) It demands lots of sacrifice of time and other interests in life. It means being disciplined in the use of time.
3. Preaching and teaching:
  - a) The word “preaching” in the original text is *en logo*: demands the rendering “preaching,” in the general sense of exhorting, admonishing, evangelizing. This term probably includes preaching the gospel to the unbeliever.
  - b) Linked with preaching, yet distinct, is “teaching” (*didaskalia*). Here teaching is the more specialized term, meaning authoritative instruction in doctrine for believers.
  - c) By using “preaching and teaching,” Paul covers all dimensions of public discourse. All this need to be understood in light of the heresy that has created disorder and chaos in the church.

## **D. Rightly entitled to double honor**

1. Certainly, those who lead well and those who labor in preaching and teaching should “be considered worthy of double honor,” which means “rightfully deserving” or “entitled to.”
2. Because of their gifts and strenuous labor, such elders are rightfully entitled to double honor. Also they are desperately needed in the church.

3. The church needs a fresh evaluation of these elders and their importance to the church. It is likely that the confusion in the church caused the elders to be neglected. But their work is essential to the health of the church and its protection (Acts 20:28–31. Titus 1:9ff).
4. It is the responsibility of the congregation to know this and to honor their elders. So often we think of the elders' responsibility to the congregation. Well, the congregation has responsibilities to the elders also.

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## Detailed Outline

### Part 2 of 4

*“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” (1 Tim. 5:17–18 ESV)*

## II. The Church’s Duty to Honor its Elders: 1 Timothy 5:17–18 (cont.)

### E. The Meaning of “Double Honor”

1. All elders should be honored, but elders who lead well and work hard at preaching and teaching are entitled to “double honor.”
2. By using the expression “double honor,” Paul wisely avoids slighting other elders of their due honor and is able to call special attention to those who rule well and those who labor at teaching. So “double honor” refers to both respect and remuneration: honor for an elder of the church and honor for his extra labor.
3. If this is not correct, then Paul uses double honor figuratively for abundant honor, much honor, extra honor.

### F. The Meaning of the Word “Honor”

1. The word “honor” (*time*) means “respect,” “consideration,” or “high regard,” and in certain instances includes the idea of monetary aid. Consider the following points:
  - a) Although the word “honor” (*time*) itself doesn’t necessarily mean material assistance, it includes in certain contexts the sense of material aid.
  - b) 1 Timothy 5:3 states, “Honor widows who are widows indeed.” The “widow indeed” is a truly destitute Christian widow. A church honors a destitute Christian widow by providing for her material livelihood.
  - c) The biblical quotations in verse 18 show that material provision is uppermost in Paul’s thought.
2. Using “honor” rather than a more tangible term like “money” is in harmony with Paul’s choice of expression for financial matters.
  - a) Paul favors terms that express grace, liberality, love, and partnership: service.
  - b) The word “honor” expresses financial compensation in a thoroughly Christian manner.
3. Financial provision for elders is really honor due the elders, and such honor conveys the congregation’s esteem, thoughtfulness, and loving concern.

## G. The Scriptural Basis for Material Honor

1. Paul wants no misunderstanding as to the meaning or necessity of his instruction, so in verse 18 he adds scriptural support and clarification to his charge. Quoting from both the Old and New Testaments, Paul writes:

*“For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox while when it treads out the grain,’ and ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” (1 Tim. 5:18)*

2. Paul introduces both quotes by saying, “For the Scripture says.” For the believer, just the mention of the word “Scripture” signals the ultimate voice of authority—God’s Word (John 10:35). By using this qualifying phrase, Paul is saying that complete unity exists between the Old and New Testaments—both Moses and Jesus agree that a laboring man “is worthy of his wages.”
3. Paul’s Old Testament quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”
  - a) The context of Deuteronomy concerns equity and justice in daily life—even the right of an animal to enjoy the fruit of its labor while working for its owner.
  - b) The full intent of Deuteronomy 25:4 is explained in 1 Corinthians 9:6–14.
  - c) To refuse to support hard-working teachers of the Word is as unjust, heartless, and selfish as muzzling an animal while it is working, which was a common practice among greedy, ancient farmers. The passage thus implies the provision of adequate living support, not merely token gifts, for the worker.
4. Paul aids more support to his point, a quotation from Jesus himself and applied by the apostle to the church elders: “the laborer deserves his wages” is from Luke 10:7.
  - a) Jesus originally spoke these words to the seventy before he sent them out to preach. Paul applied his words to all who teach and preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:14).
  - b) Here, in 1 Timothy 5, Paul applies the same words to elders who labor in the Word.
  - c) In a similar way, Paul tells the Galatians: “One who is taught the word must share all good things with the one who teaches.” (Gal. 6:6)
5. No matter how poor a local congregation is, it must exercise faith and liberality before the Lord (2 Cor. 8:1–5) in giving to those who labor in the Word. In short, God’s people must honor their elders.
  - a) Since no details are given, how this will be implemented in a local church will depend upon local circumstances.
  - b) There is a great deal of flexibility in how these things are fleshed out in local churches.

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## Detailed Outline

### Part 3 of 4

*“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” (1 Tim. 5:17–18 ESV)*

## III. First Among a Council of Equals: Leaders Among Leaders

**A. In light of what we have learned, an extremely important biblical concept to grasp is “first among equals.” Failure to understand the concept of “first among equals” (or 1 Tim. 5:17) has caused some elderships to be tragically ineffective in their pastoral care and leadership.**

1. Although elders act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all are not equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication.
2. Therefore, those among the elders who are particularly gifted leaders and/or teachers will naturally stand out among the other elders as leaders and teachers within the leadership body.
3. This is what the Romans called *primus inter pares*, meaning “first ones among equals.” This is a thoroughly biblical concept—both with the twelve tribes of Israel and Judah and Ephraim, and the twelve apostles.

### **B. Examples:**

1. Jesus and the twelve apostles
  - a) Jesus chose twelve apostles, all of whom he empowered to preach and heal, but he singled out three for special attention: Peter, James, and John (“first ones among equals”). On key occasions Jesus chose only Peter, James, and John to accompany him to witness his power, glory, and agony (Luke 8:51, 9:28; Mark 14:33).
  - b) Among the three, as well as the Twelve, Peter is unquestionably first among his equals. In all four lists of the apostles’ names, Peter’s name is first (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13).
  - c) Matthew actually refers to Peter as “the first” (Matt. 10:2). By calling Peter “the first,” Matthew means “first among his equals,” first in the group. The word first is *protos*, “most prominent of the Twelve” (Greek Lexicon, BDAG).
  - d) In all four gospels, Peter is indisputably the prominent figure among the Twelve. If you doubt this, look up the name Peter in a Bible concordance, then look up the names of the other apostles.

- e) Jesus charged Peter, “strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). Jesus acknowledged Peter as first among his brothers, the natural leader and motivator. He knew that they would need Peter’s leadership to help them through the dark days immediately following their Lord’s departure.

## 2. Peter in Acts

The book of Acts richly demonstrates Peter’s leadership. Among the Twelve who jointly shared the leadership of the first church (Acts 2:14, 42; 4:33, 35; 5:12, 18, 25, 29, 42; 6:2–6; 8:14; 9:27; 15:2–29), Peter is the chief spokesman and natural leader throughout the first twelve chapters of Acts (Acts 1:15; 2:14; 3:1ff; 4:8ff; 5:3ff; 5:15, 29; 8:14–24; 9:32–11:18; 12:3ff; 15:7–11; Gal. 2:7–14). Some scholars even divide the book of Acts according to its two central figures: the acts of Peter (Acts 1–12) and the acts of Paul (Acts 13–28).

- a) In Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Paul speaks of James, Peter, and John as the acknowledged “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9; see also Gal. 2:7, 8).
- b) They are also referred to as “leading men among the brothers” (Acts 15:22), “leading men of the city” (Acts 25:2; 13:50).
- c) As the natural leader, the chief speaker, the man of action, Peter challenged, energized, strengthened, and ignited the group. Without Peter, the group would have been less effective.
- d) When surrounded by eleven other apostles who were his equals, Peter became stronger and more balanced, and was protected from his impetuous nature and his fears.
- e) In spite of his outstanding leadership and speaking ability, Peter possessed no legal or official rank or title above the other eleven. They were not his subordinates. They were not his staff or team of assistants. He wasn’t the apostles’ “senior pastor.” Peter was simply first among his equals, and that by our Lord’s own approval.

## 3. Paul and Barnabas

The concept of “first among equals” is further evidenced by the relationship of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas were both apostles (Acts 13:1–3; 14:4; 15:36–39; 1 Cor. 9:1–6), yet Paul was first between the two because he was “the chief speaker” and dynamic leader (Acts 13:13; 14:12). Although Paul was plainly the more gifted of the two apostles, he held no formal ranking over Barnabas; they labored as partners in the work of the gospel.

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## IV. First Among a Council of Equals: Leaders Among Leaders

### A. Examples (cont.):

#### 7. Ephesians 4:11

- a) All elders must be able to teach the Word, but not all desire to work fully at preaching and teaching or have the spiritual gift.
- b) The kind of spiritual gift envisioned in 1 Timothy 5:17 parallels what we find in Ephesians 4:11, which states that the risen Christ gives to the church gifted shepherds and teachers to equip his people for better service on behalf of the body:  
*“And He gave the apostles, and the prophets, and the evangelists, and the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12).*
- c) According to the grammatical structure of the phrase “and the shepherds and teachers,” shepherds and teachers are closely linked together but not identical. Shepherds are included in the category of teachers, but not all teachers are included in the category of shepherds. The shepherd gift, then, uniquely combines teaching and leading. It is this kind of gift that would enable an elder to “rule well” and “work hard” at teaching. A great deal of flexibility exists as to how teachers operate.
- d) Such gifted teachers don’t just prepare a sermon a two a year. They are constantly preparing sermons and messages. They make enormous sacrifices in time and effort to be studying and to be prepared to teach. This is their passion. They always have books with them. They are constantly meditating on doctrine. They love the great doctrines of Scripture. But most importantly, they are gifted of the Holy Spirit and led by the Holy Spirit to do this.
- e) The church needs to acknowledge such giftedness and the benefits it receives from such gifted teachers. They are driven to study Scripture and to work fully at teaching. Nothing else satisfies them like teaching and preaching God’s Word. They are skilled at communicating divine truth, and there is a marked effectiveness to their teaching. They have a wide appeal among people, and the people have confidence that they are knowledgeable in Scripture. Their teaching bears consistent fruit.

## **V. Abuses of This Doctrine**

### **A. This doctrine is easily abused. There are two extremes to the concept of equality and diversity with the eldership:**

1. One is to see all elders as equal and allow for no diversity of gift or expression of gift. Gifted people are pushed down or out.
2. The other extreme is to create a whole new office of superiority. People are naturally lazy spiritually and are willing to hand over their spiritual responsibilities to the paid people in the church.

### **B. What “first among equals” does not mean:**

1. It doesn't mean that elders who are first among their equals do all the decision making for the group. The big issue is who makes the final decision for the church?
2. Or they are the pastors while the others are merely elders. To call one elder “pastor” and the rest “elders” or one elder “the clergyman” and the rest “lay elders” is to act without biblical precedence.
3. Nor does it create a distinct office separate from the eldership.
4. Nor does it give to any person exclusive rights to preach, baptize, lead in worship, or administer the Lord's Supper.
5. In fact, the New Testament doesn't assign a special title or name for these elders even though their giftedness and full- or part-time working status for the church distinguishes them from the other elders.

### **C. Advantages of first among equals:**

1. The advantage of the principle of “first among equals” is that it allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the eldership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders.
  - a) Just as the leading apostles, such as Peter and John, bore no special title or formal distinctions from the other apostles, elders who receive double honor form no official class or receive no special title.
  - b) The differences among the elders are functional, not formal.
2. It also protects gifted leaders and teachers from playing God or controlling everything in the church, or worse, falling into sin. It is a good form of government for the church, which is the holy brotherhood and sisterhood.
3. It also guards against jealousy over gifts.
  - a) Differences in spiritual giftedness must not be allowed to create jealousy or division within the eldership.

- b) By stating God's approval of such elders and their entitlement to double honor, Paul emphasizes that these elders ought to be viewed by the congregation and their fellow elders as a source of blessing, joy, and profit, rather than as a threat.
- D. All this must be balanced out with Jesus' teaching on servant leadership. All great leaders are, in the end, servants of the people of God. Yet there is the constant danger of exalting one man over all others, making him the "holy man," the Protestant priest.**