Equality and Diversity within the Eldership

In words directed to the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul said, “The Holy Spirit has made you [all of you] overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). He later wrote to the church at Ephesus, “The elders who rule well [some elders] are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). From these two magisterial, pivotal texts addressed to the church at Ephesus, we learn that both equality and diversity exist within a biblical eldership.

On the side of equality (also called parity of the eldership), the Scripture teaches that all the elders:

- Have been placed in the flock by the Holy Spirit as “overseers” for the specific purpose “to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28)
- Have been charged by the Holy Spirit to “shepherd [pastor] the church of God” (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1, 2)
- Share equally the authority and responsibility for the pastoral oversight of the entire congregation: “Be on guard ... for all the flock” (Acts 20:28; italics added)
- Are equally responsible to be alert to the constant dangers of false teaching and to guard the flock from false teachers (Acts 15:6; 20:28-31; Titus 1:9-13)
- Are to be able to teach Scripture and rebuke false teachers (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9)
- Are to be publicly examined as to the biblical qualifications before serving as an overseer (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:22-25)
- Are responsible to visit and pray for the sick (James 5:14)
- Share the designations “elder” and “overseer” (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17)
- Are equally accountable to the entire eldership body and under the loving pastoral care of the entire eldership body (Acts 20:28a)
- Are to be appreciated, esteemed “very highly in love,” honored, protected from slander, and obeyed (1 Thess. 5:12,13; 1 Tim. 5:17,19; Heb. 13:17)

Although all elders share equally the same of office and pastoral charge, there is at the same time rich diversity of giftedness and life situations among those within the eldership. It is obvious that not all elders on an elder council are equal in giftedness, effectiveness, influence, time availability, experience, verbal skills, leadership ability, or biblical knowledge.

Note the following scriptural references to diversity within the eldership:

- Not all elders labor diligently “at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Although all elders must be able to teach, to refute false teachers, and be spiritually alert to the dangers of false doctrine, not all have the spiritual gift of teaching or evangelism or the same degree of proficiency at teaching or preaching the gospel. This implies that
some elders (or one elder) will have a more prominent role in the public teaching ministry to the whole church.

- Not all elders “rule well [a marked proficiency]” (1Tim.5:17). Although all elders must be able to lead and manage their homes well, not all have the spiritual gift of leadership or the same degree of leadership skills (Rom. 12:8). This implies that one or some elders will display more prominent leadership initiative and influence within the eldership body.

- Not all elders receive financial compensation or the same amount of compensation (1 Tim. 5:18; Gal. 6:6).

- Not all elders receive “double honor” from the congregation and its elders, but it is mandated that the elders laboring in the Word be compensated for their diligent labor (1 Tim. 5:17,18). This implies that the elders and congregation acknowledge, set aside, and support those elders who labor in the gospel and equip the saints by the Word (Eph. 4:11). So Scripture supports both equality and diversity within a church eldership council.

The New Testament beautifully illustrates the concept of equality and diversity within the eldership by means of the twelve apostles. Our Lord appointed twelve apostles, not one apostle with eleven advisers. He trained and sent out all twelve to preach and heal (Matt. 10:1–11:1). He never trained any man alone, nor did He appoint one man head of his church. He dedicated himself to training a team of men who would eventually work together as a leadership body.

Yet within the apostolic team, Peter, James, and John stand out among their colleagues as exceptional leaders. Peter especially stands out as the chief speaker of the apostolic body and the prominent figure among the Twelve—the first among equals (Matt. 10:2; Luke 22:32). Yet despite his prominence, Peter is considered one of the pillars of the church, not the pillar (Gal. 2:9).

First Timothy 5:17,18 is the key text that acknowledges diversity within the eldership council. Paul tells Timothy and the congregation that “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.’”

Elders who lead “well” and especially those who work at teaching are to be treated as worthy of double honor. Elsewhere, Paul identifies those who “work hard at preaching and teaching” as gifted “evangelists,” “pastors,” and “teachers” Christ gives to the church “for the equipping [preparing] of the saints for the work of service” (Eph. 4:11,12). These gifted men equip God’s people for ministry and protect them from doctrinal immaturity and false teaching (Eph. 4:14).
These gifted men “are to be considered worthy of double honor.” The imperative verb translated *are to be considered worthy* means “to be rightly deserving” or “to be entitled to” double honor. Paul is not making a suggestion; “double honor” is a requirement, an obligation on the part of each member of the congregation. All who have benefited from the leadership and teaching of such elders are to take the initiative in this practical matter. The point is that certain elders, not all elders, are to receive double honor. This is not meant to create jealousy among elders, but rather is intended to strengthen the eldership and acknowledge that not all elders possess the same giftedness and leading from God.

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Regardless of the precise meaning of “double honor,” the context makes it clear that material or financial honor is undoubtedly included. 1 Timothy 5:17,18 is part of a larger context in which a series of honor commands appear: “honor” genuine widows (5:3-16), give “double honor” to certain elders (5:17-18), and give “all honor” to non-Christian slave masters (6:1, 2a). “Honor” is the key word. In the cases of destitute widows (5:16) and certain elders (5:17), honor includes respect as well as material provision. “All honor” in the case of a slave and his non-Christian master means respect and valuable service. The context determines the differences in nuances of meaning of the word *honor*.

Paul feels so strongly about those who labor in the Word and their rightful entitlement to “double honor” that he immediately backs up his imperative command. In verse 18 he quotes two Scripture passages to bolster his injunction on double honor: “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing’ [Deut. 25:4; 1 Cor. 9:11], and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages [Luke 10:7].’” The hard-working ox must not be denied its share in the harvest; the worker is worthy of his wages; and the laboring elder is worthy of material provision for his needs. This is a New Testament principle of church order and life.

These verses from Deuteronomy, Luke, and 1 Corinthians reveal what “double honor” means; namely, material compensation. Similarly, Paul writes in Galatians 6:6: “The one who is taught the word is to share all good things [spiritual and material, Luke 16:25] with the one who teaches him.”

Two unbiblical extremes have historically distorted the biblical concept of equality and diversity within the eldership. One extreme is to sacralize and professionalize a gifted elder, making him in effect a Protestant priest: the chief shepherd, the anointed one, or the one who alone can bless, preach, and administer holy things. The other extreme is to force complete equality among the elders, allowing for no special giftedness, calling, function, or financial provision for any member. With God’s help, let us seek to represent accurately and completely Christ’s instructions on this important subject.