

Love Among Elders

Detailed Outline

Part 1 of 4

I. Introduction

A. The fall has adversely affected every human relationship.

1. All of us, from time to time, experience conflict in every human relationship we have. It is part and parcel of living in a fallen world.
 - a) Husbands and wives
 - b) Parents and children
 - c) Siblings
 - d) Employers and employees
 - e) Nations

"Man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward." (Job 5:7)

 - f) Church members
 - 1) Less than 2% of church splits are over doctrinal issues.
 - 2) 98% of church splits are the result of discord among the children of God.
 - 3) At times we simply cannot get along with each other.
 - 4) Even the most godly and mature among us still have areas where the flesh raises its ugly head.
 - 5) Churches experience disunity, conflict, and sinful actions as a result of the fall.

B. The fall has adversely affected every church leadership team.

1. It is not uncommon for the elder board to struggle with conflict and carnal behavior. Church leaders can be tempted with:
 - a) Worldly politics and pride
 - b) Selfishness and immature behavior
 - c) Stubbornness and annoying weaknesses
2. Strong disagreement among leaders in and of itself is not necessarily wrong.

C. The fall can provide opportunities for personal growth and unity.

1. Service together on an elder board can provide a wonderful training ground for men to personally grow into wise, loving servants. In an atmosphere of love, elders can:
 - a) Express differing theological views
 - b) Have a good Spirit-led debate
 - c) Improve their communication skills
 - d) Learn to submit to one another
2. Conflict is not always a bad thing; it becomes a bad thing when it leads to ungodly and carnal behavior.
3. Church leaders must learn to deal with conflict and controversies among themselves.

4. The spiritual atmosphere of a leadership group directly affects the health of a church.
 - a) A carnal leadership team can destroy a church.
 - b) There is a direct link between the quality of elder relationships and the quality of the leadership and pastoral care that the group provides.
 - c) Whether we realize it or not, the attitudes and behavior of the leadership body provide a model for all the other relationships within the church.
 - d) Sadly, the opposite can also be true. If not operating under the control of the Spirit, church leaders can also make matters worse.

II. Building Solid Relationships Among Elders

A. God has provided the resources for leaders to function in love and unity.

B. The good news is that God has already given to us all of the resources that we need to live Spirit-led lives as we work and serve together as leaders, in addition to being role models to the flock.

1. Seven qualities available for life and godliness:

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:3–8)

2. A few observations from this passage:

- a) God has provided all needed resources for life and godliness.
 - 1) In addition to the new birth, God has granted to us all of the resources that we need for life and godliness.
 - 2) More specifically, all that church leaders need to serve and work together in a humble, Spirit-led manner has already been given to us.
 - 3) It's as if God has given to us a wonderful toolbox filled with just the right equipment to build up:
 - (a) *Our private lives*
 - (b) *The body of Christ*
 - (c) *The elder board*

God has given seven supplemental qualities to add to our faith (vv. 5–7): virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love.

- b) It's as if Peter is comparing the building of our lives to a solid building.
 - 1) The foundation: faith

- 2) The capstone: love
- c) Gifting (service) without love equals nothing.
 - 1) As it relates to leadership, we may:
 - Have a vibrant personality
 - Be very gifted
 - Have profound bible knowledge
 - Have leadership skills

- 2) But if we lack love, we are nothing, as Paul says in I Corinthians.

"There is no use trying to do church work without love. A doctor, a lawyer, may do good work without love, but God's work cannot be done without love." D. L. Moody

- 3) And that work would include church leaders serving and working together.
- 4) Elder relations with each other must be bathed in love!

C. Three foundational passages for building love and unity among elders:

And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.
(Col. 3:14)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1–3)

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. (Eph. 4:31–32)

Our Goal as leaders as a result of this study:

1. Glorify God by placing Christ's example of love at the center of the leadership body.
2. Seek to promote love and unity among the elder board, which then sets the tone for the entire congregation.

III. Soul Maintenance is Vital to a Leadership Team

A. A loving leader must be a healthy leader.

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Eph. 5:2)

1. One of the key issues to being a loving leader is maintaining a healthy, loving soul.
 - a) When a church leader is spiritually healthy, love for others is less of a challenge.
 - b) An elder board will never reflect the love of Christ with unhealthy leaders.
2. In addition to the world, the flesh, and the devil, the pressures of church leadership can leave one spiritually drained.
 - a) Statistics are showing that 1,500 pastors permanently leave the ministry **each month** in America.

- b) About 50% of those who continue are so discouraged they would seek another line of work if they could.
- 3. Spiritual health is a major issue facing Christian leaders.
 - a) When a leader serves on spiritual fumes, his brokenness tends to be accentuated.
 - 1) Insecurity
 - 2) Pride
 - 3) Selfish ambition
- 4. On the other hand, when a church leader pursues spiritual health as a lifestyle, love for fellow elders tends to be one of the byproducts.
 - a) The key word here is "pursue." Are we . . .
 - 1) Pursuing Christlikeness?
 - 2) More loving, patient, kind as we encounter each other's idiosyncrasies?
 - 3) Seeking to improve in our people skills?"
 - 4) Displaying love and compassion for our fellow leaders?

James Strahan said, "Men are not to be judged by the presence or absence of faults, but by the direction of their lives."
- 5. A spiritual leader can never stop growing.
- 6. We can never kick back and think we have arrived.
- 7. We can never coast and live off of past victories.

I like what the American business leader Bruce Barton said:

"When you're through changing, you're through."

B. When leaders serve and work together in a loving atmosphere, they set the tone for the whole congregation.

- 1. A leader's life is like an open book for all to see: the good, the bad, and the ugly.
- 2. History has accurately demonstrated the following principle:

*"As the soul of the leader goes, so goes the leader.
As the leader goes, so goes the ministry."*

Why is this true?

C. The health of a leader sets the tone for those he leads.

- 1. People tend to emulate their leaders.
 - a) Whether they realize it or not, leaders set the spiritual bar in a ministry or a church.
 - b) If leaders tend to gossip, those that follow tend to gossip.
 - c) People tend to pick up their leader's traits, whether good or bad.
- 2. Members of a group tend to be inspired by a godly example.
 - a) A loving leader also sets the tone for the elder board.
 - b) That love comes through intimacy with Christ, which contributes to a healthy soul.
 - 1) Unfortunately, we often minimize the need for a healthy soul when it comes to church leadership.

- 2) Spiritual drift on the part of a leader is a constant hazard for the leader himself as well as for those he is leading.
 - c) The truth is, all leaders are still imperfect human beings. We are all affected by the fall and still struggle with many character flaws.
3. All leaders must tend to their spiritual health and seek to improve in their people skills.
 - a) As leaders we must first have a desire to improve.
 - b) Then, we must intentionally pursue change or it will never occur.
 - 1) Do I communicate poorly?
 - 2) Do I display irritating eccentricities?
 - 3) Do I have a gnawing character flaw?
 - 4) Do I have blind spots and imbalances?
 - c) When leaders become stagnant in their growth, their weaknesses can be exposed.

Pride, bad tempers, controlling spirit, cutting words, attempts to intimidate or manipulate fellow elders

 - 1) As a result, our love for one another can be adversely affected and very difficult.
 - 2) Many church leaders continue to serve, but:
 - Carry grudges.
 - Have unresolved conflict with other leaders.
 - Are bitter, jaded, and suspicious of one another.
 - d) Yet, under the same circumstances, a leader also has the opportunity to:
 1. Grow spiritually.
 2. Improve in people skills.
 3. Be a model and a blessing to fellow leaders.
 4. Demonstrate love under pressure.
 5. Demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.
4. I believe every sincere church leader desires to be a catalyst for change, not only in his congregation but also among the leadership team. The good news is that God has given us all of the resources required to do that.

Love Among Elders

Detailed Outline

Part 2 of 4

IV. Love: The Key Ingredient for Elder Relations

A. The biblical emphasis on love

Bible scholar William Kelly said, *"Love is the life-breath of the church."*

We might add that love is also *"the life-breath of the elder board."*

1. Setting the bar on love.
Leviticus 19:18 instructs us to *"Love [our] neighbor as ourselves."*
2. Comparing the bar on love
 - a) Our Lord repeated this when asked by an expert in the law which command in the law is the greatest?
"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. (Matt 22:37-38)
"The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matt 22:39)
3. Raising the bar on love
 - a) But before the Lord went to the cross to die, he raised the bar even higher.
 - b) In John 13:34–35 he gave a new command regarding love:
"I give you a new command: Love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."
 - c) While this new command was given to all of Christ's followers, it is also the standard for behavior among elders as they serve together. Without the crucial ingredient of love, elder relationships can spiral down to simply enduring each other or worse, undermining each other.
4. When biblical love permeates elder relationships, it enhances the group dynamic and frees the members from: jealousy, fear of opposing ideas, defensive posturing, infighting and a host of other carnal tactics and responses.
5. When love prevails, it is much easier for elders to: communicate ideas, disagree, understand each other, be open to opposing views and forgive one another.
6. Elders must let love set the tone and be the standard for all leadership interaction.

B. The church leader's wardrobe

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against

another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ *And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.* (Col. 3:12–14)

1. I recommend that church leaders adopt the following items as their “dress code.”
 - a) Paul encourages us to put these items on: Compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness and love.
 - b) As a matter of fact, love should be at the heart of everything an elder does, including interacting with fellow leaders.
 - 1) Love is simply the most important piece of spiritual clothing.
 - 2) Let’s apply this directly to elder relationships!
 - (a) *Elders should express heartfelt compassion for one another.*
 - (b) *Elders should treat each other with kindness and humility.*
 - (c) *Elders should be gentle and patient with one another.*
 - 3) Could you imagine an elder board that operated like this?
 - 4) Offenses and complaints are inevitable as leaders work together in many stressful situations.
2. Elders are to accept and forgive one another as offenses and complaints arise.
 - a) Notice the qualifier that Paul adds to the end of verse 13:
“Just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.”
 - b) How has the Lord forgiven us?
 - c) Is his forgiveness limited?
 - d) Does he hold a few sins back to drag out against us to keep us in line?
 - 1) No! All is forgiven! “As far as the east is from the west.”
 - 2) I put it this way: God through Christ has forgiven **the mother lode** of our sins.
 - 3) And having experienced that level of forgiveness, how can we then hold back and not forgive a fellow elder for a much lesser level of offense?
3. And then Paul crowns this passage with “above all” exhortation.
“Above all, put on love—the perfect bond of unity.” (14)

C. The church leader’s model for love

1. There is an incident in the life of the Lord Jesus that has inspired me to intentionally pursue becoming a more loving elder. It was at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11.
 - a) It was a very stressful, hectic moment for Mary and Martha, as well as the Lord Jesus.
 - b) Tension was high at the loss of a brother and dear friend. Tears were being shed.
 - c) This scene was being observed by onlookers. Many opposed the Lord’s ministry.
 - d) What impressed me in this passage was what the Jews said as they observed the Lord in this stressful situation.
 - e) And what they said inspires me as an elder to remember that the world is watching us as spiritual leaders. *“So the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”* (John 11:36).
2. As we serve the Lord and his people as elders, we may hear encouraging remarks about our service: He is a hard worker, he is a good shepherd, he is a good preacher or teacher.

- a) But the one I aspire to most of all is to be known as a humble, loving servant.
 - b) Wouldn't it be wonderful if the saints in our local churches would observe their leaders, and like the Jews, say, *"See how they love us"*?
 - c) This will not happen by accident. By nature we love ourselves.
3. As leaders we must intentionally seek to improve in our love and people skills as we serve God's people. If we leave it to chance we will never lead with love.

D. The church leader's mandate for love

1. The command to love one another is the most oft-repeated command in the NT.
- a) Of course, it is a command for all believers.
 - b) But how much more important it should be for those who lead the flock of God.
2. I would like to go over just a small sampling of some of the NT commands regarding love. As we do, I think you will be impressed at least about two important things:
- a) How crucial these commands are in developing a leader's love for others.
 - b) If practiced regularly, how they could radically transform a leadership body.

Romans 12:10 gives us the first two commands:

"Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor."

3. Be an example of love. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul instructs Timothy to:
- "Set the believers an example in . . . love."*
4. *"Pursue . . . love"* (1 Tim. 6:11)
5. *"Love the brotherhood."* (1 Peter 2:17)
6. *"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly."* (1 Peter 4:8)
7. Maintain a perpetual debt of love for one another. *"Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."* (Rom. 13:8)
8. As you can see, the topic of love was not an incidental issue for the apostles.
9. Christian leaders should be out in front modeling love in their congregation.
- a) But it must begin to be demonstrated first among the leaders themselves.
 - b) If there is a fake love among the elders who simply tolerate each other—well, this would be hypocrisy.
 - c) And Paul is very clear about hypocrisy when it comes to love. He tells us in Romans 12:9 to *"Let love be genuine."*

So, as you can see, love among believers, particularly among elders, is not an incidental issue. It is at the heart of Christianity.

V. A Self-Test to Measure an Elder's "Love Factor"

A. Let me suggest to you a kind of self-test that you can administer to get a sense of any area you may need to shore up in your relationship with your fellow elders.

1. In 1 Corinthians 13, sometimes called the "love chapter," Paul describes the manner in which believers are to use their spiritual gifts as they serve one another. He presents this

chapter because many of the Corinthian believers were misusing their spiritual gifts like children playing with toys.

2. Church leaders are the ones to set the tone in the local church. They are the “role models” of how believers should get along as they serve in the local church. So let’s read verses 4-7 in this passage. But let’s do it as an “elder self-test” to measure our “love factor” as leaders and role models among God’s people. We will simply add the word “elder” from time to time to make it personal to those who lead the flock.

**[An elder] is patient, . . . is kind.
[An elder] does not envy,
is not boastful, is not conceited,
 ⁵ does not act improperly,
is not selfish, is not provoked,
and does not keep a record of wrongs.
⁶ [An elder] finds no joy in unrighteousness
 but rejoices in the truth.
⁷ [An elder] bears all things, believes all things,
 hopes all things, endures all things.
(1 Cor. 13:4–7)**

I can’t stress enough how important this passage is in maintaining love and unity among believers, but particularly among elders as we serve together.

3. Paul starts the passage with two positive aspects of love: (patience and kindness)
 - a) Am I a patient leader?
 - b) Am I a kind leader?
4. After mentioning these two positive aspects, he then goes on to lists eight negative things that sabotage love.
 - a) These eight negative qualities are like termites. If left unchecked, they could eat away at the fabric of an elder board, reducing it to a group of suspicious board members who simply tolerate each other.
 - b) They are eight negative aspects that should never characterize a Christian leader:
 - c) Eight negative aspects of love.
 - 1) As a leader, do I struggle with envy?
 - 2) Do I promote myself (boasting, pride?)
 - 3) Do I come across as conceited? (conceit)
 - 4) Do I demonstrate improper behavior?
 - 5) Am I selfish?
 - 6) Am I easily provoked?
 - 7) Do I keep records of wrongs committed against me?
 - 8) Do I secretly find joy in unrighteousness?

B. So as we work together as church leaders, let's make it our goal to:

1. Wear the right wardrobe (put on love)
2. Model love
3. Pursue love

As leaders of God's people, let's bathe everything we do in love.

Love Among Elders

Detailed Outline
Part 3 of 4

VI. Check Your Attitude

A. You have heard the saying that “attitude is everything.” This is especially true as church leaders serve together in the crucible of life.

1. Working closely under stress in a leadership body can quickly reveal our depravity.
2. The potential for disunity among elders is just one bad attitude away. Such things as pride, threatening talk, selfish independence, temper tantrums, emotional withdrawal, angry outbursts of emotion, jealousy, and sour attitudes can sabotage love and harmony.
3. The antidote: an attitude check
 - a) We need to make sure our attitude in ministry aligns with the attitude of our Savior.
 - b) This is so important that God has given us an entire chapter in the NT regarding the correct attitude, which we will look at in just a moment.
 - c) And that attitude should permeate every aspect of elder relationships; how we talk to one another, how we talk *about* one another, how we treat one another, how we conduct ourselves at board meetings

B. Right and wrong attitudes

1. We must constantly fight against what the “Diotrephes Syndrome.”
 - a) In 3 John 9, the apostle wrote about Diotrephes. He described this man as one “*who likes to put himself first.*” In our fallenness, our instinct is to put ourselves first.
 - b) Thus, we need to constantly check our attitude as we serve with others. In Christ’s kingdom, especially for those who lead, things are different.
2. The world says:
 - a) Be bold, be brash, be assertive
 - b) Demand your rights, use others
 - c) Do whatever it takes to get to the top, to get your way
3. In Christ’s kingdom, things are different—things are reversed.
 - a) Mark 9:35: “If anyone wants to be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”
 - b) As under-shepherds of God’s people, elders lead the flock in a manner totally different than what we find in the world.
4. In the business world, where one fits on the social ladder is of great concern. This kind of leadership is often obsessed with self-promotion, honorific titles, and public acclaim.
5. In Christ’s kingdom we want to connect leadership with servanthood. It was the way of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

C. The best attitude: In Philippians 2:5–8, the apostle Paul gives us a wonderful description of Christ’s servant attitude.

1. Before reading it, note the context as Paul leads up to this passage, Philippians 2:1–4.
2. Paul addresses some problems at Philippi by giving good counsel to combat them:
 - a) Be of the same mind (be like-minded) - v. 2
 - b) Have the same love - v. 2
 - c) Being one in spirit and of one mind - v. 2
 - d) Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit - v. 3
 - e) Value others above yourselves - v. 4
 - f) Not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others - v. 4
3. Notice the phrase in verse 3; “*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit.*” That would include relationships among the leadership team.

D. Christ’s attitude

1. Philippians 2:5–8
“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”
2. Can you imagine how the atmosphere of many elder boards would instantly change if all leaders emulated the attitude of Christ as described in this passage?
3. Jesus’ life was characterized by self-surrender, self renunciation, and self-sacrifice.
4. These words of Paul would have been shocking to members of the Roman colony, where status and the pecking order were everything.
5. Three points would have been particularly troubling:
 - a) He used his exalted status for the benefit of others.
Humility in the Roman world was not seen as a virtue, but rather as a weakness. The idea that someone would *purposefully* descend from a position of honor and status would have been countercultural. But that is exactly what Christ did:
Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing. (vv. 6–7)
 - b) He took the lowest status in Roman society for the benefit of others.
Slaves were at the very bottom of the pecking order in their culture. To descend from being the sovereign Creator of the universe, to WILLINGLY becoming a slave, would be madness in the mind of any Roman citizen. But that is exactly what Christ did: “*He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant [slave], being made in human likeness.*” (v. 7)

- c) He died a criminal's death for the benefit of others.

Death by Roman crucifixion was reserved only for non-Roman citizens. It was the ultimate shame for a human being. Yet Christ descended to even this, for the benefit of others: *"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!"*

- 6. Christ's example redefined for believers at Philippi how one uses status to benefit others.
- 7. Imagine what the tone and atmosphere would be like on an elder board if church leaders applied these teachings on a regular basis.
- 8. Joseph Hellerman, in his book *Embracing Shared Ministry*, summarized Paul's teaching for the believers at Philippi:
"To pattern their lives not after the values of Rome, but after a Jewish Messiah who willingly exchanged his immeasurably exalted status for the shame of a crucified slave—all for the benefit of rebellious human beings whom he had created."
- 9. Paul's teaching in this passage should still be the normal operating procedure in the modern church, but especially for church leaders as they serve and work together.
- 10. The Lord taught the same thing in Matthew 20:26, didn't he?
Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. (Mt. 20:26)
"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many." (Matt. 20:28)
- 11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor, referred to the Lord Jesus as "the Man for others." And indeed he was.
- 12. The right attitude among the church leadership is crucial. One's attitude can affect the entire elder board—for good or for bad.
- 13. Christ's attitude should affect elders in the way they communicate with each other, disagree with each other, persuade and press each other for change, use body language, and care for each other.
- 14. It's so easy to revert back to the old carnal ways. But our Savior has left us a better way:
 - a) He was humble and selfless.
 - b) He focused on the interest of others.
 - c) He refused to use his personal status for his own benefit
 - d) He was the ultimate servant: he gave up the ivory palaces for a stable, set aside his royal robes to become human, put on an apron to wash dirty feet, went forward to receive the betrayer's kiss, and made the ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of others.

E. We who lead the people of God are now called to have this same attitude as we serve.

- 1. But how important to demonstrate this attitude *with those we serve with!*
- 2. Ironically, the Father responds to Christ's amazing descent by bestowing on this crucified slave the highest honor ever bestowed on a human being.

3. Aligning our attitudes to God's kingdom principles pays large dividends in the end.
4. Church leaders who use their status for the blessing and benefit of others will likewise receive honor from the Father.
5. Peter, in 1 Peter 5:4, says to his fellow elders: *"And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."*
6. Let me encourage you as a spiritual leader: As you serve the Lord and serve his people, make it a regular habit to always be aligning your attitude to that of Christ's in this passage, and to use your status for the benefit of others.

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Detailed Outline

Part 4 of 4

VII. Practical Suggestions for Building Love and Unity Among Elders

A. Paul tells the Corinthians: “Let all that you do be done in love.” (1 Cor. 16:14).

1. As is obvious, this would include relationships among elders.
2. I want to share with you my personal learning experience as it relates to love and unity among church leaders.
 - a) I have had the privilege to serve as a church elder for the last 18 years. Currently I serve at my local church with four other elders.
 - b) I can honestly say that my experiences have transformed me into a better person.
 - c) Dealing with stressful situations over the years with men who are equally flawed has been somewhat like a workshop for developing Christ-like character.
 - d) Serving as an elder is a life-changing experience where God develops us into mature, Christ-like men.
3. Working together forces us to:
 - a) Exercise patience, self-control, and gentleness
 - b) Improve in people skills
 - c) Stretch our minds to other’s ideas
 - d) Become better Bible students
 - e) Practice humility and forgiveness

“As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” - King Solomon (Prov. 27:17)
4. Of course, for this to occur, an elder must be teachable, open to constructive criticism, willing to have his opinions challenged, willing to grow and improve.
5. As it turns out, one of the other elders in our local church also happens to be one of my dearest friends in life. We enjoy hobbies together and communicate almost on a daily basis. We share our personal lives and we hold each other spiritually accountable.
6. While I certainly love and respect the other elders, I usually do not interact with them outside the church leadership context.
7. What I noticed was that in critical and stressful moments, say, at an elders’ meeting, my interaction with my friend was more loving and patient than my interaction with the other elders. With the other elders my interaction was more formal and “business like.”
8. Why the difference? My friend and I had developed a “friendship relationship.” We had a history. It was not simply a “task-oriented”, “business-at-hand” relationship.
9. What I learned from this observation was that my relationship with my other fellow elders was imbalanced. While we had a cordial business relationship, we lacked a deeper level loving relationship. And I believe this is critical issue for any leadership team.
10. Now, while it is unrealistic to expect all the elders to be best friends as well, a leadership team can take steps to foster deeper relationships.

B. Let me give you a few practical suggestions toward building a more loving and caring environment among the leadership team:

1. Plan and implement a yearly retreat for the leaders and their wives.
 - a) The purpose of this time away would be to encourage and enjoy fellowship among the leadership team and their wives.
 - b) Today we live in a hyper-busy society. Rarely do we have time to enjoy deep fellowship with our fellow elders.
 - c) A weekend away together could help the leadership team move beyond simply having a business relationship to building a deeper, more intimate connection.
 2. Intentionally plan social interactions during the year for the leaders.
 - a) While a yearly time away together would be a move in the right direction, more fellowship is needed to build a healthy, loving atmosphere among the leadership.
 - b) Church leaders are constantly in the midst of spiritual warfare; Dealing with church conflicts, grappling with difficult people problems, handling complaints and criticisms, doctrinal disputes
 - c) Such issues can weary an elder board.
 - d) Therefore, elders should be intentional in pursuing regular social settings together for fellowship, mutual encouragement, and accountability.
 - e) These could include such things as:
 - 1) Regularly scheduled meals together (hospitality)
 - 2) Occasionally scheduling lunches during the week
 - 3) Having breakfast before a workday (monthly)
 - 4) Recreation: golf, hunting, fishing, etc.
 - f) All of these suggestions would help to build a healthy, loving atmosphere among the leadership team.
 3. It must be intentional or in time the atmosphere can become cold and corporate, where programs become more important than people.
 4. This is a worthy goal. To deepen our relationships and build a sense of family where we:
 - a) Share laughter and have fun together
 - b) Cry together and carry each other's burdens
 - c) Resolve conflicts together
 - d) Seek to build a good team culture and a sense of community
- Get this on the agenda. Plan for it or it will never happen.

C. Purposely set aside a regular time for praying and sharing personal needs.

1. At the start of each board meeting, set a specific time apart before proceeding with the business at hand. Use this time to share personal struggles and temptations, family matters (pray for specific family members), thank God for each other, ask for counsel and practice mutual accountability.
2. Elders must remember that in addition to shepherding the flock, we are also responsible for caring for the wellbeing of each leader and their family.
3. Elders and their families are particular targets of our enemy.

4. Setting aside a time to pray for and focus on the specific pastoral needs of fellow leaders and their families is crucial to building a loving atmosphere among the leadership team.
5. I find that an attitude of prayer for my fellow elders also diminishes the potential for conflict with them and any temptation to judge them or be unkind to them.
6. You see, it's difficult to hold them up to the throne of grace and pray God's best for them, and then to turn around and mistreat them. Prayer fosters kindness and forbearance among church leaders.

D. Design and implement a pledge of protection for the leadership body.

1. It is naïve to believe that relationships among church leaders will always be smooth sailing. The potential for conflict and damaged relationships is very high.
2. Hurt feelings, mistrust, infighting, and power struggles can sabotage the unity of the elder board. Wise elders will anticipate conflict and get out ahead of the problem.
3. One way to do it is draw up a document that outlines biblical principles of how conflict will be handled when it arises. Included in the document will be pledges:
 - a) To pray for and support each elder and their family
 - b) Never to gossip or slander a fellow elder
 - c) To always represent each other accurately without exaggeration
 - d) To respect all confidences
 - e) To foster a safe environment within the team to be able to express contrary opinions
 - f) To demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit when conflict arises
4. In the "heat of the moment" when conflict arises among leaders, there is a tendency to revert back to what the apostle Paul called "the works of the flesh."
5. With a pledge there are clear boundaries. When the boundaries are crossed, it's much easier to resolve issues because all had agreed to abide by the contents of the pledge.
6. If nothing is written down, the situation can be rather murky. There is little to no expectation on how elders are to behave in stressful situation.
7. Galatians 5:19–21 mentions fifteen examples of the works of the flesh. Eight of them seem to be particularly common if an elder board is not led by the Spirit when conflict arises. They are enmity (hostility, animosity), strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy.
A few verses later, in Galatians 5:26, Paul adds these words: *"Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another."*
8. Because the male ego is so fragile, it can quickly become volatile. This seems to be the case in theological discussions, especially if one's theological point of view is ridiculed or dismissed or if one's self-respect has been attacked.
9. Paul prepared the Galatians for dealing with the works of the flesh. He said: *"Through love serve one another." (Galatians 5:13)*
10. But Paul knew, and we must understand, that by ourselves we do not have the power to either resist the works of the flesh, or to produce the fruit of the Spirit.
11. Any attempt at unity among the elders will be short-lived if they are not spiritual men.

12. Elders must be Spirit-filled and Spirit-led men.
 - a) They must be men who constantly seek to demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit.
 - b) And while all nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit mentioned by Paul in Galatians 5 are essential for maintaining love and unity among elders, the last one mentioned is especially needed. And that is “self-control.”
 - c) It’s easy to love in theory when all is going well. But in the “heat of the moment,” self-control serves like a gatekeeper, holding back the works of the flesh from gushing forth. Listen again to Paul in Galatians 5:16:

“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”

So a wise elder board will take proactive steps to be prepared when conflict arises.

And one of those steps will be to draft a document explaining the way in which elders will function when facing conflict.

E. Determine to have the hard conversations when needed.

1. If you are like me, you seek to avoid conflict if at all possible. Yet, is there a time when smiling and being nice can be counterproductive? I believe the answer is yes.
2. One defense mechanism we often employ when conflict or hard issues arise among leaders is to simply avoid dealing with them. We are really good at dancing around issues and ignoring “elephants in the room.”
3. We often prefer to maintain peace by being nice. For example, we would rather tolerate:
 - a) A bully
 - b) A controlling elder
 - c) Intimidation tactics
 - d) Inappropriate behavior
 - e) Harsh communication, etc., rather than having the hard conversation!
4. Frankly, we are just not that good at speaking up. We know it is the right and loving thing to do, but we drop the ball when it comes to the difficult, courageous conversation.
5. We often prefer to project an image of peace and unity on the elder board that does not match reality. We interact with kindness and respect and prefer to gloss over any conflict so as not to make any waves.
6. The problem however, is that avoiding conflict really sabotages genuine community and deep relationships. *“Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse [deceitful] are the kisses of an enemy.”* (Prov. 27:6)
7. Leaders must be intentional when it comes to having the hard conversations.
8. When people know you love them, you can say hard things to them.
9. Shying away from speaking truth to a beloved colleague leads to superficial relationships. In Ephesians 4:15, Paul admonishes us to *“speak the truth in love.”* This principle was also important to the apostle John. In 1 John 3:18 he said, *“Let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.”*
10. At times I have remained silent when I should have spoken up. I’ve gone along with decisions against my will for fear of what others might think of me. I have tolerated behavior unbecoming of an elder because I didn’t want to have the difficult conversation.

11. I believe all of us want a leadership environment that is authentic, loving, and where we feel safe to have honest communication. Therefore, pulling back and remaining silent in conflict is not an option. True biblical love values a colleague to the point where we tell them what we think. We communicate our concerns clearly and honestly.
12. Sadly, problems are perpetuated when we remain silent in times when we should be speaking up. We mistakenly *think* we are maintaining peace, but really we are prolonging an unhealthy environment.

F. Regularly set goals and evaluate progress as a team.

1. Example: My backyard
 - a) The backyard of our house goes right into the woods at about 60 feet. Every year weeds try very hard to take over both the garden areas and the grassy areas of our yard. If I let it go for just one year, it would look like an abandoned lot.
 - b) Every year is a battle: Fertilizer, weed control, water, remove fallen branches, deal with moles and chipmunks—and on and on.
2. A leadership team is in some ways similar to my backyard. It is not going to function and thrive by chance.
 - a) Leaders are not going to wake up in a few years and say: Hey, how did we achieve such peace and unity? How is it that we love each other in spite of our disagreements? How did we become a healthy, mature group of men?
 - b) No. It is going to require constant maintenance and hard work. It needs to be an intentional part of the elder agenda over time. Leaders need to be aware of the three “killer bees”: building, bodies, bucks.
 - c) If things are going well in these three areas, there is a temptation to lie back and coast or go into maintenance mode.

VIII. Conclusion

A. We can have a crowded church with countless programs, but it does not guarantee that the leadership team will be healthy and on track spiritually. I want to encourage you to be intentional when it comes to the health of the elder board.

1. Let me finish by reminding you of how very important your work is as an under-shepherd. You are caring for “blood-bought” sheep. In other words, God paid an unbelievably high price for his sheep. It cost him the very life of his Son. So it’s a big deal to him how they are cared for. That care can only come from a leadership team that is growing and healthy.
2. And our growth and health as leaders is not going to occur by chance. We must be intentional about it! But it’s worth the effort, both for us as well as for the flock of God.

Remember the words of Peter in 1 Peter 5:4: *“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”*