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Introduction

WHILE I WAS STANDING at the rear of the church sanctuary where I had just finished preaching, I overheard a disturbing conversation. Three of the church elders were deciding on a time to have their next elders' meeting. One insisted that he was too busy to meet any time soon. Another suggested that their business could be accomplished easily in less than ten minutes. The others happily agreed with his assessment, so while everyone else was talking or leaving, the elders had a quick, stand-up meeting at the back of the sanctuary.

It didn't seem to occur to these men that they had allocated no time for prayer to seek God's guidance on their decisions. It didn't seem to matter that they were neglecting their pastoral work of greeting and ministering to the people after the service. Mercifully, God didn't strike them dead for their pastoral indifference as He did the careless priests Nadab and Abihu.¹ But within a few years, their church was nearly dead.

Although this degree of disinterest in elders' meetings is extreme, it illustrates the prevailing indifference that many elders have toward meetings. Mack Tennyson, author of *Making Committees Work*, humorously comments, "To write good things about meetings is almost like speaking well of Adolf Hitler. Everyone loves to bad-mouth meetings. No one speaks well of them. Most people see them as evil."²

Mercifully, God didn't strike them dead for their pastoral indifference. But within a few years, their church was nearly dead.

As much as they may dislike meetings, most elders realize that they need to meet together as a group because church eldership is shared leadership. But most elders fail to understand the profound importance

of their meetings. They fail to recognize the impact their meetings have on themselves and on every aspect of the life of the local congregation. So my purpose in writing this book is twofold:

First, I wish to explain why elders' meetings are vitally important. Much more takes place in elders' meetings than merely discussing finances and programs. Meetings refine character, build group morale, Many elders are tired of attending tedious, aimless, unproductive meetings. provide pastoral accountability, sharpen pastoral skills, clarify doctrine, generate vision, and ignite the power of prayer. Also, elders' meetings provide a training ground for future elders.

Second, I want to help elders improve the effectiveness of their meetings. Many elders are tired of attending tedious, aimless, unproductive meetings. By nature, meetings can be stressful, but for a meeting to be unproductive is a double frustration. Moreover, God's flock suffers if the shepherds are ineffective in their work. So I have provided numerous guidelines for conducting an effective meeting. In addition, this book, although it is written primarily for church elders, can be adapted readily by deacons or other church committees to improve the quality of their meetings.

Meetings don't have to be boring timewasters. Frustrating, tiresome, inefficient meetings can be transformed into spiritually productive and personally satisfying meetings. This book presents biblical principles and practical suggestions that can help to:

- Stimulate your God-given creativity, so that you can develop improvements that suit your local church situation
- Challenge you to continually evaluate and improve your meetings
- Improve your team management and communication skills
- Facilitate needed change
- Apply God's Word to your meetings and your work
- Place Christ at the center of your meetings

Part Three of this book (p. 65) provides questions and assignments that will help your group evaluate its meeting strengths and weaknesses and identify areas for improvement. It offers a step-by-step plan for discussing and implementing the suggestions in this book.

Throughout this book are suggested biblical texts to memorize. Please take these Scripture memory assignments seriously because they will help you become a better shepherd and meeting participant. God's Word needs to be imbedded in our minds and hearts so that it will guide our conduct, attitudes, and actions during the course of our meetings. Our goal is to have Christ-centered meetings that glorify God and result in better pastoral care of His flock.

The Importance of Elders' Meetings

FROM THE BOOK OF EXODUS to the Epistle of James, we learn that God's people have always had a council of elders (the presbytery) to lead them. Even around the throne of God, there is a heavenly council of elders (Rev. 4:4). The New Testament teaches that Christian eldership is pastoral leadership by a council of qualified, Spirit-appointed men. It defines Christian elders as shepherds, overseers, stewards, and leaders of the local church. It also models and teaches the plurality of elders. (See Appendix A: Equality and Diversity within the Eldership, p. 69.)

Elders act as a body, a council, a team. As a team, they lead the church. A significant part of their work can be accomplished only by meeting together as a council. The verses below reveal what the New Testament says about elders and their work. These verses are absolutely foundational to understanding the rest of this book.

📖 “And this [the church in Antioch] did, sending [the offering] in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders” (Acts 11:30).

📖 “[Paul and Barnabas] ... appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23*a*).

📖 “The apostles and the elders came together to look into this [doctrinal] matter” (Acts 15:6).

📖 “From Miletus he [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church [and said to them...], ‘Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd [pastor] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert [for false teachers]’” (Acts 20:17, 28-31*a*).

📖 “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1 *b*).

📖 “But 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” (1 Thess. 5:12).

📖 “It is a trustworthy statement: If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer [elder], then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife . . . hospitable, able to teach, . . . not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:1-7).

📖 “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery [the council of elders]” (1 Tim. 4:14).

📖 “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.’ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all. . . . Do not lay hands upon anyone [new or restored elder] too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin. . . . The sins of some men [elder candidates] are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their sins follow after. Likewise also, deeds that are good are quite evident, and those which are otherwise cannot be concealed” (1 Tim. 5:17-25).

📖 “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach. . . . For the overseer must be above reproach as *God’s steward*, . . . 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*” (Titus 1:5-9; italics added).

📖 “Obey your leaders [plural] and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account” (Heb. 13:17).

📖 “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one

who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him" (James 5:14,15).

📖 "Therefore, I [Peter] exhort the elders among you, ... *shepherd* [pastor] *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. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:1-5; italics added).

Unfortunately, many elders do not understand the full significance of their meetings, nor do they understand the impact their meetings have on themselves and the congregation.

Pastoral leadership by a council of elders obviously requires elders to meet together regularly. So meetings are an indispensable feature of the elders' work. Meetings have an important function that cannot be replaced by anything else. Unfortunately, many elders don't understand the full significance of their meetings, nor do they understand the impact their meetings have on themselves and the congregation. Thoughtfully consider the following reasons why elders' meetings are important.

MEETINGS AFFECT THE SPIRITUAL HEALTH OF THE FLOCK

The eldership is the church's principal leadership and decision-making council. So the elders' meetings are multifaceted meetings that involve problem solving, decision making, coordination of church activities, information sharing, brainstorming, study, planning, and fervent prayer. According to the New Testament, the elders jointly:

- Shepherd the flock (1 Peter 5:2)
- Oversee the flock (1 Peter 5:2)
- Lead the people (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12)

- Manage the household of God (Titus 1:7)
- Investigate and judge doctrinal matters (Acts 15:6; Titus 1:9; 2:1)
- Dispense counsel (Acts 21:17-26)

So in a real sense the elders' meetings are the critical nerve center of the local church body.

A clear connection exists between the quality of the elders' meetings and the quality of the elders' pastoral leadership.

Make no mistake about it, elders' meetings affect the spiritual health of the church. What elders talk about, what they do or don't do, how they act toward one another, and what they plan or fail to plan affects every member of the flock. Thus a clear connection exists between the quality of the elders' meetings and the quality of the elders' pastoral leadership.

If the meetings are headed nowhere, if they are unproductive, if they deal only with facilities and finances, and if they have little spiritual life, the flock will feel the sad effects. Elders, too, will experience the frustration of wasted time and effort. In an effective elders' meeting, on the other hand, godly decisions are reached, direction is given, problems are identified and solved, plans are refined and improved upon, vision is cast, sins are confronted, error is brought to light, and pastoral vigilance is enhanced. The result is better spiritual care for the flock by a more dynamic eldership team.

Elders' meetings provide a model for every committee and leadership team in the church.

Furthermore, the elder council is a microcosm of how the whole congregation should live and work together. Elders' meetings provide a model for every committee and leadership team in the church. As elders work together according to biblical principles, they demonstrate the Christlike life of service, love, unity, forbearance, humility, prayer, and doctrinal faithfulness. Their behavior and attitudes set the tone for the entire church community.

People want good leadership. They desire to be cared for, protected, fed, challenged, and given fresh vision and new ideas. So don't disappoint them. Provide the godly leadership and care they need and crave. Start by taking control of your meetings so that they center on spiritual leadership and pastoral care.

MEETINGS BUILD CHARACTER

There are no graduates from Christ's school of shepherding. We all have much to learn about becoming like the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep (John 10:11-13). We all need to improve our:

- Love and compassion for people
- Wisdom and counsel
- Ability to lovingly confront people and issues
- Sensitivity in dealing with complaints and questions
- Prayer life

Although all elders must be morally and spiritually qualified before serving as pastor elders, they are still imperfect human beings, sinners saved by grace. They have weaknesses, character flaws, imperfect skills, annoying eccentricities, blind spots, and imbalances that need improvement. These imperfections at times make working together painfully difficult. Under the pressure of meetings, pride, bad tempers, lack of love, poor people skills, or a controlling spirit are exposed and cry out for correction. Under the same circumstances, strength of character and abilities are also revealed and become a blessing to all.

The goal of every shepherd is to become more like the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ, and elders' meetings help develop Christlike character. God has used the elders' meetings to expose the weaknesses of my character and to reshape it into a more Christlike character. Mack Tennyson aptly expresses this truth:

Meetings provide a good place to practice the Christianity we preach. The Christian fruits are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Faking these fruits for a church service or a church fellowship dinner or when working for the poor is easy. But faking them in church meetings is hard. The next time you feel that you are wasting time in a meeting, think about the character you are developing.¹

An elder with a teachable spirit will soon discover elders' meetings to be a sort of graduate school for developing Spirit-controlled character. Being a pastor elder stretches one's mind, character, knowledge of the Bible, prayer life, and people skills to the limit. Each meeting tests one's love, self-control, forgiveness, humility, truthfulness, knowledge of the Word, spiritual wisdom, and pastoral skills.

By having to deal with tough questions and agonizing life problems, elders are forced to study and apply God's Word like they have never done before. They are also forced to pray like they have never prayed before.

During my first year as a pastor elder, for example, one of the elders and I would go to a restaurant after our meetings. Over a cup of coffee, my friend would tactfully point out my shortcomings that had been exhibited during the meeting. He would say things like, "You don't listen as well as you should," "You need to speak more gently," or "You scare the older men with all your ideas." At times it was discouraging to hear of my repeated failures, but nonetheless I invited my friend to keep helping me improve. These times together were life-changing experiences that proved essential to my maturing in Christlike leadership skills.

Each meeting tests one's love, self-control, forgiveness, humility, truthfulness, knowledge of the Word, spiritual wisdom, and pastoral skills.

Meetings truly are a spiritual workshop in which God refines one's character, and in Christian work character is everything.

MEETINGS DEVELOP LEADERSHIP SKILLS AND GODLY WISDOM

Meetings provide on-the-job training for developing pastoral leadership skills and godly wisdom. Each elder (assuming he is biblically qualified) has unique wisdom and skills to contribute to the group and to teach others. As elders meet and work together, they teach one another and learn from one another. King Solomon expressed the kind of mutual growth that one can expect from participating with a council of elders when he wrote, "Iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Prov. 27:17). Commenting on this verse in his classic commentary on Proverbs, Charles Bridges writes, "[As] steel whetted against a knife

sharpens the edge, so the collision of different minds whets each the edge of the other.”²

The dynamic interaction that takes place during an elders' meeting sharpens a person's mind and communication skills. It is impossible to participate in an intense, highly interactive meeting that involves difficult church problems without growing in biblical wisdom and improving one's pastoral skills and knowledge of doctrine. This kind of human interaction and learning cannot come from a book or a computer; it must be experienced. So elders need to understand that each meeting, despite how frustrating or unproductive it may seem, is a learning opportunity.

Active participation in meetings, moreover, sharpens an elder's leadership skills and ability to give wise counsel. Also, one or more of the elders may have exceptional wisdom and years of rich pastoral experience that can be an invaluable aid to helping others grow in their pastoral skills. The Bible tells us, “He who walks with wise men will be wise” (Prov. 13:20). As newer, inexperienced elders watch experienced elders care for people, deal with difficult people, and make wise group decisions, they will learn by example—a thoroughly biblical way of learning and of teaching others.³ Meetings, then, are a school for continual improvement of one's:

- Teamwork
- Communication skills
- Tact with people
- Personal organization
- Leadership abilities
- Competence in counseling
- Shepherding skills

MEETINGS ENHANCE GROUP MORALE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

We need to remember that people are more important than meetings. So an eldership team needs to develop the friendship-relationship aspect of eldership as well as the task-organizational aspect. An eldership team that is solely work-oriented is imbalanced. It is missing out on loving relationships, a key element of a healthy church leadership team.

Elders must actively work at building a community spirit by genuinely caring for one another and becoming Christlike servants to one another. Leading God's people isn't easy. Elders are busy people who are engaged in frontline spiritual warfare. Listening to complaints and dealing with people's sins wear a person down. Even Moses fell apart under the pressure of the people's sins and complaints (Num. 11:10-15). The friendlier and closer that elders are to one another, the better prepared they are to handle the pressure and disagreements that occur while leading a church.

The elders' meetings provide a regular social setting in which elders can encourage and enjoy fellowship with one another. Meetings provide a regular forum for sharing personal needs and prayer requests.

Elders must actively work at building a community spirit by genuinely caring for one another and becoming Christlike servants to one another.

Praying for one another binds people together, enhancing their knowledge of and pastoral care for

one another. Meetings also provide an opportunity for elders to acknowledge and thank one another for special efforts or faithfulness to a task. Paul delighted in acknowledging and thanking God for his fellow laborers, and Barnabas is known as a minister of encouragement (Acts 4:36; 11:22-24). The ministry of encouragement is a powerful, rewarding ministry that is much needed in our churches today.⁴ So seek to be a team of elders that continually encourages and thanks God for one another.

Moreover, meetings allow elders time to counsel and admonish one another. We must not forget that each elder is under the pastoral authority and care of the entire eldership body. The eldership is responsible for caring for the welfare of each elder and his family. This includes being genuinely concerned for the spiritual condition of the elder, his wife, and his children. At times an elder council may need to advise an elder to pull back from some responsibilities because of an overloaded work schedule or a stressful home situation. In practical ways like this, elders guard one another's souls; they act as loving pastors to one another.

Finally, and of crucial concern, elders' meetings provide an official forum for accountability. Genuine accountability helps elders (as well as others) become better stewards of their time and gifts. It helps

protect them from the all-too-common human tendencies toward procrastination, laziness, misdirectedness, and forgetfulness. This is one reason Jesus sent His disciples out by twos (Mark 6:7; Luke 10:1).

**Don't fear group accountability—
welcome it; seek it.**

Eldership is nothing if it does not include genuine group accountability.

Regular reporting and answering to one another help elders fulfill their pastoral duties. As a team member, each elder is answerable to the group for his actions. If an elder is having difficulty fulfilling his duties, this can be openly discussed and the group can provide counsel and assistance to relieve the problem. So don't fear group accountability—welcome it; seek it. The eldership will be the better for it.

MEETINGS TRAIN FUTURE ELDERS

Part of the responsibility of overseeing God's flock involves preparing future shepherds in order to provide for the ongoing leadership of the church. Elders cannot afford to be passive about this matter. Paul charged Timothy to identify and train men who were trustworthy in character and capable of teaching. "The things which you have heard from me," he wrote, "entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). This is a beautiful description of a qualified, biblical elder.

These words are as urgently needed today as when Paul wrote them to Timothy. Elders need to develop a shepherd's eye for identifying men of trustworthy character (Titus 1:6-8) and teaching ability (Titus 1:9-13), and they need to have a practical plan of action for both challenging and training potential pastor elders. Kenneth O. Gangel reminds us of this simple, but fundamental truth: "The key to reproducing leadership is to clearly plan for it."⁵ "Church leaders," he goes on to say, "need to produce leaders who will reproduce leaders precisely as it is done in the family—through experience, instruction, and modeling."⁶

One practical way to challenge potential elders is by inviting them to attend elders' meetings as observers. This allows them to learn firsthand about pastoral care. Indeed, no one should be appointed an elder if he has not spent time observing elders' meetings and learning to work with the eldership council.

Many of the skills needed to shepherd a congregation are learned best by watching and doing. The best way to teach potential elders how to pray for people, for example, is to have them pray regularly with the elders. As they pray with the elders about the many needs

Elders need to have a practical plan of action for both challenging and training potential pastor elders.

of the people, they will get to know the people and experience the elders' heart for the people.

Also, elders need to learn how to work with others as a team of servants. They need to submit to one another, to wait patiently on one another, to love and forgive, to be open and truthful, and to recognize and repent of deep-seated pride and selfish independence (Phil. 2:3,4). People in Western cultures value individuality, rugged independence, self-determination, and equality, so it's not surprising that good team cooperation doesn't come naturally to most of us. We learn the skills of servanthood best through the consistent, and at times difficult, hands-on experience of being part of a leadership team.

Our Lord never trained any man alone. He called and trained men as a team.

Of course, preparing for eldership involves more than exposure to meetings. Doctrinal and pastoral training is essential for preparing future elders. Nevertheless, a vital part of that training should include attending and observing elders' meetings. Our Lord never trained any man alone. He called and trained men as a team. He devoted a major portion of His life and time to training a team of twelve men. As A. B. Bruce, in his classic volume *The Training of the Twelve*, observes:

Both from His words and from His actions we can see that He attached supreme importance to that part of His work which consisted in training the twelve. In the intercessory prayer [John 17:6], e.g., He speaks of the training He had given these men as if it had been the principal part of His own earthly ministry. And such, in one sense, it really was. The careful, painstaking education of the disciples secured that the Teacher's influence on the world should be permanent.⁷

Oh, that local church elders might have such a passion for training others!

Let us never underestimate the significance of the elders' meetings. Elders' meetings should be a time of refining character, sharpening leadership skills, training younger elders, challenging potential elders, seeking God through group prayer, growing in the wisdom and knowledge of God's Word, enjoying rich fellowship together, and laboring on behalf of God's precious flock. As such, elders' meetings bring great blessing into our lives. In his book *The Team Concept*, Bruce Stabbert tells of the blessings he has experienced as a result of being part of a biblical eldership team. His words should be an encouragement to make our elders' meetings all they can be:

They [the elders] are responsible for guiding the church people by making wise decisions and by careful administration. To do this, they must be humble men of prayer. They must be conscious of sound principles of management and decision making. They must not be impulsive or dictatorial, but rather cautious and concerned for the feelings of the church. This requires that the elders meet together at least weekly, in order to pray together and superintend church life. Our elders meet on Monday nights from seven to eleven or twelve. These times have been some of the greatest hours in my life, to sit among Spirit-filled men who are humbly seeking Christ's direction for the church. There is every prospect that men of diverse perspectives will be able to lead together with a blessed unity, if they submit themselves one to the other in the fear of Christ. (Eph. 5:21)⁸