"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. 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. This 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.