First Among Equals

Detailed Outline
Part 4 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

B. 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.
IV. 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.