

## Effectively Training Elders, Deacons and Members for Service

### 1. The Nature of Service

- A. It is the natural tendency of man to be self-centered and to strive for supremacy over others.
1. Jesus: “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you ...*” (Mt 20:25-26).
  2. “Success” in the first century was measured by how much power one could accumulate. This philosophy was embodied in the Caesars, the Herods and the Jewish hierarchy.
- B. Jesus calls us to a higher and nobler definition of success: *service*. Many of the world’s ills can be traced to the related principles of pride, greed, lust for power and control of others. But by heavenly standards, greatness is achieved through humility and helping.
1. In the passage noted above, Jesus addresses a dispute raised by James, John and their mother (Mt 20:20-21). Their request for positions of power had the immediate effect of creating strife among the apostolic group (20:24).
  2. One feature of pride is overestimation of self. When Jesus asks this ambitious pair: “*Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink ...?*” (20:22), they naively answer: “*We are able.*” But within a few short days they will flee the scene of His arrest.
  3. The role we are best suited for, and which promotes godly character, is that of *servant*, not *master*. Even *the Master* takes on this role while among men: “*And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many*” (Mt 20:28).
- C. Rather than covet titles (Mt 23:8), create factions (1 Cor 1:12-13) or impose personal standards upon others (Gal 6:12-13) – the sorts of things people do when they covet rule over others – we are urged to “*let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who ... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant ...*” (Ph 2:5-8).
1. Service is the hallmark of the Christian life. It begins with the inner attitude of humility, “*in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself*” (Ph 2:3).
  2. Jesus taught, modeled and expects service from us. His judgment of us will place a high premium on our service *to Him through others* (Mt 25:33-46).
  3. If we understand this basic principle, we will better understand the role an evangelist should play in preparing elders, deacons and all Christians to serve in the church.

## 2. The Nature of an Evangelist's Work

- A. The concerted efforts of evangelists and elders are for *“the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (Eph 4:12-13).
1. As with the human body, the spiritual body is to be self-healing and self-strengthening *“according to the effective working by which every part does its share”* (Eph 4:16).
  2. The evangelist has a part in this process via teaching. Some misunderstand the evangelist's role as limited to converting the lost, but this is an artificial distinction. The letters to Timothy and Titus and Paul's own work as an apostle/preacher dispel this notion.
  3. Furthermore, teaching the saved is vital to the process of converting the lost, for if the church is not practicing the truth the lost will be tempted to reject the gospel, judging the saints to be insincere or inconsistent at best and hypocrites at worst.
- B. Exhortations to comprehensive teaching:
1. Among the Ephesians for three years, Paul had *“not shunned to declare ... the whole counsel of God”* (Ac 20:27).
  2. Timothy was exhorted to *“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching”* (2 Tim 4:1-2).
  3. Timothy was to *“give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine”* (1 Tim 4:13), and in addition *“commit these things to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”* (2 Tim 2:2). So must an evangelist do today.
- C. Beyond teaching, the evangelist is a model and mentor. His effectiveness in these areas will depend upon developing and maintaining relationships based on integrity, godliness and real concern. Paul exhorts Timothy:
1. *“Share with me in the sufferings for the gospel”* (2 Tim 1:8) and *“endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ”* (2:3).
  2. *“Flee youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace ...”* (2:22).
  3. *“Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife”* (2:23).
  4. *“Not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient”* (2:25).
  5. *“Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity”* (1 Tim 4:12). The evangelist's life and faith must be able to support his exhortations.

### 3. Preparing Men to Serve As Elders

A. What is required in this aspect of a preacher's work is partially defined by what an elder is/does:

1. **God never bestows authority on men to elevate them for their own sakes.** A shepherd is a servant-leader; that is, he is given an authoritative role by God *in order to serve the spiritual interests of God's "flock"* (Ac 20:28; 1 Pet 5:2-3). Whether elder or father or civic official, *any* position of leadership has the goal of serving the needs of the community: the church, family and nation. An evangelist will teach prospective elders to honor this service role and not seek a "position" for personal considerations.
2. An elder must have a good working knowledge of God's word: "*not a novice*" (1 Tim 3:6). A preacher's responsibility is not only promoting *what* is right but *how* to arrive at the truth via sound study habits. If he does this well in the normal course of his work, he will be preparing the leadership of the future.
3. As an extension of the previous point, an overseer is charged to confront doctrinal corruption (Tit 1:9-11). An evangelist will help prepare men by teaching positively the truth and also by exposing false doctrines and showing how to combat them.
4. Shepherds cannot feed, guide and protect those they do not know, and yet some elders are aloof and unapproachable. Perhaps subconsciously, they see themselves to be above the congregation; they lose rapport with the people whom they need to connect with the most. A preacher can help this by his own example. He can demonstrate to current and prospective elders what genuine concern and interaction look like in practice.

B. But what is the ultimate outcome of the servant-leadership of shepherds? Is it to maintain a meeting place, a schedule of worship times, curriculum planning, a treasury scripturally disbursed and preachers supported abroad? Those may all be important activities, but they are *results* of more basic needs being supplied. The ultimate aim of leadership is to maintain a safe, just, positive environment where saints are freed and inspired to achieve their highest potential for God. This they do individually and collectively as a local church.

1. Recall the provisions Moses made for leaders among Israel: "*You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates ... and they shall judge the people with just judgment. You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous*" (Dt 16:18-19).
2. Note that the situation in Ac 6 (discussed below) involved a primary question of *justice*. So long as this was unresolved the energy of the Jerusalem church would be squandered.
3. Ezekiel 34:1-10 is a scathing indictment of shepherds who had lost sight of their primary role of protecting and nurturing God's people "*Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings but you do not feed the flock. The weak*

*you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them” (34:1-4).* It is vital for preachers to grasp and remain focused on the big picture, the ultimate purpose for which God desires human shepherds among His people. They need to insure that the principles of God are upheld with fairness, along with mercy and grace, so that the sheep are free from strife and anxiety so as to produce their milk and wool and lambs.

#### C. Some practical observations:

1. A preacher can inspire prospective elders by exemplifying what a father and husband should be to his family. Since a qualification of a shepherd is *“one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence”* (1 Tim 3:4), the preacher can and should model what this looks like in real life.
2. Another important area of “back-door teaching” is the relationship an evangelist has with the current eldership. If the interaction is characterized by strife, lack of respect or a “maverick” mentality on the part of the preacher, he poisons the atmosphere of peace in the congregation and may well discourage others from aspiring to be elders.
3. An evangelist can contribute in meaningful ways to the strength of an eldership. Sermons which both inspire and inform younger men on the subject of spiritual leadership are important. Educating the congregation on qualifications and work of elders can help make the selection process more stable. A good eldership is vital to the unified and fruitful functioning of a local church, and an unqualified or misguided eldership can do much harm. Things dealing with congregational leadership are serious business.

#### 4. Preparing Men to Serve As Deacons

- A. The very term “deacon” connotes service: “primarily denotes a ‘servant,’ whether doing servile work, or as an attendant rendering free service, without particular reference to its character” (Vine, *Complete Expository Dictionary*, p. 147).
  1. The specific work of deacons is not detailed in the NT, but a prototypical example may be drawn from Acts 6:1-7. The apostles distinguish between “prayer and ... the ministry of the word” (6:4) and “serve tables” (6:2).
  2. In the growing community of believers in Jerusalem there were indigent widows being cared for out of the “daily distribution.” The Hellenistic widows felt discriminated against in favor of the “Hebrews” or orthodox/Palestinian Jewish converts. This was a crucial issue to resolve, for it had the potential of exploding into racial division.
  3. This is an example of issues that will inevitable arise among a group of people who have close association with each other. There are “nuts and bolts” problems and needs which must be addressed but which do not fall into the category of overseeing the overall spiritual welfare of the flock – a responsibility charged to elders.

B. Deacons, then, are servants of the congregation in matters apart from spiritual oversight. This, however, does not mean there is no spiritual *significance* to their work, and this is attested by the qualifications in 1 Tim 3 (and the prerequisites of Ac 6:3).

1. As in the case with elders, preachers should teach on qualities such as humility, service, developing “agape” love for God’s people, being a strong family leader (1 Tim 3:12) and intense study of the word of God (1 Tim 3:9) in order to prepare men for deacon-service.
2. It was apparent in the episode of the widows that when the time came for men to be selected to handle the matter, *these were men already noted for their integrity, faith and leadership capability* (Ac 6:3, 5). Evangelists should encourage young family men to seriously consider their leadership potential and invest the time and energy necessary early on to place themselves on a path of active service and growth.

## 5. Preparing Members for Faithful Service

A. This subject is nearly as broad as the New Testament itself, for the outgrowth of faith is diligent service to God in genuine worship, doctrinal integrity, moral purity and service to others. For the purposes of this study, we will emphasize some limited, basic points. First, let’s note our special service toward God.

1. The basic “unit” of salvation is the individual. That is, God does not save “groups,” be they families, local churches, ethnicities, etc. Salvation – a restored relationship with God, our Creator – is open to all but *established and secured by each individual*. Each must personally respond, and each will be judged on his own merits (cf. Mt 16:27; Ac 2:38; 2 Cor 5:10). There must be individual faith, motivation and growth.
2. Each individual is “gifted” by God with resources to accomplish His will in this world. This is expressed in parables such as the “talents” (Mt 25:14-30), the vine/branches (Jn 15:1-8, the analogy of the body (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12) and direct statements such as Rom 14:12 that “each of us shall give account of himself to God.”
3. While we can influence and be influenced by others, in the final analysis we are responsible for the choices we make, the lives we live and the duties that God places upon each of us. Life is a stewardship, and we must return to our Maker the fruit that He would bear in this world through us. “*For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works ... that we should walk in them*” (Eph 2:10).

B. One objective of the evangelist in his teaching is to help God’s people recognize and develop their individual gifts.

1. The Lord made Paul a far greater man as a Christian than he would have ever been as a Jew. Paul, in turn, made Timothy a much more substantive man than he would have ever been if he had remained in southern Galatia. And Timothy made the Ephesians better people than they would have been if he had not come to Ephesus as Paul’s emissary and an evangelist to further guide and ground them.

2. If he is to help Christians develop the potential God has given them, an evangelist must consider them as individuals. He must learn their strengths and weaknesses, perceive both present and latent abilities and understand their deficiencies of knowledge so that he may provide a balanced diet of teaching.
  3. Meeting such challenges might involve working with someone as a co-teacher; engaging in personal studies to deal with specific issues; taking on a “preaching apprentice”; critiquing sermons or articles; arranging training classes for public service; etc.
- C. At the broadest level, our service might be differentiated by: 1) that which we offer to God directly; 2) that which is done for the benefit of His people; and 3) that which serves our fellow man at large.
1. While everything we do in this life must be motivated by and in harmony with the will of God, this does not make everything we do “worship.”
    - a. But when we *do* offer specific acts of obeisance to God, they must be deliberate (not habitual, rote), reverent (not to impress men) and enthusiastic (not grudging).
    - b. Practical applications: private prayers (frequency, diligence); Lord’s supper (focus, self-examination); singing (enthusiasm, proficiency); group worship (consistency, engagement); study (discipline, obedience).
  2. The ideal context of earthly life is among fellow believers; i.e., as part of a local church. We owe those in the family of God special consideration (Gal 6:10). They are the ones that we share common values and convictions with; they are the ones we (should) know better than anyone; they are the ones who will be there to pick us up whenever we fall.
    - a. This service begins with an *attitude* (as noted on p. 1). We see this in action in the first century church as the Jewish widows are accommodated.
    - b. Within local churches Jew and Gentile brethren had to learn how to appreciate one another after centuries of animosity. The “wolf and the lamb” had to learn to lay down together (cf. Is 11:6-9). Paul exemplified this attitude (1 Cor 9:19-23).
  3. Christians are not to hole up in monasteries or insulate themselves in enclaves. We are “*in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world*” (Ph 2:15). This echoes Jesus’ sentiment, “*You are the light of the world ... Let your light so shine before men ...*” (Mt 5:13-16).
    - a. As individuals we have an obligation to all men to serve and help them in their needs, for we share a common Maker and learn to see their value as creatures of God.
    - b. After harsh indictment of the Cretan culture (Tit 1:12), Paul exhorts Titus to “*in all things show(ing) yourself to be a pattern of good works ...*” (2:7).

- c. Perhaps due to their penchant for laziness, Paul then exhorts Titus to “*remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work*” (3:1). This exhortation is repeated twice more for good measure (3:8, 14).

## Concluding Observations

1. If we do not teach the next generation, then leaders will be made according to standards of human wisdom. Churches will be led by those who have been financially successful, who have charisma, who have many friends, and so on – i.e., leadership will be determined by popularity contests or carnal influences.
  2. Teaching on leadership should not be restricted to times when the “elder search” is under way. Christians need to be clear on what qualifies a man to lead a congregation and what his work truly is, and they need to be constantly watching and considering men to gauge their suitability.
  3. Existence in this world as a human being is a complex proposition. No one is an expert at everything (or anything, for that matter). But elders, if truly mature and godly men, are well-rounded, informed and competent in a wide array of matters. They have blended knowledge of scripture with observation and application in the real world. This balance should be taught and encouraged by evangelists as they seek to help men prepare for this great stewardship.
  4. It is not the job of the evangelist *singlehandedly* to prepare men as leaders. It is a joint effort of the whole community, with the preacher doing his part by teaching and example. Also, a preacher who is not an elder will not have a complete view of what is involved in spiritual leadership. Only those who actually shoulder such a responsibility will have the clearest view. For that reason, the present eldership needs to think carefully about its effort to foster leadership in the next generation. (Cf. Josh 24:31; Jud 2:10)
  5. Perhaps the flip side of this question needs some attention. If part of the role of the evangelist is to help develop leadership, the negative corollary would be to help men realize when they are ***not qualified*** to lead. Or, to put it more mildly, a man may not have been gifted by God with leadership capabilities, or they have not been fully developed yet. If this is the case, then pressing for a position of leadership will be harmful to all, and the preacher does a service to the individual *and* the congregation by helping the unqualified realize their shortcomings. Romans 12:3ff speaks to this general principle: “*For I say ... to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith ... all the members do not have the same function ...*”. It is a delicate line that an evangelist has to walk. To exercise corrective authority from God’s word while maintaining influence and good will takes diplomatic skill and an understanding of and love for people.
- Summary:** This is tall order for an evangelist, isn’t it? So much for the often well-intentioned humor about the preacher “only working on Sunday.” The training for service that an evangelist must encourage is a full-time job all unto itself, and much of it is done behind the scenes. **May we all be diligent to serve the Lord with what we have and increase our resources so that we multiply our productivity for God: “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (Jn 15:8).**