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A Biblical Perspective on Church Relationships, Part 3

Ezekiel is a fantastic book! In fact, among the first couple of topics addressed in Ezekiel is the wicked leadership with which the nation was yoked prior to the fall of Judah.

Ezekiel 8:9-12a, “And He said to me, ‘Go in and see the wicked abominations that they are committing here.’ So I entered and looked, and behold, every form of creeping things and beasts *and* detestable things, with all the idols of the house of Israel, were carved on the wall all around. And standing in front of them were seventy elders of the house of Israel, with Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan standing among them [What a shock! This man was related to some of the key supporters of Josiah and Jeremiah!],

each man with his censer in his hand, and the fragrance of the cloud of incense rising. Then He said to me, 'Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images?'..."

At this time in Redemptive History, the people of God suffered under unrighteous leaders who outwardly looked good, but inwardly had strayed from the Lord. Yet, the people of God most certainly didn't complain!

Prophesying generally around the same time as Ezekiel, Jeremiah wrote:

Jeremiah 5:31, "The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule on their *own* authority; and My people love it so!"

How sad! From top to bottom, Judah was filled with rebellion! And it all started with their leaders. Yet it wouldn't always be that way. At this very dark time God promised His people that there would come a time when He would send godly leaders. Speaking about the age in which we live, God said this:

Jeremiah 3:15, "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding."

Picking up on this, Paul made this incredible statement, speaking of Christ:

Ephesians 4:8, 11-12, "Therefore it says, 'When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, and He gave gifts to men'... [notice one of those gifts...] And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ."

Godly, faithful church leadership is a gift from the Lord! What a blessing to be in a church whose leaders are NOT swayed by public opinion, by what is expedient, by the promise of church growth, by power or politics (as they were in Jeremiah and Ezekiel's day), BUT simply the calling of God and so the plan of God for His people!

The Thessalonians had such leaders. Yet, there were some in the body who were attacking them with criticism, accusations, and outright rebellion! Paul exhorted the body to relate to their leaders this way:

- They Must Appreciate the Calling that Rests on the Life of a Church Leader, v. 12a.
- They Must Actively Work to Love their Leaders, v. 13a.

That's the calling of the people of God, but what about the leaders? They had been attacked and in some ways abused. What are they to do? Paul laid it down rather succinctly here.

God's Leaders must fulfill their call as it relates to God's people.

1 Thessalonians 5:12, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those [again, speaking of one group¹] who [1] diligently labor among you, and [2] have charge over you in the Lord and [3] give you instruction."

By commending this threefold calling of the elders, Paul is encouraging them toward that end! In light of this, the implication is that the leaders of the Thessalonian church were to *continue* laboring at their service in Christ's Kingdom. And what specifically was that service? What are the fundamental characteristics of church leadership? To answer this, we begin with their calling.

1 Thessalonians 5:12, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord..."

The word for "have charge over" is προΐστημι (*proistēmi*). This is a compound of two Greek words: ἵστημι (*histēmi*) which means "to stand" and πρό (*pro*) which is translated as "ahead," "before," or "in front of." Accordingly, the word as used here means *to stand before* or *ahead of someone*. It is used in the New Testament in the context of parenting! Parents, among other things, are ones *who have gone before* the next generation such that they are able to protect and direct them that the next generation might mature into healthy, godly individuals. Think of the fourfold description of what is involved in the maturation of a child.

Luke 2:52, "And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom [mental development] and stature [physical development], and in favor with God [spiritual development] and men [social development]."

In the Jewish mind these are the areas in which a parent "*stood before*" or "*went before*" their children to guide and direct them. Truly, parents were/are to be ones who have "gone before" their child when it comes to their mental, physical, social, and *spiritual development*! It is the latter that receives the emphasis when we talk about the qualification of an elder in Christ's church.

1 Timothy 3:4, "[An elder] must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity."

This is not talking about children who act like soldiers and so respond with a "yes sir" when their parent barks a command. Rather, Paul is talking about their spiritual growth and development in Christ, that is the emphasis when it comes to the elder qualification of effective house management here! Consider the opposite type of parent:

1 Timothy 3:5, "But if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how

will he take care of the church of God?"

When it comes to the pastoral care of the body, what is a necessary qualification of church leader? They must be one who has proven fruit when it comes to the discipleship and care of their children, because that is what pastoral ministry is all about! If a man is not discipling his own family, if he is clueless in this regard, he will be clueless when it comes to the body of Christ (1 Timothy 3:5)!

The word Paul uses in our passage for "having charge over" is the same word Paul used in 1 Timothy 3:4 for "managing a household." To "have charge over" speaks of spiritual oversight with a view toward the growth and maturation of an individual in Christ! That is the calling of the elder!

1 Thessalonians 5:12b, "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord..."

Unlike the charge of a parent who must "*go before another*" when it comes to their physical, social, mental, and spiritual development, the authority of an elder revolves around the spiritual development of the body of Christ, that is the implication behind the qualification, "...in the Lord"! Peter gave this charge to the elders in Christ's church.

1 Peter 5:2, "Shepherd the flock of God among you..."

That is the calling of an elder in Christ's church. It is to "care" and so to "*go before*" the body of Christ when it comes to their growth and maturation in Christ!

This is what shepherding is all about! Paul gave this charge to the Ephesian elders:

Acts 20:28, "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."

From this exhortation we conclude that pastoral care begins with the elder's own godliness! If this is lacking, so also will his ability to care for the flock of God! Yet if the church leader is a man of God who has learned how to walk with Christ and so grow in Christ in the most difficult soil, he will be one who can lead others to do likewise! That ultimately is what is behind all church authority!

Speaking of his own authority in Christ Paul wrote this:

2 Corinthians 10:8, "...the Lord gave [it] for building you up and not for destroying you..."

Do you understand the nature and purpose behind all church authority? It is for the growth, maturation, and so the building up of the body of Christ (cf. Ephesians 4:12)!

When it comes to the relationship that ought to exist between the leaders of the body of Christ and God's people, the elder is charged with caring for and *going before* the body of Christ when it comes to their spiritual growth and maturation in Christ!

Yet the elders in Thessalonica had just been verbally attacked and ridiculed by the body of Christ. In light of their calling, what are they to do? Shrink back? Chuck the ministry and go back to that at which they were successful before they were called? No! That would NOT be the advice you would give to *a parent* charged with the spiritual maturation of their child. Paul advises that the elders are to be the mature one, ignore their gripes and complaints if they be groundless, and continue in spite of their barbs to labor at growing the flock of God in Christ!

We must all recognize for the peace and purity of Christ's church, that the elder's job in a particular church is NOT to

- Meet our felt needs!
- Lead the institution into great and glorious things!
- Grow the numerical size of a church body!
- Be a cheerleader!
- Lead the body in electing certain state officials or getting certain laws passed!

The job of the elder is to be a man of God (and so an example of Christ-likeness) who encourages, equips, cajoles, and educates the people of God when it comes to their walk. Paul uses the metaphor of marriage to describe this:

2 Corinthians 11:2, "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you *as a pure virgin.*"

As an elder in Christ's church, Paul thought of himself as the steward of a household who had been tasked with protecting, preserving, and so readying the master's future bride for her marriage. But what if this woman is selfish and mean? Would it matter? No! It just means that the job would be harder than expected! Truly, a wedding day lies at the end of this age (Revelation 19:7ff). The charge of the elder is the preserving, maturing, and so readying of the body of Christ to meet her Lord!!!

The elders are given tools for their calling, the word of God.

1 Thessalonians 5:12, "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."

The elders are to lead through “instruction”! This is an important word in the Bible when it comes to ministry, and it is NOT what you and I might think at first! The word translated here as “giving instruction” is NOT διδάσκω (*didaskō*) which we might have expected. RATHER it is νοουθετέω (*noutheteō*) which speaks not of formal teaching as in a classroom, but of a one on one/one on two interactions. It is an active term which involves teaching, accountability, and personal interaction when it comes to a person’s growth in grace.² G. L. Green describes it this way:

An author would not employ this word to describe the task of imparting information, though it might be linked with teaching (Colossians 1:28), but would rather take it up to point to giving advice and correction designed to change the conduct of a person (5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15).” (Green, 2002, p. 250)

That is the ministry of a church leader! It is NOT standing in a classroom lecturing on the finer points of theology (although that is not precluded). RATHER it is having the pastoral backbone to involve themselves in the lives of God’s people in order to encourage, reprove, rebuke, and exhort them when it comes to their relationship with Christ. Accordingly, in Scripture the activity of νοουθετέω (*noutheteō*) is one of:

- Restoring the soul, Psalms 23:3.
- Strengthening and healing, Ezekiel 34:4, 16.
- Exhorting, 1 Thessalonians 2:3.
- Encouraging, 1 Thessalonians 2:11.
- Imploring, 1 Thessalonians 2:11.
- Having mercy, Jude 22.
- Snatching others out of sin, Jude 23.
- And much, much more!

In essence is the work of an elder! Again, could it involve formal teaching/instruction? Of course, which is why as a church we engage in Sunday school, Logos classes, mid-week Bible studies, and the like! Yet you must see that The Tool referenced here by Paul goes way beyond formal instruction! It demands *personal* and *individual* interaction, discipleship, and counseling!³

Sadly, this is the very thing American culture is going away from! With the rise of the iPod, iPad, and iPhone- all of which revolve around “I”- we are more and more becoming isolated and individualistic! I am NOT just talking here socially, BUT physiologically as well! The more we spend time alone on an electronic device we literally are changing our brain to be adept at such living. This is the opposite of how God would have us live as a community! The body of Christ has an obligation to be involved in each other’s lives unto the growth and maturation of the church- yes, νοουθετέω (*noutheteō*) is a responsibility of all in Christ. And it is the elders/leaders of the church who are called to be first among equals here! Paul

describes His ministry:

Colossians 1:28-29, “And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man [that’s the tool of the elder] and teaching every man with all wisdom [why?], that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.”

This is what we are about as a church and as church leaders! It is “presenting every man complete/mature in Christ.” How do we do this? By involving ourselves in the lives of others to encourage, equip, admonish, and so bring God’s word to bear upon their lives!

With this notice the cost of the elder’s calling; and this is where our expectations when it comes to ministry is set:

1 Thessalonians 5:12, “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you...”

The word for “diligently labor” is κοπιάω (*kopiaō*) has a very specific nuance in the Bible. In Classical Greek κόπος/κοπιάω referred to a beating and then the “weariness” that came from a beating (think of torture)! It is that strong of a word! As such, the Septuagint LXX used it for the exhaustion that occurs in battle (2 Samuel 23:10) or the groans of one overly afflicted (Psalms 6:6). In fact, the word is used to translate the Hebrew, **יָגַעַ** (*yāgēa*), which speaks of the work of misery- and so any activity that leads to extreme fatigue, turmoil, or grief.

This connotation continued into the New Testament. As such, this word used in this text denotes NOT just “labor,” BUT *brutal labor*- labor/toil to the point of exhaustion! In other words, it does NOT denote a 9-5 job that you can’t stand. RATHER, it refers to a ministry and so an obligation that you can’t shake! Think of someone with the ministry of suffering. A person with a terminal illness can’t clock out at 5 o’clock! Their pain and burden remains with them at all times... sleeping, waking, working, playing, when it is convenient, and when it is not. That is why at times they are brought to the end of themselves in their *weariness*. They suffer exhaustion from their illness, *and yet still it doesn’t cease!* This is the idea behind the word for “labor” here. It is a negative term which speaks of grueling toil!

Now with salvation, when we come to the New Testament I want you to see that the word took on a very specific nuance. During the formative years of the early church κοπιάω (*kopiaō*) was THE term used to refer to kingdom service!⁴ Gordon Fee wrote speaking of this word:

Although this is the only occurrence in these two letters, this first verb is one of the most frequent words in Paul to describe ‘ministry. (Fee, 2009, p. 204)

Ironically, later when church office became a status symbol, the language used of the ministry of God's Kingdom was dropped! How sad! In the Bible, κοπιάω (*kopiaō*) is used in reference to:

- Presenting mature Christians to Christ (Colossians 1:29)- and so discipleship, teaching, correcting, overseeing, and so caring.
- Any and all Kingdom Service- preaching, teaching, evangelizing, discipling, witnessing (Philippians 2:16; John 4:38).
- Formal ministers and ministries (Romans 16:12; 1 Corinthians 16:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17).

So we are talking here about distinctive Christian activities: worship, body life, Bible study, serving, bearing one another's burden, teaching, discipling, preaching, and the like. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the negative connotation housed in this word remains. These activities- though they are for the glory and service of God and the benefit of the believer- nevertheless are accompanied by trial, difficulty, hardship, exhaustion, and much more (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23ff)!

From this we behold the nature of ministry in the Kingdom of God, and it clearly is NOT a cake walk! It involves great effort which oft-times will not be appreciated by those who receive it. In fact, so much is this the case the genuine servant of the Lord at times may be tempted to draw back. Isaiah gives us great encouragement:

Isaiah 49:4a, "But I said, 'I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity...'"

Family of God, to have your good evil spoken of- to be slandered and ridiculed falsely, can make one want to leave the ministry and leave the church! Consider Jeremiah's thought process:

Jeremiah 20:8b-9a, "...for me the word of the Lord has resulted in reproach and derision all day long. But if I say, 'I will not remember Him or speak anymore in His name' [that Jeremiah expressed this sentiment tells us that he struggled with this temptation], then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I am weary of holding *it* in, and I cannot endure *it*."

There is no question that Jeremiah contemplated leaving the ministry many times! Why? Because ministry is "labor!" Paul, speaking of the "super apostles" who claimed that their authority was superior to Paul's because they had "suffered so much" declares:

2 Corinthians 11:23-29, "Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine *lashes*. Three

times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. *I have been* on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from *my* countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; *I have been* in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from *such* external things, there is the daily pressure upon me *of* concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?"

That is ministry in the body of Christ... pressure! Understanding this is so important as we labor together to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"! Elders/church leaders, if you get bit by the very ones you are seeking to help, don't be surprised as if some strange thing were happening to you! Toil, hardship, ingratitude, criticism, and more is part and parcel of ministry in an estate of sin and misery- not necessarily a sign that you have done something wrong!

So how is an elder to keep serving the body? Paul gives us the answer. Recall that which he already has used to encourage the body of Christ to stand when the world is falling apart around them, and when persecution comes heavy upon the people of God:

1 Thessalonians 1:10, "...wait[ing] for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *that is* Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come."

Paul's joy when life was hard wrote this:

1 Thessalonians 2:19, "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?"

Paul couldn't have but it more succinctly than when he wrote these words:

1 Timothy 4:10a, "For it is for this we labor and strive [using the words of our text], because we have fixed our hope on the living God..."

So how do we keep going? In the words of A. W. Tozer wrote, "We can afford to suffer now; we will have a long eternity to enjoy ourselves." (Tozer, 2001, p. December 27)

This world is NOT our home. We have been saved for a New Heavens and Earth where righteousness dwells! That is where our rest is! That is where our joy is! I love the question of Peter when facing the difficult calling of the ministry:

Matthew 19:27-28, "Then Peter answered and said to Him, 'Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?' And Jesus said to

them, ‘Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’”

And lest you think that Christ is only talking about the Apostle, listen to the rationale of Peter for the elders of his day:

1 Peter 5:4, “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”

Works Cited

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End Note(s)

¹ As the three participles of this verse are preceded by a common article we understand that Paul here is addressing one group of persons and not three.

² It is from this word that *Nouthetic* Counseling gets its name. By definition Nouthetic Counseling involves a confrontation in which change in beliefs, attitudes and behavior is brought about by the practical use of Scripture in order to honor God and bless the one who is confronted. It is biblical change brought about by confrontation out of a loving concern.

³ G. K. Beale wrote, “The word refers not merely to teaching but to instruction aimed at changing one’s moral disposition, with respect to both enlightening and warning the ignorant about potential problems ahead and rebuking those already entangled in wrongdoing.” (*1–2 Thessalonians*, p. 161)

⁴ Later on, such words as δουλεύω [*douleuō*] and λειτουργέω [*leitourgeō*] would be added when the office of leader began to be an office of honor and respect. Because of this, such a term as κοπιάω (*kopiaō*) was viewed as demeaning. And so the word was abandoned!