

The Chief Duty of An Elder

by Bryan Gibson

It's not managing the church's money, even though that is a necessary part of his job (Acts 11:30). It's not making decisions either, although he will be required to make many. It's not even teaching the gospel, even though he must be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2), so able in fact that he can "exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9).

First and foremost, an elder is someone who watches for souls. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account..." (Hebrews 13:17). Elders are described as shepherds, and isn't that their main duty—to keep a very close eye on the flock? "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). When the apostle Peter addressed "the elders who are among you" (1 Peter 5:1), he gave them this command: "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers..." (1 Peter 5:2). Elders must overSEE, because one day they will give an account to God for how closely they watched (Hebrews 13:17).

And so what then is the most important quality an elder can possess? A genuine, sincere concern for the souls of others (Philippians 2:20). It's easy enough to have that concern for one's family and close friends, but notice carefully what Paul told this group of elders: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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" (Acts 20:28). Every blood bought soul is important, and so no one should be overlooked.

One thing an elder must avoid, then, is showing partiality—playing favorites, treating some members more favorably than others. Perhaps the following "impartiality test" will help an elder see if he is truly taking heed to all the flock.

(1) Will you show an obvious difference in the way you treat your family, and everyone else? Don't ever think this goes unnoticed—brethren see it, and they don't appreciate it. Remember, these other members of the flock are your family, too. (2) Will you treat those who have challenged you, or found fault with you, the same as those who have not? (3) Will you praise and promote the good work of some, while ignoring others? (3) Will you target certain ones for rebuke, while constantly excusing others? (4) Will you move quickly to help some brethren with their problems, while leaving others out in the cold? (5) Will you act quickly to withdraw from some, while dragging your feet on others?

No one knows more about shepherding than the "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), and there is certainly no partiality with Him. Follow His example, and you'll not only gain the respect and love of your brethren, but you'll also receive "the crown the glory that does not fade away" (1 Peter 5:4).