

The Elder and His Rebellious Child:
Is He Still Qualified?

by

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ABSTRACT

The Elder and His Rebellious Child: Is He Still Qualified? Mike Chipman

In my near 10 years of working in youth ministry, I have seen many rebellious children. Sadly, many of them are children of elders—both teaching and ruling. In working in two different Presbyterian churches in two different denominations, the issue seems to be a significant one. One question that I have often wondered is, “Are elders who are parents of rebellious children qualified to hold their office?” The general conclusion I reach is that just as God is not disqualified because of his rebellious children, the elder who raises his children within biblical parameters and who continually pursues his wayward child is not disqualified.

In this thesis, I will first lay the foundations by showing what the biblical idea of the elder is and what his role in the church is. I will look at the qualifications, considering them from family, reputational, and practical perspectives. I will then spend some time drawing a comparison between God and the elder he has appointed to lead his church. While there obviously are stark differences between God and elders, there are enough similarities to make the connection. I will then consider applications of this to the local church, both in what constitutes a man who is qualified, despite his rebellious child, and one who is not.

for Emily, Anna, Kate, and Ginny Brooke
the loves of my life; they make it
easy to lead and shepherd

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Tom, a ruling elder in a local church, sat staring at the letter, going over it one last time. He had gone over it many, many times before. Finally, he brought himself to fold it and seal it in an envelope. The letter had been a long time in coming, at least in Tom's mind. He had toiled through the past year with his rebellious, teenage son to the point of exhaustion and emotional breakdown. His son's debauchery and immorality tested his faith and the faith of his wife again and again. They continued to pursue their son over the course of the year, but finally they lost all hope. They were not sure what to do next. One thing Tom was sure of, however, was that he needed to resign from his position as elder. He placed the resignation letter on the desk of his pastor.

What drove Tom to do this? Tom knew what Scripture required of the men¹ called to the office of elder. The apostle Paul wrote these qualifications in a few places, namely in 1 Timothy and Titus. The requirements of these two epistles include that the elder should "manage his household well . . . keeping his children submissive" (1 Tim. 3:4),² and that the children should be "believers and not open to debauchery and insubordination" (Titus 1:6). Tom played back the words of Paul in his head repeatedly: "for if someone does not know

¹ I acknowledge that there is an ongoing debate as to whether or not it is biblical to ordain women to the office of elder. I have read and now understand the arguments for it, but I do not agree with them. For the purposes of this thesis, it will be assumed that men alone are qualified to serve as elders in Christ's church. Though the debate is worthwhile, it is not applicable to the scope of this thesis.

² All Scripture passages are quoted from the *The Holy Bible English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Good News Publishers/Crossway Books, 2002).

how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?" (1 Tim. 3:5). These words had driven Tom to do what he did.

One need not venture far into a group of pastors and elders to hear stories just like his. I have listened to many stories over the years from pastors who have had to exercise church discipline on their own children, even seeing them excommunicated from fellowship. These same men have often taken the same step as Tom. In looking at their lives and supposed failure to live up to the qualifications of their callings, they deemed themselves unfit and subsequently offered their resignation. These tragic situations raise an interesting question: Are elders with rebellious children automatically disqualified from office?

A cursory glance at the Scripture texts cited above might lead one to believe so. Paul's words, in both English and Greek, are plain and simple. If a man cannot take care of his home, how can he take care of the church? Though these words are absolutely true, reading the broader list of qualifications without the larger context of the rest of Scripture would likely lead us to disqualify every man from the office of elder. They are a challenging group of qualifications, especially the mandate to manage one's household well—a household that includes sinners with fallen hearts and motives.

A perusal of the pages of Scripture confirms the universal sinfulness of God's people. In reading through the Pentateuch and historical books, you follow a people, Israel, who repeatedly chase after things that are not from God and prostitute themselves to the gods of the very nations who would seek to destroy them. Reading the book of Judges might make one want to shake his fist and simply shout out to Israel, "Just stop already!" Reading about Solomon and the hedonism of his later reign makes one think he is reading a story about a modern rock star or movie celebrity.

The chosen people of God did not choose him. In all their rebellion, they had a God, a loving Redeemer, who chased them to the uttermost—pursuing after them with the kind of love that knows no parallel. Did his people’s rebellion disqualify God from office? Was Christ not able to redeem his people because God had done such a poor job of raising them? Is Christ’s kingdom invalid because the king is disqualified as the divine parent of his people?

One easily answers no to these questions. Of course, he is not disqualified. He pursued his people with his covenantal love for them—a love that knows no end and that ultimately sent Christ to die on or behalf.

If this is the case with God, what about the elder who pursues his children with this same kind of love and mercy? Is the elder who raises his children as prescribed in Scripture and continues to pursue them in their sin disqualified from serving God in his office?

In this thesis I will argue that just as God’s wayward people do not cause him to be disqualified, the elder who pursues his wayward child is not disqualified from his office. I will first lay the groundwork for this position by defining the office of the elder, including his responsibilities and qualifications, particularly examining those qualifications surrounding the family. Then I will trace God’s treatment of his people through biblical history and church history, with particular emphasis on his pursuit of them as wayward children. Following that, I will look at the practical implications of family rebellion and the specific situations in which an elder should be disqualified and when he should not.

CHAPTER 2
THE OFFICE OF ELDER:
WHAT IS IT?

When considering of the office of elder, one usually thinks of it in the New Testament (NT) context. However, the Holman Bible Dictionary lists an elder as “a prominent member of both Jewish and early Christian communities.”¹ In the Old Testament (OT), the Hebrew word *zaqen*, normally translated “elder,” literally means “chin” or “beard,” which normally indicates the ages of a man. In the NT, the word elder is typically translated from the Greek word *presbuteros*, from which we derive our English words “Presbyter,” “Presbyterian,” and “priest.”²

Elders in the Old Testament

In the OT, the first mention of a group of people known as elders is at the end of Genesis, following Jacob’s death. Jacob’s body is taken back to the cave purchased by his grandfather Abraham at his own request. Accompanying the body was a large procession of people, including many of Pharaoh’s personal assistants, and the elders of his household. The term used here is not likely to mean “elder” in the sense of an official, but rather indicates that these were important people due to Joseph’s position in the land of Egypt. Thus the death of Joseph’s father Jacob merited this sort of pageantry. Though the term does not

¹ Fred A. Grissom, “Elder,” in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publisher, 1991), 406.

² *Ibid.*

indicate an official position, it does give us an idea of the importance of one who is to be referred to as “elder.” Of the 180 instances of the word “elder” in the OT, two-thirds of them refer to this group of people considered important by their communities.³ Benjamin Merkle states that it is likely this group is not appointed, but one that is given authority by the group that represent and that an elder became such according to his moral character and his influence among his people.⁴

A somewhat more official sense of “elder” occurs in the book of Exodus as Moses goes to rally the people of Israel to stand up to Pharaoh. In Exod 3:16, Moses is told to “go and gather the elders of Israel.” John Currid identifies this group of “elders” as a ruling body of Israel of which little is known.⁵ Through the opening section of the book, the elders play a role in seeing that Israel be freed (Exod. 4:29), and in the selection of the sacrificial Passover lamb (Exod. 12:21). The role of the elder is obviously important to the people of Israel, though it is not readily defined in this context.

This relatively informal concept of eldership is not difficult to understand when compared with how we promote certain men in our own culture. Without any pomp or ceremony, we often elevate men to leadership status because of their deeds and their reputation in their society, whether as a close-knit family member or the hero of a country.

Throughout the OT, the writers listed men that might fall into this category, whether for good or for ill. In Genesis, Moses speaks of “mighty men who were of old, men of renown” (Gen. 6:4). The word “renown” there in the Hebrew is *shem*, which is often simply translated as “name.” Here the word has a connotative meaning, meaning more than the name

³ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregle, 2008), 61.

⁴ Merkle, 61.

⁵ John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus; Vol.1, Chapters 1-18* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 92.

one is given at birth. It has to do with the reputation and character that someone had. But though these “mighty men” in Gen. 6:4 made a name for themselves among the people of that time, God was not pleased with them and soon judged the earth with a flood.

Another group of men in the OT that had this “renown” was David’s group of “mighty men” (2 Sam. 23:8-39). This group of mighty men is listed in a much different context than the previous group. David, the most popular king in Israel’s history, had a group of men that he kept close to himself. They served as his personal guard, and he could trust them to take on difficult tasks and do them immediately. These men were listed as his chiefs and captains. The description of this group’s exploits in 2 Sam 23 reads like a fantasy novel, with men doing extraordinary tasks with the Lord’s help and coming out alive. To David, these men were more valuable than all the gold in world. They also had a special place in the hearts and minds of the people of Israel, whom David served.

Although neither the mighty men of Gen. 6:4 nor David’s mighty men could technically be listed as elders, both groups illustrate how the reputation of a man can elevate his social status. Such men of renown often began to be regarded informally as the leaders of the communities in which they lived.

The OT elder served several functions in his society. First, the elders were a representative body.⁶ As God is commissioning Moses to go before Pharaoh, he instructs him to take the elders with him. From the context, it seems that God would have Moses to take the elders with him not only as representatives for the people of Israel, but also as a way to get Pharaoh to listen (Exod. 3:18). It seems likely that even Pharaoh would have recognized

⁶ Merkle, 61.

the importance of the men standing before him, even though he would pay no heed to their authority or reputation.

During the period when judges governed Israel, the elders approached Samuel, who was then the God-appointed judge over the people, and asked him to appoint a king for them “like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:4). Interestingly, their reasoning was because Samuel’s sons “do not walk in [Samuel’s] ways.” Samuel was an elder to the people of Israel, but his sons were not living as they should have been, so the people did not want his sons to lead them. Samuel saw this as a rejection, but the Lord reminded him that the people did not reject Samuel, but had rejected God himself as their representative, as their Elder. Ironically, the rebellious elders wanted a king who was not rebellious. In approaching Samuel, these elders represented the wishes of the people in whose communities they lived. They would not get their wish, because Saul, their chosen king, ultimately did not follow God or his will.

Secondly, the elders in the OT served as a governing body.⁷ In the book of Ezra, the elders are mentioned throughout as a decision-making body whose judgment had a direct effect on the rebuilding of the temple (Ezra 6:7,14). During the reign of David, Absalom, the traitor who turned against his own father, had elders who offered advice to him on behalf of the people. Their advice was to strike down the king, and Absalom was in agreement with it. The royalty would have only conferred with these elders if their word carried weight with the people. As a representative body, they played an important part in influencing the important decisions of government, even if those decisions were treacherous.

⁷ Ibid.

Thirdly, the OT elders served a judicial role.⁸ Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, the elders are called upon to make judgments concerning those who have broken the law. The elders of the cities of refuge were to find those who murdered in malice and deliver them to the avenger of blood for the murderer's execution (Deut. 19:12). In the case of an unsolved murder, the elders were asked to make atonement for the death and thus "wash their hands" of the guilt associated with the murder (Deut. 21:3-8). Only the most trusted members of the community would have been asked to take these types of matters under consideration. Similarly, only the elders of the community would have been entrusted with the authority and jurisdiction to carry out the punishments associated with each crime. The Lord recognized the importance of these men of renown among the people and used them to do his work and to minister to his people in various roles of leadership.

In chapter 18 of Exodus, we see something similar to the NT idea of elder, though the actual term is not mentioned. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, stopped in for a visit and noticed that Moses was overextending himself as he "sat to judge the people" and they "stood around Moses from morning till evening" (Exod18:13). Jethro's response to what he saw was an emphatic "Not good!" He then instructed Moses to appoint "able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times" (Exod. 18:21-22). Jethro saw what Moses was doing as bad for all parties involved, and gave Moses some sound advice to alleviate the stress on both Moses and the people.

With Jethro's advice, the concept of the elder begins to take shape in Scripture. It is developed further in Num 11, when God directed Moses to appoint a group of seventy elders

⁸ Ibid.

who, with the enabling of his Spirit, would assist Moses in overseeing the people. God's instruction was for Moses to gather people whom he knew to be elders (Num. 11:16). This is significant because not just anyone would have been able to serve in this role. The people would need previous experience in demonstrating their role as leaders of the people before being chosen. Their specific task was to "bear the burden of the people with you [Moses], so that you may not bear it yourself alone" (Num. 11:17).

Another NT word associated with eldership, the Greek word *episkopos*, commonly translated "overseer," also has its background in the OT. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, the term *episkopos* occurs fifteen times and is translated in several different ways. In Job 20:29, the word is translated "God," with the Hebrew word there being a very common name for God. H. W. Beyer sees this translation as pointing to God's judicial function, as the overseer of our souls. He quotes Philo as saying, "nothing, good or bad, can be hidden from God."⁹ *The Wisdom of Solomon*, an apocryphal book, uses *episkopos* when referring to God as well, saying he is a true searcher of the heart.¹⁰

When referring to men, *episkopos* can indicate a number of different offices. In Num 31:14, *episkopos* is used to describe army officers. Over half of the references to *episkopos* in the Septuagint (LXX) concern a religious function.¹¹ In Num 4:16, Eleazar is appointed as *episkopos* of the temple. Rather than equating the overseer with the priest, the term indicates that the priest functions as the overseer of the temple. In many places, *episkopos* is used when referring to the different transactions and activities of the temple, where the overseer was in charge of those day-to-day events.

⁹ H. W. Beyer, "ἐπίσκοπος" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 1:246.

¹⁰ *Wisdom* 1:6.

¹¹ Merkle, 65.

In summary, the elder in the OT played a very important part in the early Jewish society. He not only served as a model for society because of his renown, but he also functioned formally also as a leader, making decisions and judgments according to the needs of the people. As with all leaders of all times, Israel's elders were not without some corruption, but from the outset of God's redemptive economy, it is clear that he worked through the office of elder.

Elders in the New Testament

The Greek word *presbuteros* is almost exclusively translated "elder" in the NT, with the only three exceptions being references to an elderly person. The term is used as a way to compare one person to another in age. It is also used to denote ancestors. But the predominant use of the word in the NT is to refer to a ruler or representative of a group of people, either in Judaism or the new Christian church.

The elder in Jewish society was typically a person who had some important role in the temple or in leading the people in worship. This usage would go hand-in-hand with the normal use of the word in the Hebrew language above. The vast majority of the uses of "elder" in the Gospels refer to groups who directly opposed the ministry of Jesus, the Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. It is not until the book of Acts where we read about the elder being associated with the church.

The elders of the Jerusalem church are almost exclusively mentioned in conjunction with the Apostles. When Paul and others are planting churches elsewhere, we read of the appointing of elders to govern the new congregations. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in the various churches they travel to, and in Acts 20:17 Paul gives a farewell

address to the elders in Ephesus. The remaining NT references to the elder, except those in Revelation, speak specifically of those holding the church office of elder and their functions in that office. The elders in Revelation are those gathered around the throne of God, perhaps as a representative of the church past and present.¹²

Many of the discussions surrounding the office of elder in the NT relate to the use of two the Greek words previously mentioned, which some believe refer to the same office and others two distinct offices. The first, *presbuteros*, has already been discussed. The second, *episkopos*, is used only five times in the NT. It is translated as “overseer” in more recent translations, but as “bishop” in the King James Version. Getz comments that in Roman society this term denoted the leader of a colony.¹³ He goes on to note that this terminology would have been familiar to the Gentile converts, since the majority of early Christian missions were done within the confines of the Roman Empire. He believes that Paul likely borrowed this term in order to adapt to the culture he in which he was ministering: “This demonstrates the freedom NT leaders felt to vary ‘language forms’ to adapt to cultural situations and enhance their ministry.”¹⁴ Peter calls Jesus the *episkopos* of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25), suggesting his pastoral work of watching over his sheep. Jesus is thus the model for his church leaders.

In the NT, men are referred to as *episkopoi*, the word’s plural form. The term is used to denote leaders of settlements. In Acts 20:28, the elders there are referred to as *episkopoi*, with the same group of men being referred to as *presbuteroi* in verse 17. This shows that Paul drew no distinction between the two words when referring to the church office. Based on this

¹² William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967), 85-88.

¹³ Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 186.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

usage in Acts, I will use the word “elder” when referring to NT passages using both Greek words.

The NT also describes the office of elder in terms of two distinct roles—teaching and ruling. Though in the lists of qualifications, the elder is to be “able to teach” and “able to give sound instruction in doctrine” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9) other NT evidence suggests that the elder does not necessarily function as a teacher. In 1 Tim 5:17, we see the two types of elder spelled out: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, *especially those who labor in preaching and teaching*” (emphasis added). The verse seems to imply that some elders who rule do not teach. Though it is clear that the elder should rule, those who are especially gifted in teaching are to be set apart to do that task.

What does the elder do?

The elder in Scripture has many different functions, as the word is used many different contexts. Though the advent of the church office of elder is a NT phenomenon, the OT has much to say about the functions of the office of elder.

The Elder Leads

In Exod 18, as mentioned above, Moses was commanded to appoint leaders over the people. The purpose was not only to take stress off Moses, but also to take the stress off the people, as Jethro said, “You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out. . . .” (Exod. 18:18). They were appointed over various numbers of people, and the responsibility to judge the quarrels of the people and oversee them was evenly distributed.

Why do you suppose it would wear out the people, as well as Moses? As one considers the work of the elder, it becomes clear that having just one elder among the thousands of Israelite wanderers would have been quite taxing. The elder—in this case Moses—would have been emotionally and mentally taxed from being in front of people all day. The people, having to wait and wait to see a man with authority, would also grow increasingly restless as the day wore on. With a number of men of authority and renown placed over particular groups of people, you not only have a satisfied congregation, but you also have rulers who are not so worn out from resolving their people's disputes. In considering the topic of this thesis, it is easy to see why the qualifications for the office of elder place a strong emphasis on family. With so many people to care for, the ability to care for one's own family members is an important prerequisite. . . .

The elder is not simply a leader in the church by default, but he is *called* to be a leader. This is borne out by both OT background and the NT example. In the Exodus passage above, as well as Num 11, the elders are appointed and set apart for their work. God mandates their work and blesses it, seeing it as beneficial, not only for Moses, but for all the people. While it is true that elders are gifted as such by God before they are ever called, there is a sense in which the elder should not serve as such until he is called—whether that call is affirmed by the congregation or the current leadership structure. This calling is to lead Christ's church, just as he is called to lead his household (1 Tim. 3:4-5). In turn, the congregation is instructed to submit to the authority of its leaders. In Heb 13:17, the people are told to submit, in order to make the elder's job easier than it would be if they were rebellious. The congregation is thus exhorted to recognize the authority of the elder as given by God.

This authority as leaders is not a dictatorial style of leadership, but one of a servant leader, modeled perfectly by our Lord Jesus and instructed by his apostles as they led historically by their example and continue to lead today by their words. Peter says that elders are to lead in such a way as to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). The writer of Hebrews applies this to congregations by saying, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:17).

The Elder Protects

The elder serves in a leadership role over his people, and that role leads into a shepherding role as well. It is not enough to say that an elder simply rules over his people, but his leadership is one of a shepherd—not just pointing and shouting at his sheep, but often carrying and prodding them. In the OT, David, who is the quintessential shepherd, saved his sheep from the mouths of bears and lions and lulled them to sleep with the sweet sounds of his harp. His time in the pasture prepared him for his time on the throne. He led his people as he led his sheep—with tender care and mercy and a fierce determination to see them survive and thrive. Even in the midst of much family upheaval related to his son Absalom, we find David weeping after his son, longing to see him come back to the fold. Though Absalom would have loved to see his father dead, David could not bear the thought of his son dying. He wept bitterly at the death of his beloved lamb, crying out, “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” (2 Sam. 18:33). He would later see to it that Joab, the murderer of his son, was killed (2 Kgs. 2:9). The shepherd’s heart for his people is one of compassion, but the heart for his family is one of passionate zeal. If elders are referred to as shepherds, the people of God are often

compared to sheep. David refers to God as a great shepherd in Ps. 23 who leads his people through difficult times to safety. Peter, as he repeatedly reaffirms his love for Jesus, is told by Jesus to “Feed my sheep.” Peter later uses this same analogy to instruct the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). In their exercising of oversight, they are to be men of character and integrity because they are examples to the flock. The pastor’s role is synonymous with that of a shepherd, as he is called not to run an organization, but to shepherd the souls of the sheep—the people with which he has been entrusted.

Jesus is obviously our model shepherd (Heb. 13:20), as one who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). He feeds his sheep. He provides his sheep with rest. He protects his sheep from the thief and offers them an abundant life. In that, he is willing to protect the sheep from “fierce wolves” that will “come in among you, not sparing the flock” (Acts 20:28:29). In the same way, the elder is to protect his flock from the enemies that come from the outside and the inside.

The Elder Teaches

The elder is also to be a teacher. As discussed earlier, there is a special calling in the NT to be a teaching elder. However, qualifications for both ruling and teaching elders include that they should be able to teach. An elder cannot correctly lead or shepherd his flock if he cannot teach them the way they should go. This does not mean that all elders should undergo the same degree of training that a teaching elder receives to prepare him to teach. Nevertheless, all elders should be versed in Scriptural and theological understanding to correctly lead and shepherd his flock. The early church was said to have “devoted themselves

to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). This devotion would no doubt include proper instruction, so that the flock would not be so readily led astray. Paul warned Timothy that people will hear what they want to hear, and Timothy is therefore to "preach the word in season and out of season," requiring him to "reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (1 Tim. 4:2). Even today the church is full of sheep who will go wherever they think food is. It is up to the elder to provide the right food—which is the proper teaching of the Word of God.

The Elder Equips

Lastly, the elder is also an equipper. In Eph 4 Paul includes shepherds in his list of gifts to the church, whom the Lord gave us to "equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). How does the elder equip the saints to do the work? A good way to look at it would be to say that Jesus gives the gifts, and he has gifted men in these shepherding offices to provide the tools to use those gifts. This equipping must be done so that Christ's church can be built up. Just as in Moses' day, one man doing all the work will wear the leader and his people down. Thus Moses appointed reliable men to share the load. The same principle can be seen here, but with the added feature that the leaders are enabling and empowering the congregation to do the work of the ministry. Elders, both teaching and ruling, who do all the work of ministry and equip no one else not only wear themselves out but they destroy the church from within by making themselves indispensable. Through the ministry of equipping, a body that is working properly "builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:16).

Paul's words to Timothy also give us a glimpse of how this model works. Paul told Timothy to entrust what he learned "to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim 2:2). In order for the early church to propagate, these early church planters, like Paul and Timothy, had to equip men not only to lead the church, but also to be able in turn to equip others. This equipping is not only done by keeping the integrity of the gospel message intact, but also by seeing that others know how to teach it. This makes a strong case for finding men who are called to the office and training them to hold the office to which they are called. This training should come from specialized institutions like seminaries as well as from the local churches. Churches should both be bringing qualified men from other places who are called to the area and raising up men from their own congregation who have the advantage of knowing the flock well. You can better equip a flock when you know their gifts and weaknesses, thus building up the body of Christ in unity.

The office of elder is a complex one, but can be summed up by saying that the elder is to *lead* his flock by example, *nurturing* them and protecting them, *teaching* them the way they should go and seeing that they continue in that way. His duties as elder mirror his duties as father and husband. These in turn are modeled on the ministry of our heavenly Father to his children, for he is the perfect leader, shepherd, teacher, and equipper of his people.

Who can be an elder?

The qualifications for the office of elder are high, and one should not glance over them casually. John Calvin comments on the early church's practice in selecting elders to lead their churches, particularly those called to the office of teacher elder. He says,

In this the ancient church followed Paul's prescription and the examples of the apostles. Their custom was, with the highest reverence and with earnest calling upon God's name,

to meet to choose pastors. Moreover, they had a form of examination in which they tested by the standard of Paul the life and teaching of those to be chosen.¹⁵

The church has historically placed a high standard on the men who are called to lead it, but the standard set forward in Paul's epistles is difficult enough to attain to. Looking over them forces one to ask, "Who indeed *can* be an elder?" Being an elder is a tall task, but it is crucial for the health and growth of a church. The qualifications for eldership are laid out very specifically in the books of 1 Timothy and Titus. Since each letter was written under different circumstances by the same author, I'll consider them separately, but as one complete set, focusing on the elder's family qualifications, his reputation, and practical consideration that qualify him for the position.

The Family Qualifications

In 1 Tim 3, we have the first group of family qualifications. Donald Guthrie points out that many of the positions of authority in Greek culture would have held to "strikingly similar" standards for holding office.¹⁶ He also points out that the qualifications were beyond what the average man could fulfill, since the church was made up of "converts. . .from a background of low moral ideals."¹⁷ Paul wrote to his student and close friend, Timothy, as Paul neared the end of his ministry and Timothy began his. It is apparent from the context that false teachers were pervasive in the early church and Paul was preparing Timothy for the work ahead. How was Timothy to do it? He was to do it by appointing elders who were able

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville: John Knox, 1960) 4.4.10.

¹⁶ Donald Guthrie, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Pastoral Epistles*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

to aid him in his ministry. Paul says, “The overseer must be *above reproach*” (1 Tim. 3:2, emphasis added). Pitkin defines the Greek word translated “above reproach” in 1 Timothy as “one who cannot be attacked, seized, laid hold of, inviolable, unassailable, blameless.”¹⁸ In Titus, a different Greek word is used for a similar concept, which David Valleskey defines as “a person or thing against which there can be no *egklema* (accusation) and which is thus free from reproach, without stain, guiltless.”¹⁹ Though much has been written about the difference between the Greek words found in these two lists, they seem to be synonyms of one another. Thus for the sake of simplicity I will combine the two to say that when Paul speaks of the elder as being “above reproach,” he is saying that the elder is one whom no one can accuse of any egregious wrong. Before God, man is always found wanting, but before man, some men rise above and are examples of morality and integrity. These are the men that Paul has in mind when instructing his disciples in the qualities of the elder.

If the elder is to be above reproach, in what specific ways is he to be above reproach? In both sets of qualifications, Paul begins with this overarching idea of being above reproach. The elder is to be above reproach in all he does, whether it is leading his home, his church, or his personal life. The other qualifications fall under these three areas: family, church, personal life. Each of the qualifications that follow fit under this rubric of being above reproach. In each of these, the elder should not have an area where anyone but God could bring accusation against him. Other places in the New Testament speak to this same idea. In 1 Cor 4:2, Paul says, “it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.” Elsewhere,

¹⁸ Ronald Pitkin, “ἀνεπίλημτος” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 4:9.

¹⁹ David J. Valleskey, “The Pastor Must Be Above Reproach: An Examination of *Anepilemepos* (1 Timothy 3:2) and *Anenkletos* (Titus 1:6) with Applications to the Public Ministry of the Gospel,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 96, (1999) : 197.

he speaks of himself and Timothy, that they should “put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry” (2 Cor. 6:3). Paul reminds Titus that in everything, he should set an example of being good (Titus 2:7). All throughout his epistles, Paul reminds the leaders of his church the importance of being above reproach in all things. One cannot lead the church if people are not willing to follow him, and people will not follow someone they cannot trust. Being above reproach in all areas, and particularly in the remaining qualifications listed in 1 Tim and Titus, would go a long way to building the kind of trust it takes to shepherd Christ’s church.

In both 1 Tim and Titus, the first set of qualifications under the banner of being above reproach are those that relate to the elder’s family.

There has been a great deal of discussion concerning the qualification that the elder be “*the husband of one wife*” (1 Tim. 3:2, emphasis added). A literal reading of the English seems to support the conclusion that he must be married. Not only that, but some argue that he must also be married to his first wife, meaning that he cannot have been divorced. Supporters of this view would say that Paul discourages singleness, especially for those who are in ministry (1 Cor. 7:32).

The early church fathers believed this qualification related to the elder’s current situation, not necessarily excluding the man without a wife. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350-428) said the elder is one “who marries one wife, lives with her prudently, keeps to her, and directs to her the desire of nature.”²⁰ This interpretation makes the most sense when considering the context that Paul was writing in—a culture that lauded polygamy and where

²⁰ C. H. Dodd, “New Testament Translation Problems II,” *Bible Translator* 28 (1977) : 115

women were largely considered property rather than a helpmate. By being committed to his wife, the elder was to be above reproach in his marriage.

The same can be said concerning the elder's children. 1 Tim 3:4 states that the elder must keep his "*children submissive.*" The Greek, like the English, uses a plural when referring to the number of children the elder has. Does this disqualify the man without children or with only a single child? On the contrary, just as with the previous statements about marriage, Paul is simply speaking to men in the "normal" situation in life—married with children. These statements are not meant to be exclusive, but to cover a number of specific situations.

The single man should take heed to these qualifications. One is not to live a life of promiscuity and licentiousness before he seeks the office of elder. "Sowing the wild oats" may seem attractive from a worldly perspective, but actions have consequences. Not only does this type of lifestyle contradict the direct teachings of God's Word, but it sets one up for a life of failure when he does want a family. The scars of a "hard" life do not heal easily, and those wounds are taken into the family when he is ready to "settle down."

When it comes to the elder's children, the ESV translates Titus 1:6 as "if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, *and his children are believers.*" (emphasis added). The Greek word *pistos*, translated here as "believers," is also translated "faithful" in some versions. An extensive word study was done by Norris C. Grubbs, which studied the NT, Philo, Josephus, the apostolic fathers, and the LXX for the use of the Greek word *pistos* concluded that the vast majority (92%) of the instances of the word *pistos* are best translated as "faithful," which in the common vernacular symbolized one who was trustworthy and

reliable. The more modern idea of a faithful person is one who is a dedicated Christian.²¹ The comparable NT idea of the word *pistos* is the same trust and faith a soldier puts in his weapon.²² It is a term that is used frequently in secular contexts and is seemingly a term borrowed by the early church to signify a very Christian idea. Of the sixty-six times the word is used in the NT, it is translated as “faithful” fifty-four of those times in various translations.

The context in Titus 1:6 is one of children who are “not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” This speaks more to the faithfulness of the child as opposed to his or her personal belief in Christ. It can even be argued that since the father has no control over the child’s heart and cannot force the child to trust in Christ for salvation (which is what is assumed by the translation “believer”), the qualification that the elder must have “believing” children may be an unreachable one. However, since the father does have some control over the faithfulness of the child, this reading is preferable.

The English words “debauchery” and “insubordination” in Titus 1:6 are probably adequate words for the ideas presented here, but they do not capture the full scope of the meaning included in the Greek words. The King James Version (KJV) translates the word for “debauchery” as “riot” both here and in 1 Pet 4:4. It conjures up a picture of a naturally self-destructive pattern of behavior that is bent on hedonism. This idea is coupled with the next word, “insubordination.” The English word does a better job here of capturing the Greek essence, but since the word is only used twice in the NT, it carries with it a distinctive meaning. The term is used in Hebrew 2:8, with the idea of insubordination, as it is said that

²¹ Norris C. Grubbs, "The Truth About Elders and Their Children: Believer or Behaving in Titus 1:6?" *Faith and Mission* 22 (2005) : 6. The actual study contained in the article is quite extensive, though Grubbs passes it off as minimal. I suggest reading it for a better overview of what he was doing in his article. For the purposes of this thesis, a brief statistical overview will suffice.

²² Rudolf Bultmann, “πιστεύω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 1963), 6:174-175.

God “left nothing outside his control.” Since God is sovereign, nothing is ultimately insubordinate to him. However, just the opposite is true of the insubordinate child in Titus 1:6. We get a picture of a spoiled child who is completely refusing to be submissive to his parents. Another meaning of the word is “rebellious.”²³ The notion of a rebellious child is relevant in any century.

Taken together, these terms convey the idea that the children of the elder should not be open to the charge of being self-destructive rebels who are seeking after their own way. Of course, the best picture of this in Scripture is that of the prodigal son in Luke 15. This son took his entire inheritance early and squandered it on reckless living. His self-destructive patterns led him to the fields with the pigs. His rebellious heart led him away from the security of his father’s house and had him question and turn away from those traditions his people held dear and to seek his own way in a foreign land. If there was ever a son open to the charge of debauchery and insubordination, it was this one.

The clear implication of these requirements is that the children in view are not adults outside the home, but dependents whom the father has direct authority over. The comparable charge in 1 Tim 3 is that that father would manage his household and that he would have submissive children. Surely, Paul is not asking Timothy to find men who still have submissive adult children. The household that Paul is asking the elder to manage well is still under his roof. This becomes more apparent as you couple it with 1 Tim 3:5, which states, “if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church.” The elder is not called to care for the church at large, but for his particular

²³ Walter Bauer, “ἀνυπότακτος” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Publisher, 2000), 91.

congregation. In much the same way, the father is asked to care for his own household, not the household of his adult children, even though that household may only contain a solitary member.

The Reputation Qualifications

In an earlier section, the elder's "renown" was taken into consideration, particularly when considering the role of the elder in the OT. Though the idea took on different connotations in the early church and has done so again today, the same principles are there. The elder is to be of high repute in order to hold office. In considering the qualifications of an elder of rebellious children, this qualification is of particular relevance.

In both 1 Timothy and Titus, Paul provides the reader with a list of moral qualifications to which an elder must attain. Lists like these are common in Paul's writings, and they are usually associated with the Christian's conduct in contrast with that of the unbeliever and provide examples of how the believer should walk with Christ as opposed to living in the world. For the elder, consistent Christian behavior takes on a new level of meaning. These lists give him a mandate with respect to his Christian conduct, but they also carry with them the idea that "everyone is watching." The elder, by virtue of his calling and standing among his people, already stands out. The elder is already a man of renown, simply because the Lord has created him that way. Because of that, his sin and his struggles will be magnified in the eyes of his flock. Every believer should want to follow the demands of the lists in 1 Timothy and Titus, but the importance of conforming to them is more heightened for the elder because of his role as an example to the flock.

The two lists governing moral, or reputational, qualifications share similarities and differences. In Paul's list to Timothy, the first of these qualifications is that the elder should be *sober-minded* (1 Tim. 3:2). William Mounce says that this word has "a cultic meaning of holding no wine, including objects made from the wood of the vine."²⁴ Though the Greek word carries with it the meaning of abstention from alcohol like its English counterpart, the direct prohibition of drunkenness mentioned later points toward another meaning. "Sober-minded" means that the elder is to be of a clear mind and sober in his decision making. If a man has a reputation for being too quick to act and not think through the ramifications of his actions, he should not serve as an elder. Many of the decisions an elder makes have far-reaching consequences for lots of people, and one who takes these decisions lightly may hurt many people. When decisions are tied to the elder's family, which should be the first indicator of sober mindedness, the elder should make them thoughtfully and with consideration of those who are under his authority in the home. A good leader serves his people with his leadership. He does not cause them stress with his sporadic behavior. The next qualification, "self-controlled," has similar implications, with an added nuance of sexual decency.²⁵ This supports the command of being husband to one wife—the elder should live a life that is faithful to his spouse, both in thought and in deed. In Titus, Paul uses the word "disciplined" to parallel "sober-minded" in 1 Tim. The words are very similar in meaning, but "disciplined" carries with it the idea of control over one's will and thoughts. For the elder to live in good repute, he should be in control of his mind and actions, as far as humanly possible.

²⁴ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Next, Paul tells Timothy that the elder should be *respectable*. Whereas being sober-minded and self-controlled are inward attributes, this one is outward.²⁶ The Greek word here, *kosmios*, is where we get the English word “cosmetic,” and is only found elsewhere in the NT when referring to women’s clothing. On this, Gene Getz says, “In essence, Paul was teaching that our lives are to be like cosmetics to the Gospel—to make the Gospel attractive by the way we live our lives.”²⁷ George Knight notes that in classical Greek literature the word is often used to describe a person who is orderly and well behaved, and he goes on to say that this characteristic must be evident, “as is true of the other characteristics, in a heightened way in the bishop.”²⁸ This characteristic speaks about how others view the elder, and could serve as a summary of all the other qualifications. Using the cognate verb in Titus, Paul instructs slaves “that in everything, they may adorn (*kosmeo*) the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10). The elder must live in such a way so that others will want to emulate him, because he is living like Christ. When Paul calls believers to imitate him, the implication is that he is seeking to be “respectable” in his Christian conduct (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17). But our ultimate model should be our Lord, the consummate Elder and Shepherd of our souls, who left for us, according to Peter, “an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21).

Next, the elder is to be *hospitable*. The word literally means “lover of strangers.” The early church took pride in this. They took many in, cared for the widows and orphans, and welcomed any and all with open arms. In Acts, the beginnings of the church are outlined, and from the beginning, there were people of many tongues and nations, yet the Christians

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Getz, 97.

²⁸ George W. Knight, III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 159.

welcomed them into their fellowship and “there was not a needy person among them” (Acts 4:34). As with other traits, this should be greater in the elder. The Shepherd of Hermes said, “the episkopos must be hospitable, a man who gladly and at all times welcomes into his house the servants of God.”²⁹ Knight says of this, “he who must teach others and take care of and exercise oversight over them must be open and loving to them.”³⁰ In youth ministry circles, youth workers say this is “earning the right to be heard.” In order to be able to speak into the lives of the people he is leading and shepherding, the elder must open up his own home to those people. In opening up his home, the elder is opening up his life, the life of his spouse, and the lives of his children. This is a very vulnerable position to be in, but if the elder wants a congregation that is transparent, he has to model that himself. Inhospitable leaders will have inhospitable followers.

Another qualification that Scripture calls the elder to is to *abstain from drunkenness*. In 1 Tim, this qualification begins a list of negative qualifications, whereas in Titus, this is listed among the first of these reputational qualifications. This same qualification is repeated for the deacons as well. Paul’s insistence on this qualification here and in other places suggests that the problem was a great one in the early church. Mounce suggests that Timothy may have even been abstaining from alcohol because of the overuse of it in the Ephesian church.³¹ However, Paul tells Timothy that a bit of wine would be good for his ailing stomach, so there is not a strict prohibition against the substance (1 Tim. 5:23). Though there are not any direct prohibitions against the consumption of alcohol, there are definite stipulations against drunkenness scattered through Scripture. The elder must consider

²⁹ Mounce, 174.

³⁰ Knight, 159.

³¹ Mounce, 175.

carefully how his reputation will either suffer or benefit from the use of alcohol. For Timothy, it may have been better for him not to drink. For another, in another context, it may be appropriate.

The elder is admonished *not to be violent, but to be gentle*. This is tied to the previous qualification, as the two words are often found together, suggesting a drunken stupor in which one bullied those around him and became violent. A violent temper can manifest itself in many other ways as well. Getz defines this violent person as “a pugnacious, contentious, quarrelsome person.”³² This person seeks out confrontation for the sake of confrontation and loves an argument. Pugnacious elders can disrupt meetings and destroy ministries. Worst of all, their families suffer and their children rebel, sometimes with devastating results. Though the prohibition against physical and verbal violence is definitely present here, there is much to be said about the mental manipulation and torment that goes on the homes of men who appear to others to be qualified men to lead Christ’s church, but in reality, they are wolves in shepherd’s clothing.

The next qualification of *not being quarrelsome* would also fit here. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”³³ There are enough quarrels and tensions in the church without its leadership adding to the mix. When considering the elder’s family, he should be the calming influence in the chaos, from the time of his first newborn baby to the last teenager’s departure from the house. The elder, as a good father, is the glue that holds his family together, and he is the glue that holds the church together, at least humanly speaking. A quarrelsome, pugnacious man serving as shepherd of the flock will only destroy it.

³² Getz, 98.

³³ Matthew 5:9

The last of the reputational qualifications that Paul mentions in his letter to Timothy is that the elder should not be a *lover of money*. Though money is something that many people do not want to talk about—particularly when it comes to their personal finances—it is a subject the Bible talks about often. A common cliché in our Christian culture is that you can tell where a man’s heart is by looking at his checkbook. It is cliché because it is largely true. Our Lord Jesus knew the importance of money, as did the apostle Paul, and that is why they spent so much time discussing the matter. Even John the Baptist preached about the issue when preparing the way of the Lord.

In Luke 3, John preaches to those gathered near about the coming Messiah. In response to his preaching on bearing fruits in keeping with repentance, the crowds asked him, “What shall we do?” His response largely centered around their possessions and how they used their possessions in dealings with other people (Luke 3:1-14).

Jesus spoke many times about money, and his teachings can be summed up with what he said in the gospel of Matthew: “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. . . No one can serve two masters. . . You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:21, 24). Later in 1 Tim, Paul writes, “But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tim. 6:9-10). Merkle contends that “The results of loving money can end in the destruction of one’s soul.”³⁴ Jesus said famously that it is easier for a camel to through the eye of a needle than it is for rich man to get into heaven (Mark 10:25).

³⁴ Merkle, 120.

Because of the priority of good money management in general Christian ethics, it is not difficult to see why Paul would include it in both lists. Though they are parallel, Paul words this qualification in Titus as not being “greedy for gain” (Titus 1:7). The difference is subtle, with one trait emphasizing the love of money and other focusing on greed for profit. The prohibition does not go so far as to say that the elder cannot handle money. On the contrary, the inherent positive command here is that the elder would rightly handle his money and be a good steward of it. In the life of a church, the elder will be called upon to make financial decisions, and with some churches, these decisions may involve large sums of money. The elder who cannot manage his personal finances should not be considered qualified to handle the finances of God’s people. In addition, the elder who has demonstrated a sinful love for money should not be able to hold office. The love and worship of money and possessions is at the root of many sins, and because money is also tied to our comfort and security in today’s culture, it makes these issues even more difficult to overcome.

These reputational and moral qualifications are important for the elder to study closely as he considers his calling to office. Only the Shepherd of our souls and Teacher of our hearts was able, in his earthly ministry, to master each of these qualifications, living a life among sinners with a good, strong reputation and a moral character that was spotless. His example as the Great Shepherd is one elders should look to for guidance and strength.

The Practical Qualifications

Though there are several explicit biblical considerations in the calling of the elder, there are also many practical ones as well. These are not spelled out directly in Scripture, but can be deduced from general biblical guidance and wise counsel.

The first practical consideration is whether the elder is in the right *stage of life* to lead the church. There are no explicit age restrictions on the office, but for the elder to lead and shepherd well, he must know something about life. A young man who is fresh out of college and recently married likely does not have the life experience to lead church members through the difficulties of their own lives. Since there are no explicit age restrictions on the office, in some congregations younger elders may be appropriate. In some churches, the average congregation member may be below 30, in which case it would make little sense to bring on older men just to lead the church. Nevertheless, Scripture does attribute wisdom to age, and though a younger church may not have “elders” in the chronological sense, it may be sensible for them to bring an older man on as the pastor to shepherd the young flock with his age-born wisdom (Job 12:12; 32:7). However, in cases where the congregation is older, the opposite can be said. This practical consideration is a matter of prudence for the congregation and the current Session.

Another practical consideration is *the season* of an elder’s life. What is going on in his life currently? Problems in his marriage, finances, job, etc., can keep the elder from leading as he should simply because he cannot devote the time to it that is needed. Of particular interest in this thesis is whether an elder who is in the midst of a family crisis, like a rebellious child, should consider whether his situation is keeping him from leading rightly.

The practical considerations for office are as many and varied as there are men who are otherwise qualified to lead Christ’s church. The questions raised in this realm need to be asked thoughtfully and thoroughly by the examining Session to avoid bringing an already-weakened man into a position that will require his full attention and readiness. Though these qualifications are not spelled out verbatim in the pages of Scripture, they can be some of the

most important questions a church asks as it considers a new elder candidate, or particularly as it considers whether an elder continues to be qualified as his circumstances in life change.

The Elder's Dilemma

A man called to the office of elder is called to a high office. Given the qualifications listed in the NT, we may well wonder, "Who can be qualified?" The foundational qualification of the elder is that he is above reproach, and that begins in his own family. The Scriptures have much to say about how a man should lead his family, both in the Old and New Testaments, and those instructions are quite clear.

Clear Instructions for Family Leadership

Scripture provides clear mandates throughout regarding how a man should lead his family. Though these commandments can be found in many places, none is more prevalent than in the book of Deuteronomy. In Chapter 6, Moses proclaims,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9).

In Judaism, the first part of this section of Scripture is called the *Shema*, which simply is the first Hebrew word of the phrase, translated "Hear." In Deuteronomy, as the people of God prepare the move into the promised land and become involved in the dealings of pagan peoples, God calls his people to hold fast to his law once again. God the Father, knowing

how prone his children are to complain, grumble, and move towards other gods (See Exod 32), wanted to make sure that these commands weren't simply heard by the ones who were present for the covenant renewal. This was something that would be passed down continually from one generation to the next. His command to "teach them diligently to your children" was not to be taken lightly. The Hebrew verb translated "teach them diligently" (*shanan*) literally points to the sharpening of a weapon. One lexicon suggests the translation "teach incisively," indicating that the teaching should be acute and should make a clear division between the two sides of an issue.³⁵ That is, the teaching is to be clear enough for the child being instructed to understand what he is being taught and to be able to distinguish the teachings of God from the teachings of the pagan nations they would soon meet. In addition, Moses provides the extent of this command. He tells families to teach the commands of God "when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Moses is not limiting the teaching to these particular occasions. Rather, he is using a literary device known as a merism, which gives parameters to demonstrate the all-encompassing nature of the statement. For the Lord to stipulate that the commands should be talked about "when you lie down, and when you rise" isn't simply to say that the teaching should happen in the morning and evening, but that it should be happening throughout the day and should be a part of all that you do. The same device is used in the commands to "bind them as a sign on your hand, and. . . [let them] be as frontlets between your eyes" and to "write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." These need not be taken as literal. Currid insightfully comments that "the idea of the Torah being before their eyes and

³⁵ Francis Brown et al., eds., "שָׁנַן," in *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1042.

in their hands is that they are to be constantly reminded of the foundation it provides for all life. Two of the major senses are involved: one is to see the Torah and to feel the Torah—it is ever to be the companion of the godly person.”³⁶ His point is not that hanging Scripture portions on the doorpost is wrong, but merely that that this verse is teaching something broader. In summary, the Lord would have parents make His word a way of the life for their children. In all they did, they were to remember the words of God, so that they would not depart from them.

These same ideas are echoed in the NT. In Eph 6, Paul addresses children directly, which is rare in the Scriptures. Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. ‘Honor your father and mother’ (this is the first commandment with a promise), ‘that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.’ Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:1-4). The commandment for children to obey their parents in the Lord is linked with the Decalogue’s commandment to honor their father and mother. The promise is that upon obedience, “it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Deut. 5:16).

What are the implications of keeping this commandment? When looked at in the OT context, their children’s obedience is of the utmost important for the continuation of the Israelite nation. Not only was a battle about to be fought for the promised land (which the Lord was fully prepared to fight for and hand to his children), but a war was being fought and would continually be fought for the hearts of the Hebrew people, especially their children. The many influences of the pagan nations would always be a major enticement for God’s

³⁶ John Currid, *A Study Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2006), 165-166.

people, and it was critical that the children fully understand that they had a Redeemer, and he was not made of wood or gold, but he was the Maker of all things. When they strayed from that and from their parents' teachings, there was no hope for the nation, not just the rebellious child. To obey their parents was to have the promise of life for the nation. The implications for the NT church are the same for church today, as the children are the next generation of leadership in the church. Though the Lord alone holds up his church, he has given his people the commandment to go into the ends of the earth and teach all that he has commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). This "going" should begin in one's home. For the local church to continue and thrive, fathers must lead their children and teach them in the way they should go.

In Eph 6, the father is exhorted not to provoke his children to anger, but instead to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The Greek word for "bring them up" is only found here and in Eph 5:29, where Paul speaks about "nourishing" one's own flesh.³⁷ Therefore, to bring your child up in this way is related to caring for one's self—it is *nourishing* and *cherishing*. This background also gives greater significance to what it means not to provoke one's child. Not provoking, in this context, would mean for the father not to harm the child—not necessarily physically, but in such a way as to break the spirit of the child who is receiving discipline. The implication for the elder is that to manage his household well encompasses the balancing of discipline and nourishment—seeing them not as separate entities that need separate attention, but as one and the same.

The second part of this commandment is to *bring them up in discipline and instruction*. The English translations of the words *discipline* and *instruction* are adequate, but in the

³⁷ Walter Bauer, "ἐκτρέφω" in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 311.

modern era these words have become fused with particular connotations, so it is difficult to capture the fullness of these words. The word for “discipline” literally speaks of bringing the child up for the purpose of responsible living.³⁸ The word for “instruction” parallels this to a degree, but the instruction is focused on that which leads away from danger. The word “warning” might be a better fit here to capture the meaning that Paul is putting forth.

Fathering involves the command to make his child responsible, warning him or her about the dangers of life, all the while not breaking his or her spirit. Obviously, this is to be done continually as the children develop, never taking a break. Just from these two passages, one can see that the Bible embraces the colloquialism that one never stops being a parent.

One common theme in the church and in the pastor’s leading of his family is the concept of family devotions. Pastors have used these times not only to keep the family educated in biblical teaching, but also informed as to the perils of the world. Early American Presbyterian pastor William Morrison Engles published a document in the mid-nineteenth century that commented on this idea while discussing the broader topic of the qualification of elders. He said, “To maintain the worship of God in [the elders’] families is the first branch of this his duty.”³⁹ For Engles, the family worship, or devotion, was to be done in such a way so it was not boring.⁴⁰ Engles’ desire to grow his children up in the Lord and to keep them in the world but not of the world is worthy of our study, even if it is 200 years removed from our modern-day family problems.

More could be said about what the elder’s children’s appearance portrayed to the community and church. Samuel Bownas, an eighteenth century Quaker, wrote,

³⁸ Bauer, “παιδεία”, 748.

³⁹ William Morrison Engles, *Qualifications and Duties of Ruling Elders in the Presbyterian Church* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010), 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

endeavor to train them up in the Nurture and Admonition of the Lord, and in plain, exemplary Dress, suiting thy Ability, discouraging in them every Thing, both in their Dress and Discourse, that appears inconsistent with that Plainness which a Minister's Children ought to appear in, that they may be exemplary to others.⁴¹

Bownas saw the importance of having his children live lives that were above reproach, just as he, as a pastor, was asked to do the same. He went on to stress the importance of preaching the gospel message to his children, and how that is what truly makes one act as he or she should.⁴²

An implication of the commands to lead his children is the admonition that the elder should lead his wife well. An elder cannot lead his children well if the relationship with his wife is not going well. Instructions regarding a man's relationship with his wife began in the garden of Eden with Moses' words on the first marriage. He said, "Therefore a man should leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24-25). In this act of joining to his spouse, he is leaving behind his previous life of dependence upon his parents and is now "holding fast" to his wife. In order to properly lead his wife in the home, the man has to be released from his first home. This text on marriage is used by Jesus and Paul when referring to the joining of the husband and wife (Matt. 19:5; Eph 5:31).

Paul takes this idea a step farther in saying that this "mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Paul says, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). In Paul's culture, women weren't highly regarded, so that having their husbands love them in this manner was a sort of liberation for them. He goes on to explain that this type of love manifests itself with

⁴¹ Samuel Bownas. *A Description of the Qualifications Necessary to a Gospel Minister, Containing Advice to Ministers and Elders* (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2010), 101-102.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 102.

the bride being presented “holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). This provides a picture of the man upholding the marriage relationship in such a way as to be a watcher over his wife’s well-being, not only physically, but spiritually. Peter expounds on this idea in his first epistle, saying, “Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you” (1 Pet. 3:7). In homes where the husband is not shepherding his wife, that dysfunction will trickle down into the relationship between the father and children, leading to the problems discussed above.

The Impossible Task of Parenting

With all we have seen from the Scriptures thus far, we are only left to wonder, “Who is up to this task?” As it often turns out, bringing the child home from the hospital and enduring those first few weeks of sleepless nights and incessant crying is the easy part. As the child ages, parents are given the extraordinary task of raising him or her in the nurture and warning of the Lord. The task is heightened even more for the elder, who is called to not only lead as the head of his household, but also the church of Christ. It is no wonder that Paul, explaining the qualification of good household management for the elder in 1 Tim, states, “for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:5). The man who cannot manage his family cannot be called upon to manage the church.

Each child in the elder’s family is a soul that will never die. He or she is also a soul that has inherited to the sin of his or her first father, Adam. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “The covenant being made with Adam. . .all mankind. . .sinned in him, and

fell with him.”⁴³ This sin problem is ultimately what has kept a rebellious people from communing with their heavenly Father and becoming God’s wayward children. It is also what compels today’s children to rebel.

⁴³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Bell and Bain, 2001), 289.

Chapter 3

ONE FAMILY'S STORY: GOD AND HIS WAYWARD CHILDREN

From the beginning of time, God set aside a people for himself, that they should “be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4). This ultimately came to fruition in the person and work of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Through Christ, his people today can be presented holy and blameless before him. However, between the founding of the earth and the work of Christ there have been many bumps along the road. God, being the chief shepherd (or elder, if you will) to his people, was the one who led them and taught them how they should act. Yet his people have often been disobedient. Did God fail? Is he then disqualified as the chief shepherd to his people? The OT contains the account of God’s wayward children¹ and the loving Father who could not give them up.

¹ The picture of Israel being the bride of God is also a very prominent motif in the Old Testament. However, the two ideas of the rebellious child and the adulterous spouse can be meaningfully compared, since both are situations in which a physical and spiritual bond has been broken. The adulterous spouse rips apart the marriage bond in which two “become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). The rebellious child destroys the relationship between a parent and child, which is strong by its very nature and a relationship that God himself has brought together as the child was being formed in the womb. Both sins have similar effects in the way they destroy families. That is not to say that adultery and child rebellion should be handled in the same manner, but only to note the similarities between the two, particularly when considering God’s relationship with Israel.

Comparing God to the Elder

Some might ask, “Is it legitimate to compare God to a man?” While there are obvious distinctions here that need to be understood, God created man in his own image, and man, though far removed from deity, shares many of the attributes and duties that God himself has. For this reason, by studying God’s treatment of his children we can discover principles for the treatment of our own—wayward or not.

God and Man—Obvious Distinctions

In his classroom lectures, Dr. John Frame would often quote his mentor, Cornelius Van Til, in drawing the Creator-creature distinction. To make it clear for all his students, Dr. Van Til drew two circles on the board before every class; one circle was God, and the other was man. The circles did not touch, which illustrated the clear distinctions between God the Creator and man his creation. Though man is the highest of God’s created order, he is a creature nonetheless. For Van Til, this central idea not only set up his theology proper, but also his apologetic approach and worldview. This idea cannot be overstated in a day where the church is facing a battle its very soul. At its heart, the battle concerns this Creator-creature distinction. Many influential teachers proclaim that man is but a little god, and by using the force of his faith, he can manipulate his reality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. God speaks through the Psalmist, saying, “you thought that I was one like yourself. But now I rebuke you and lay the charge before you. Mark this, then, you who forget God, lest I tear you apart, and there be none to deliver” (Ps. 50:21-22). We worship a God that is not like us and who holds us in his hands. Our fate is his to decide.

Another way in which God is distinct from us can be seen in the fact that we can't possibly know all outcomes, but he sees all ends and has ordained them all. The Westminster Shorter Catechism speaks very clearly of God's decretive will: "The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the council of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass" (Westminster Shorter Catechism 7).² He creates both the means and the ends, and sees them all come to pass, yet he is not the author of sin. This is a conundrum for our human minds, but it is a reality which the writers of Scripture, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, clearly recognized.³ Man is obviously limited in this realm. Man cannot see into the next second, much less into the past or future. Man has trouble learning from the past, much less deciphering the present or predicting the future.

A final gap between God and man, which is particularly relevant to shepherding and leading a people, is in the realm of man's moral fallenness versus God's sinless perfection. God does no wrong. After shaping and forming the world, God proclaimed it "very good" (Gen. 1:31). His actions since the creation of the world have been primarily for his own glory, and secondarily for the good of those who love him. God does not change, and he does not need to reconsider his actions. Though there are times in Scripture where God seemingly regrets something he has done, this language is only used to accommodate our human understanding.⁴ In contrast, there are few days that go by in a man's life where he does not have some regret for mistakes made or guilt for wrong actions. Human life passes quickly

² WSC no. 7., in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001).

³ This is a complex issue, and many books have been written on it. For the purpose of this thesis, I take the traditional Reformed view on the subject. For an excellent treatment of this subject, I recommend John Frame's, *The Doctrine of God* (Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002).

⁴ Gen. 6:6 is a good example of this, as God "was sorry he made man." I believe that Moses is describing God in human terms so that the reader can better understand God. The rest of Scripture attests to the immutability of God, and that he is one that does not make mistakes or regret his own actions. See again Frame's *Doctrine of God* for a more thorough treatment of this idea.

and is leaves much sin and destruction in its wake. Without Christ, man is not able to act in such a way that pleases God. However, with Christ, man is able again to please God, not because of his own righteousness, but through the righteousness of Christ that God puts to his account. In Christ, and by the power of his Spirit within, man is able to do good. Redeeming man to his created state was Christ's mission on earth, and it cost him his life. Though we are not able to fully return to this state while on earth, we can catch glimpses of it as we are sanctified. It is through God's work of sanctification that a man is able to lead God's people as an elder, and his own people as a husband and father.

There are many other distinctions that could be brought out between God and man. The gap between the Creator and the creature is much larger than the space between two chalk circles on a blackboard. In view of this distance, there are many things that a man must learn from God, and Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, in order to lead his family, and God's people, rightly.

God and Man—Obvious Correlations

Though there are glaring differences between man and his Creator, like any creation, he does resemble his Creator in a number of key way, especially in his ability to lead and shepherd the people of God. In an earlier section, the roles of the elder were explained and given Scripture support. God fills those same roles immanently in his creation. Not only do we share these divine attributes we are created in God's image being, but we should also emulate God's actions, as far as humanly possible, in fulfilling the roles that relate to these attributes.

First, as a leader, God is *the* leader of his people. Throughout the OT, the people of God sought a king or worldly leader to protect them, even at times seeking solace with the enemy. All along God told them that they only needed him as their leader, and that he would always be with them. God led his people through the Red Sea. In the wilderness, he led his people by day and by night. He led them to the Promised Land that was prepared for them in advance. He led through their capture and exile in Babylon, and then back into Jerusalem, where they rebuilt the city and its temple. God led his people with the voice of the prophets, and prepared them for the coming Messiah with the “voice of one calling in the wilderness” (Isa. 40:3). God the Son, Jesus Christ, led his apostles on earth, and God the Spirit led, and still leads, his church after Christ’s ascension.

Man, in the same way, is called to lead. First, he is called to lead his family, whether it is through times of triumph like the Red Sea crossing, or times of struggle, like the Babylonian captivity. By being above reproach in leading his family, an elder reflects the leadership of his Lord. While his leadership falls short, like all things we do, man can still lead well, and to the extent he leads his family, he can and will lead the church.

The elder is called to shepherd his people, as God is *the* shepherd of his people. God “makes [them] to lie down in green pastures. He leads [them] beside still waters” (Ps. 23:2). In the wilderness, God fed and watered his people through miraculous means. God protected his sheep from the enemy by delivering them from their various enemies in the period of the Judges. He raised up a king from among them—a shepherd himself, who would be their great king, and promised that his descendants would be on the throne forever. His people fell into the eternal pit of sin, and he gave his life so that they might be saved. He is the good

shepherd. Edmund Clowney says of Jesus' role of shepherd, "Jesus the Lord came to gather his scattered sheep. . .He is the only Lord of the flock."⁵

Like his God, the elder is called to shepherd his people. Man shepherds as he has been shepherded. Peter tells the elders to shepherd "as God would have you" (1 Pet. 5:2). In 1 Pet 5:4 we are told to be good examples to our flock, so when the Chief Shepherd (Jesus) arrives, we will "receive the unfading crown of glory."

God is also the *teacher* of his people. The best example of this in Scripture is the coming of the Holy Spirit. Of the Holy Spirit, Jesus said, "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). The Spirit serves as a teacher for us in that he calls to memory all that we have been taught—all that we know concerning God's Word and his will for our lives. In this way, the Spirit ensures that the teaching of Jesus will not pass away. The apostles took the words of Jesus and began the church with them. They later wrote them down and the church preserved them in the NT writings.

As he did with the apostles, the Holy Spirit is still teaching his people, but in different ways. Because God's Word is complete, there is no longer a need for prophets and apostles. Today, Christ's followers are spreading the teachings of the apostles and the prophets, and the elders have a critical role in this process, as the ones entrusted with preaching of the Word. Throughout the church's history, men have entrusted God's truth to other reliable men, so they would be able in turn to teach others, following the pattern of Paul, Peter and others. The apostles were directly commissioned by Christ himself to "make disciples of all

⁵ Edmund Clowney. *The Message of 1 Peter* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 201.

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] has commanded” (Matt. 28:19-20)

In similar manner, God is the *equipper* of his people. God gifted his people for the tasks they were appointed to. Moses was given the words to say and gifted for his task of delivering the people of God from Egypt. The crafters of the tabernacle were given special gifts of artistry to construct God’s holy sanctuary. The prophets were given gifts of teaching and proclamation to enable them to communicate with God’s people. King David was gifted with an amazing ability to lead people and sway the masses. God, throughout redemptive history, has equipped his people with the right measure of gifts and tools to accomplish his purposes.

The elder is called to the same task. The elder is to equip the saints to do the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). The elder has been given the gifts from the Lord to enable and empower to saints not only to use their gifts but also to see them grow the church and unify the body of Christ.

In several of his tasks, the work of an elder is not unlike the work God has been undertaking since the creation. God created a people for himself, and those people were given every good thing. Likewise, the elder provides for his family and wants them to lack for nothing, materially as well as spiritually. Still, children are prone to wander. Just as human children wander and betray their original parents, so do the children of God.

The Child’s Proclivity to Run

Soon after Adam was created, he was tempted to break the simple law that the Lord had given regarding the Garden of Eden. The Lord told man that he could not eat of the tree

in the middle of garden. If he did, he would “surely die.”⁶ Prior to their disobedience, Adam and Eve were said to be “naked and unashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Enter the serpent.

Scripture says the serpent was the craftiest of any other of God’s creatures (Gen. 3:1). He could not possibly stand up to his Creator, so instead, he sought to go after the creation. He approached Eve and enticed her with the promise of knowledge and power.

Tim Keller, in his book *Counterfeit Gods*, talks about the idol of power. He quotes American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr in saying that “the original temptation in the Garden of Eden was to resent the limits God had put on us.”⁷ Satan still uses this subtle ploy to manipulate his quarry and lure her in for the kill. When Eve partook of that fruit and passed it to Adam to do the same, they did indeed die. Although their death was not immediate, it was real and had far-reaching consequences. Mankind, and the earth he lived on, would never be the same.

Throughout the book of Genesis, the children of God continued to rebel, even after God delivered them repeatedly from peril. In the book of Exodus, God led his people out of Egypt only to have them longing for the land of their oppression later.⁸ In Israel’s desert wanderings, there were many occasions when they longed to go back to Egypt, because for some reason they considered the manual labor they had endured to be better than moving toward the Promise Land. Because of their hardships, they concluded that their heavenly Father only meant harm for them, and they wanted to go back to their taskmasters. Their

⁶ Gen. 2:17. The infinitive absolute in the Hebrew here emphasizes the certainty of the result—death. You could literally read it as “you shall die dying” or “in dying, you will die.” Interestingly enough, the same emphatic Hebrew construction is used in v. 16 to describe the allowance to eat of any tree, “Eating, you may eat.” God’s word for his people here is simple: As long as you stay within the bounds, you are free to live life to the full, but when you cross the line, you will experience death to the full.

⁷ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 101.

⁸ Exodus 14:11; 16:3; Numbers 11:5, 14:3, just to name a few. This recurrent longing eventually brings God’s wrath upon his people in Numbers 21.

discontent climaxed in Exod 32, while Moses was on the mountain receiving the Ten Commandments. While Moses was away, the people created for themselves an idol (modeled on an Egyptian god, no less) and proceeded to have an orgy in the desert in its name. Though God had led them through the desert and given them victory over their oppressors, they choose a gold cow.

As history progresses, Israel digresses. They have their moments in the sun, but many of them are preceded by moments of severe distress in which they need to be saved. The book of Judges displays this idea very prominently. Israel was near a successful conquest of the Promise Land when things started to go wrong. They began to mingle with their enemies and they were not only stopped in their conquest, but were being pushed back. Like a broken record, Israel is repeatedly taken over, cries out, and is delivered by an appointed judge. Each judge is worse than the previous in his own morality, and eventually Israel falls into complete moral decay.

Upon the people's cry for a king, the Lord gave them just that. Though David is a bright spot in Israel's history, his son, Solomon, did little for the moral stability and rampant idolatry of his nation. As the nation of Israel split in two, they were eventually captured by the countries whose gods they worshipped instead of the Lord.

The people of God are no different today. We readily forsake our loving Father for the love of money, power, acceptance, and the approval of others. Before the Reformation, the church was forsaking its historical doctrines in order to fill its pocketbooks. After the Reformation, and down to the present day, preachers in pulpits all over are doing the same thing. We readily forsake the God of our salvation for the hope of something we can touch.

Like Adam and Eve, we believe we can be just like God, yet all the while, our loving Father pursues us still.

The Father's Proclivity to Chase

No one has ever had a more wayward child than God himself. His people, Israel, turned away from him at the drop of a hat and events that must have amazed them at the time were easily forgotten (i.e. plagues, Red Sea division, Jericho). To Israel, God had become the one who could bail them out, but he was not one who they wanted to associate with on a daily basis. What was God's reaction to this? Each time, He pursued with a love that knows no bounds.

In the garden, God's children failed him. He followed up with his promise—they would surely die. However, as discipline was being dealt, there was a thread of grace. In Gen. 3:15, we have the *proto-evangelium*, or the first mentioning of the gospel. Although God warns that the serpent would bruise the heel of the woman's seed, we also read that "he" would crush the serpents head. Who is this "he"? It is Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, the Redeemer. This is how God would see his wayward children bought back from sin and death.

As Israel exited Egypt, they grumbled and complained. God's response was always right and gracious. In Exod 17, the people of God even decided to put God on trial. God instructs Moses to strike the rock so that water would come forth for a parched people. What is so incredible here is that this was no ordinary rock. Paul tells us in 1 Cor 10 that "the rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4). God, as far back as in the book of Exodus, was demonstrating his plan of placing himself as a sacrifice for his people.

In the book of Judges, God not only redeems his people repeatedly, but He is willing to get in the trenches with his people. Judges is a very earthy book, and the appointed judges of God's people use some very unorthodox methods to dispel their captors. Even with the earthiness of God's people, he is right there among them. Ralph Davis says of this,

And the glory of this text is that it tells us that Yahweh is not a white-gloved, standoffish God out somewhere in the remote left field of the universe who hesitates to get his strong right arm dirty in the yuck of our lives. The God of the Bible does not hold back in the wild blue yonder somewhere waiting for you to pour Clorox and spray Lysol over the affairs of your life before he will touch it. . . he is a God who allows weeping to endure for a night, but sees joy comes in the morning.⁹

This pattern is not only present in the book of Judges but all throughout Scripture. God is one who gets in the dirt with his people. Jesus did not ride into town on a white horse with a white robe. He was born in a stable and placed in a feeding trough. He did not descend as an intellect or an Adonis. He was a helpless baby, born to a carpenter. The prophet Isaiah said of him, "he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). He became ordinary so that he might save the ordinary.

The Lord never stops chasing his people. Though he would send a "bitter and hasty" nation to destroy the nation of his people and carry them away from their center of worship, he could not forget them (Hab. 1:6). Through the prophet Hosea, the prophet who predicted the destruction of the northern kingdom, he says,

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my burning anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not a man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. (Hos. 11:8-9).

God, though he disciplines those he loves, can never completely forsake them. He is always right there.

⁹ Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a Great Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 63.

There are many Scriptures that seem to indicate that God forsakes those who forsake him. One of those verses is Col 1:23. The passage promises that our bodies will be presented as “holy and blameless and above reproach before him” (Col. 1:22). Verse 23 begins with the conditional phrase “if indeed you continue in the faith.” Without the context of Scripture, this verse may seem to indicate that God would forsake those who struggle in their faith or even rebel for a time. The thrust of this passage, however, is a call for the Christian to persevere in his faith, and for that perseverance to provide them assurance for their faith. The believer is called to continue in their faith, “not shifting from the hope of the gospel” (Col. 1:23).

Another set of passages is found in Heb 3 and 6. The book of Hebrews is written to the Jewish believers and its primary purpose is to show them how Christ is superior to and the fulfillment of the OT types, and that they should trust him alone for their salvation. With that overarching idea of the book, one can correctly interpret the particular passages concerning man’s rebellion.

In Heb 3:7-19, the author is referring to the Israelites at Rephidim in Exod 17 (see above). Perseverance here is not dependant about the believer, but upon Christ himself. We are only able to hold our “original confidence firm to the end” when we are resting in Christ alone (Heb. 3:14). There is a definite sense of our own responsibility here, but we should not overestimate our own ability to hang on to Christ, or underestimate his ability to not let go of us. The same idea is found in chapter 6 of Hebrews. When one reads Heb 6:4-6 without the context of the rest of the book and the rest of Scripture, it is easy to think that once we rebel, we are cast out forever. However, that is not the case. The Lord himself also talked about an unforgiveable sin in Mark’s gospel (Mark 3:29). The “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit” is that of associating the work of Jesus with the work of Satan. Simply put, when one hardens his

heart to the point that he is no longer able to repent, he has committed this sin. In the Hebrews passage, turning back to Jesus is impossible because of the person's sin and their distance from him. They were never his to begin with (1 John 2:9).

Though these Scriptures and other seems to indicate that the true children of God could possibly walk away from him forever, other Scriptures indicate that this is not the case. Those who are truly God's children can never escape his grasp (John 10:28). Even when his children are without faith, he continues to prove faithful because he cannot deny that which is his (2 Tim 2:13). Jesus knew that those who were truly his would never be lost, but they would be raised up in the end (John 6:40). Paul echoes this same truth in his epistles. Phil. 1:6 says, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." Though his children will rebel at times, he will remain faithful to the end.

The early church is not without stories involving wayward children and the elder's who pursue them. Eusebius tells about an elderly Apostle John who pursued a young convert after he slipped back into a life of sin.¹⁰ The young man was corrupted by his old friends and his old lifestyle, and committed robbery, while his friends were inciting him to commit greater crimes. Though an unknown amount of time passed, John went to the man at the request of the church, and with the Holy Spirit's work in the man's life, John was able to welcome him back into the fold.

The church through history and up to the present day is not much different. The things that pull us away from God take a different shape, but we still seek them to save

¹⁰ Eusebius, *Church History*, 3.23.6-19; <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250103.htm> (accessed April 23, 2011).

ourselves rather than turning to the only one who can. Yet all the while, Christ, who came to save sinners, continues to walk with us in this strange land. He is the Everlasting Father—never forsaking his children, but continuing with them through their rebellion and seeing them through to completion—one that begins here and becomes final as we enter into glory (Isa. 9:6).

Chapter 4

QUALIFIED OR NOT?

Children throughout history have rebelled against their parents—beginning with Cain and continuing until Jesus comes back. In my own experience, it would seem that those who have the best arrangements at home (as far as their spiritual situation is concerned) are sometimes at the greatest risk for this type of rebellion.¹ Why is that? The answer I continue to come back to is that man is sinful, and his heart is deceitful and past figuring out (Jer. 17:9). Just as God has continually dealt with rebellious children since the beginning, we also deal with them even today in our own families. The family of the elder is not immune to this.

According to the qualifications for the elder in 1 Timothy and Titus, the elder who cannot manage his family well is not suited to shepherd God's church. What does that mean practically? As we raise children who become adolescents with minds of their own and who are wedged between playing with toys and holding down jobs, the lines on what it means to manage one's family can become quite blurred. Nevertheless, though it is a difficult task, it is one worth doing. Earlier I made the case that the elder shares certain roles with God, though they are entirely distinct. God leads his people, just as the elder is called to do. Elders will

¹ This author has been in full-time youth ministry for over nine years and has been working closely with children and their parents for over ten. In his experience, there is no discernable pattern when determining which child is likely to rebel and which one is not. Families with nearly no spiritual leadership at home have turned out future pastors and pastor's families have raised future penitentiary residents. The greatest cases of rebellion he has seen are in the families of teaching and ruling elders. There is no discernable pattern, but that has been the case. In each case, each family was above reproach in their spiritual leadership and shepherding of their families. There was simply no way to predict the behavior that followed.

sometimes have to deal with rebellious children. Just as God pursued his wayward people to the cross, so must the elder continue to pursue his wayward child.

Who is qualified?

In the introduction, I began with a story of a fictional ruling elder named Tom, who handed in his resignation from his office because of the events over the past year with his family. Tom's son had dug deeper into a pattern of reckless living that was destroying himself and his family. Tom and his wife loved and held on to their son during this time, but there was just no change in his behavior. Does Tom's family situation disqualify him from his position? I would argue that Tom is not disqualified. Tom's situation is dire to be sure, but he has not become disqualified because of the sins of his son. Let me expand this argument in several areas.

The Family Qualifications

As we look at the biblical mandate of parenting presented above, let's assume that Tom has done these things. The teachings of the Lord have been a part of their family worship. Tom does not provoke his child to anger, and he seeks to have his children obey in the Lord. Tom and his wife have never stopped pursuing their child, just as the Lord has never stopped pursuing his wayward children. Though he would give anything to see his son come back around, he just is not doing so. Tom needs a hand to hold and a shoulder to cry on, but his son's rebellion does not disqualify him from office. As far as humanly possible, he has kept to the mandate of Scripture in parenting his child, but despite good parenting, the son has sought after his own way and gone astray.

This story plays itself out throughout Scripture. The parable of the prodigal son gives great insight into the manner in which a parent deals with a wayward child (Luke 15). From the parable, we have no reason to believe that the father had somehow failed in his task as a parent. Nonetheless, the son takes his inheritance, moves away, and becomes destitute. What is the father's response when his son returns? He runs out to meet him and restores him to back to his status as a son. With the return of the son, there is much rejoicing.

Does that mean that the elder should simply wait, expecting his son to return so that he can receive him with open arms? This would not be realistic. In the vast majority of cases, the wayward son does not want anything to do with father. They have found "something better" and the care and nurture of the father is no longer desired.

So what should the father do? If communication with the wayward child has reached an impasse, the father may be left with few options as far as his child is concerned, but he should not give up hope. This is a great time to have the body of Christ rally around him and lift him up in their prayers. Depending on the severity of the case and its nature (public or private), it may be better to share these concerns with only the Session, but it may also be prudent to have the many in the congregation praying for the child. When the child does return, it becomes a celebration for the whole community of God's people. If he does not, the whole community can mourn together. In this life, we will have both times of rejoicing and mourning, and we should share them together.

During this time, it is imperative for the elder to keep his other family relationships strong and open, as many others in the family may be hurting from the rebellious child. Your first priority is to your wife, making sure she is able to express her feelings, and ensuring that her assurance is still rooted in the One who rescues His children. Next, the elder must

continue to shepherd the hearts of his other children, as they will all deal with the situation differently. As their maturity level allows, they need to understand the steps being taken to reconcile with the wayward child, and how their Lord never leaves or forsakes his own children. Though it is a difficult time for the family, it is a good opportunity to teach the children about redemption and restoration.

The Reputational Qualifications

Another consideration in considering the elder's qualifications is the damage done to his reputation. As a man of "renown" among his people, he must assess whether he can maintain this status, keeping the respect and admiration of the people whom he leads. As elders are called to shepherd by example, there is a very real sense in which the congregation looks up to him and admires him for his role in the church. This should not be taken lightly, as it is a very big responsibility.

David had a similar weight on him. He had the admiration of an entire nation, and he ruled his nation well. When Absalom, his son, drove him out of power, David had an important decision to make: Should he flee or fight back? He and his advisors decided it was better to flee, and let Absalom walk into Jerusalem as the self-proclaimed king. David bided his time, and when the time was right, he retook his kingdom. The writer of 2 Samuel paints a picture of the complete devastation of Absalom's forces. David, still caring for and pursuing his son, said, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (2 Sam. 18:5). Rather than obey the king, the hasty Joab took matters into his own hands and killed Absalom. David's reaction was that of a father who still dearly loved his son and hoped for restoration.

Why did David not attack immediately? Why did he not overthrow the rebellion from the beginning as opposed to building forces on the Jordan and coming in later? While Scripture is not clear on this point, it is clear that David knew the hearts of people. By waiting, David avoided a bloody battle inside the city of Jerusalem. He also minimized the damage to the civilian populace. By waiting, he had the opportunity to reconcile with some of the people who had become estranged from him before making his grand re-entrance into Jerusalem. Appointing the traitor Amasa as general left him more room to pardon those of Absalom's supporters who were left. Past sins in David's life, namely, his adultery with Bathsheba, ensured that "the sword would never depart [his] house" (2 Sam. 12:10). but these actions show that David was concerned with his reputation, and this concern directly affected the way he led his people. Though his wayward child Absalom caused an uproar in the kingdom that would reverberate for years, David did not give up on his son, and Absalom's rebellion did not disqualify him as a leader of the people.

The Practical Qualifications

The practical qualifications discussed earlier are somewhat subjective by nature because each situation has different variables. The Bible has many stories about men who make decisions because of the practicality, or lack of it, of the matter. That said, the times that men existed in thousands of years ago when the Bible was written are different than the times are today. God's law in the times that Deuteronomy was written had rebellious sons stoned in public for their incorrigibility. For reasons his own, the Lord chose this law for the people of that day. For today, it would not serve the church well to begin stoning its rebellious children. The church's purpose in the world has changed since the days of the OT:

whereas their purpose was to conquer, ours is to convert. The two are one in the same, but obviously have different outcomes. For the church to still follow the OT law in this regard would carry with it a great level of social discord, not to mention the fact that the church would have to do so in secret, since our nation's laws would not allow for such punishment. All things considered, the elder must choose other avenues when addressing his rebellious children, and as he considers his own qualification for office.

One question that needs to be asked in these situations is, "Is the elder still able to fulfill the roles of an elder?" As discussed above, the elder is to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip the saints. Are the situations with the insolent child stripping him of his ability to rule the people God has placed under him? Are his sheep in the church becoming malnourished because his sheep at home are causing so much distress? If he's a teaching elder, are his sermons beginning to sound alike because they are all addressed the problem with which his son is currently wrestling? Is his ability to enable and empower the congregation to do the work of ministry falling short because he himself cannot do the work of ministry? The elder must ask these questions of himself. He must also rely on his brethren on the Session or in the Presbytery.

First the elder should consult his brothers on the session, seeking advice and counsel. Scripture calls us to bear one another burdens (Gal. 6:2). There are times when we will rejoice together, and other times we will weep together. The elder should seek the counsel of the Session in how to be to love the son and lead the rest of his family. Together, they must assess the state of the congregation as it struggles together with the elder. Is there an undercurrent of gossip concerning the situation that the elders need to stamp out? His brothers on the Session and in the Presbytery should run interference for him as far as they

are able. He should give his fellow elders specific requests to be praying over and give regular updates on the progress of the situation.

Secondly, the elder should seek accountability. He should go humbly before the Session of the church and ask them to test his actions and see if there is anything he has done wrong. It is important for an elder to make his own determination of his effectiveness as a shepherd of his family, but an outsider has a much better view. He should ask the elders to hold him accountable to each of the qualifications in Paul's letters, since one failing of those qualifications can lead to others. Other broader questions that need to be addressed are the status of the elder's relationship with the Lord, his marriage, his worship attendance and participation, and his participation in the life of the church. In the same way, the elder should also ask to be held accountable for any damage done to his reputation and that of his family. If damage has been done to his reputation, the elders should evaluate the ability to salvage it.

Thirdly, the elder should consult the session as to the need for discipline in the case of the wayward child. If the child is a communing member of the church, there are certain steps that need to be taken to administer church discipline. It could simply be that one of the other elders needs to meet with the son for coffee one morning. A rebellious teen is likely to speak to someone else other than his direct authority figure, particularly if trust has been built in that relationship. This is one reason it is vital for the elders to not only be caring for the people in the church, but also for each other and each other's families.

Who is disqualified?

Though an elder is not disqualified for having children who lead reckless, insubordinate lives, the qualifications listed in the NT must not be discounted. They should be considered carefully and each situation should be handled with the utmost care. Inevitably, there will be those cases when the elder has failed in his duty to lead his family and manage his household, and in those cases he should be disqualified from his office.

In assessing whether an elder with a rebellious teen should be disqualified, the first question that should be asked is, “Has the elder led his family spiritually?” Alexander Strauch lists this as a key measure for evaluating a man’s suitability to the office.² He goes on to say that, “A well-managed family means that the children obey and submit to the father’s leadership. The way in which that relationship is manifested is especially important: it is to be ‘with all dignity.’”³ Has the man followed the mandate of the Lord in Deuteronomy in making the Word of the Lord a part of his family’s makeup? Has he heeded the instruction of Paul in not provoking his children to anger, but growing them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord? These questions are basic in dealing with an elder who has rebellious children. The crux of the questions is this: has he, to the best of his ability, done the job he was called to as the head of the household and as a parent? The spouse should also be brought in for an interview, and perhaps even the child if the situation is appropriate. This is not a trial, but more of an interview to get a sense of how things have been handled in the family. If the elders have done good passive discipline, the session should already have a basic knowledge of these things.

² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 199.

³ *Ibid.*

Next, has the elder pursued his child in such a way as to lead him back to the fold? In the Lord's dealings with Israel, He acted as Father who rightly disciplines his children for their acts of debauchery and idolatry, all the while extending his hand of grace and mercy in the act of redemption. Christ did not die for us when we had come back to him, but while we were still sinners (Rom. 5:8). What is the elder doing to actively pursue his child in loving discipline and in the grace and mercy of the Lord? Has he done everything possible to see the son be restored or has he given up on his son?

In dealing with a man caught in a sinful sexual act, Paul's admonition to the Corinthian church is "to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (1 Cor. 5:5). This "delivering" of the person to Satan is not a an altercation with the devil himself, but a removal of the man from the fellowship of the church and a turning lose into the world. The purpose of this act is not for the man's destruction, but for the restoration of his soul.

The question for the Session to consider, then, is the motives of the father of the rebellious child. If he did give up on his child, was it because he thought it would bring restoration? Did he seek the advice of the other elders before doing so, or was it a brash decision based on emotions or the heat of the moment. These questions need to be taken into consideration when the wayward son has been cast out. These situations are typically very complex and have many layers of distrust and abuse of relationship. They cannot easily be diagnosed nor can they easily find healing. Sometimes, the best thing a man can do in a situation like this is to step down from his office of elder, particularly if he has acted out of character and hasn't been above reproach in dealing with his family.

Thirdly, the Session should examine the damage done to the elder's reputation. Even if he has been above reproach in leading his family, a reputation that is beyond repair will hinder him from fulfilling his responsibilities as an elder. If the people will not follow him, he cannot lead. If they will not listen to his voice, he cannot shepherd them or teach them. If they do not respect his authority, he cannot equip them. The Session should consider these matters delicately, since not only is the reputation of the elder at stake, but also his entire family. In cases where this type of damage has occurred, the Session should make a statement in front of the congregation, affirming the elder's dedication to his family, yet confirming this reputational damage. In some cases, it may bring about repentance among the congregation.

Lastly, the Session should examine the practical ability of the elder to continue serving. If he has done right in leading his family and his reputation is still intact, there still may be a good reason for him to step down from his office. The time that it takes him to pursue his son may make him unable to fulfill his functions as an elder. Bringing in his prodigal may take priority over his position as an elder in the church. If there is turmoil in his first family, his larger family, the church, will have to go on without his leadership for a time. Also, if the elder has become emotionally or spiritual unstable as a result of the situation with his wayward child, it is right for him to consider stepping down. The Session should examine these areas with frank yet loving questions concerning his state of being. Some families may have difficulty seeing or understanding the condition their family problems have left them in, and they may need others to clarify this for them. Another consideration is the state of the elder's marriage. Has this situation taken a significant toll on the elder's relationship with his wife? If so, the Session may decide that it is best for him to either take a sabbatical to mend

the damage done to the marriage, or step down altogether, for the better of his marriage and family.

An elder who has damaged his ability to lead Christ's church because of his own sin should be disqualified from the office of elder. Though he should not lead the church, this does not disqualify him from membership in the body of Christ, as our salvation rests on Christ's merit, not our own. In that, the elder's status as a brother in Christ should be publicly affirmed. To keep these proceedings private could further damage a church with gossip and slander. The meetings discussing the details of the situation should remain private for the sake of the people involved, but the results should not. The purpose of this type of discipline is never punishment, but restoration.

Restoration of the Disqualified Elder

Paul warns Timothy, "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Tim. 5:22). Strauch draws a correlation between this warning and the restoration of elders who have fallen. He says, "The same principle applies, particularly in this context, to a disciplined elder who seeks restoration to his position after being removed from office because of sin." Though the Session should not lightly consider this process, Scripture does allow for the restoration of fallen brothers, and as with any discipline case, that is the ultimate goal.

An elder who has been removed from office, after a time, may feel ready to be reinstated to his former position. Though he has the right, it may not always be in the best interest of the church. Hasty decisions in this area can bring more damage to the church than the original discipline did. Even if the elder stepped down voluntarily for circumstances surrounding a rebellious child, restoration is a process that takes time. J. Carl Laney writes:

Restoration takes time. If the service station attendant gives me directions which result in my getting lost, it will be a long time before I trust his directions again. If a husband commits adultery, it will require a long period of faithfulness to restore his wife's trust. Similarly, sufficient time must pass for a disciplined Christian worker to be tried and proven. The leader who has fallen must once again earn the reputation of being "above reproach." It took years of faithful Christian living to qualify the first time. It may take that long to re-qualify for leadership after a fall.⁴

In view of this, the leaders of the church should not be quick to lay hands on a leader after his fall. There should be a long period of reexamination of his character. Pertaining to the fall concerning a rebellious child, the circumstances should be reexamined and an update should be given. Has the son/daughter continued in their sin or have they re-embraced Christ? Has the elder continued pursuit of their child or have they given up hope? What is the general feel and mood of the congregation concerning this matter? For some, the situation may still be too near to discuss, and these matters should not be taken lightly. The Session must also consider the effect the restoration of the elder will have on his family life. His family may not be ready to reopen the wounds of the past hurt, which a restoration to his office will most definitely do to one degree or another.

Paul's warning to Timothy regarding laying on hands on leaders too hastily ends with the comment that to do so would mean that we are "participating in the sins of others." By that, he means that by considering reconciliation to hastily, the Session risks enabling the man to further sin, thus becoming a stumbling block. Reconciliation is the goal for all discipline, but each Session should consider the ramifications carefully.

⁴ J. Carl Laney, *A Guide to Church Discipline* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1985), 124.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

The task of leading Christ's church is a tall order. Paul's letters to Timothy are full of encouragement and instruction to him for this difficult endeavor. Paul gave these instruction to Timothy that he might "know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). God has called today's "men of renown" to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip Christ's church to be a witness to this truth. With the strains on families today, it is difficult enough to lead your own family, much less the family of God. In a world that is desperate for a Savior, there are bound to be casualties, and some of those will come in the form of rebellious children. Even the elders of the people of God are not immune from this. Just as the Lord is not disqualified from being the Covenant Lord of his wayward and idolatrous people, the elder who has sought to biblically parent his child and pursue them as they go astray is not automatically disqualified from his office. These situations are delicate and should be handled with care. In the same way that we are not to be too hasty in the laying on of hands, we should not be too hasty in the stripping of that same vesting (1 Tim. 5:22).

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