

THE ELDER AND HIS WORK
DAVID DICKSON

This is a summary of David Dickson's book, *The Elder and His Work*.

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Chapter 1: The Importance of Eldership

We don't need new offices or organizations, we need new power

We need no new machinery in the Christian Church. It is all provided ready to our hand in the Presbyterian system. What we need is motive-power to set it going and keep it going. We need the baptism of the Spirit to fill us elders with love and zeal, that we may labor in our office and that the work of our hands may be established. (5)

Scripture AND Common Sense Demands Eldership

So necessary is the eldership for the superintendence of a congregation that practical wisdom would demand it even if Scripture did not provide it. In ordinary congregations it is physically impossible for the ministers to do all that is needful, or they must cease to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word...It is therefore utterly impossible for him, singly and alone, to care for several hundred souls as they ought to be cared for. (6)

Chapter 2: The Elder's Qualifications

Epistles to Timothy and Titus and 1 Peter.

1. Spirituality: Spiritual Work Requires Spiritual Men

The office and work being spiritual, it is necessary that elders should be spiritual men. It is not necessary that they be men of great gifts or worldly position, of wealth or high education; but it is indispensably necessary that they be men of God, at peace with him, new creatures in Christ Jesus; engaged in the embassy of reconciliation, they must be themselves reconciled. We must love the Master, and the work for the Master's sake. If we do love it, it will be a happy service because a willing service. And as our souls prosper our work will prosper; the joy of the Lord will be our strength. (7)

2. Knowledge of the Word of God

Not that we must be theologians, able to grapple learnedly with all heresies or controversies; but we should be well read in our Bibles, and able to do what Aquila and Priscilla did to Apollos.

Elders should be men to a certain extent "established, strengthened, settled," not "novices," whom the elevation to office in the Church is likely to make heady, forward, crotchety, conceited. For very young men and very young Christians other useful though humbler spheres are more suitable. It is a very great help to an elder to have been for some years previously a Sabbath-school teacher, and thus accustomed to study the truth and to apply it. Such work will also test his intelligence and interest in divine things. (8)

The old heresies assume new forms well worthy of study and detection; and the world listens to an exposure of them more readily from laymen than from ministers, even though not half so able or conclusive. (9)

3. Common Sense

Elders should be men of common sense, knowing when to speak and when to hold their tongues. Even grace does not give common sense, a little of which would settle many controversies and heresies in the Church of Christ. Men of points and pugnacity are very annoying in a session or congregation, and they may rise to be the terror of presbyteries and other church courts. (9)

A carping, censorious spirit is to be watched and prayed against in all of us: it is often the precursor or companion of backsliding in doctrine or life. An uneasy conscience likes to find faults in others. Having many different characters and tempers to deal with, we need as elders to be men of a meek and quiet spirit, not going from one extreme to another — men of practical wisdom and sanctified common sense, and thus able to judge of matters calmly and not as partisans. (10)

4. Consistent in Life and Conversation

We must be consistent in our life and conversation; we must be clean that bear the vessels of the Lord; men of good report, both with them that are without and them that are within the Church; model members of it; ensamples to the flock in faith, hope and charity, ruling our own children and our own houses well....Let us elders avoid all appearance of evil. Let us be known in business as men whose word is as good as our bond; not mean or shabby in our dealings, not considered hard or money-loving men...Let us by our daily life declare plainly that we seek a country by our being sober, just, holy, temperate. Let us be liberal to Christ's cause according to our ability; attached to our own Church and our own congregation, and at the same time lovers of all good men and good causes, for the man who loves his own family best has usually most room in his heart for those outside of it; given to hospitality and seeking to make our house a home for God's people. (10-11)

The usefulness of an elder will depend in the long run more on his character than on his gifts and knowledge. Quiet Christian consistency will give weight to his words of advice and be a daily lesson to all around. His walk and conversation, his style of living, his companions and friends, his geniality, his amusements, will all have an important influence, not only on his own family, but on the people of his district and congregation. Young people especially notice, and get good or evil from, much that they do not speak about to others. They should learn from us what a Christian is like, not by the frequent use of certain pious expressions, but by the clear, transparent outflow of a life hid with Christ in God. (11)

5. Deep Sympathy

Last, not least, we should be men of deep sympathy — not only having human kindness in our hearts, but that sanctified and consecrated. Having experience of the ups and downs of human life, we should have sympathy with human hearts, ready ever to weep with them that weep and rejoice with them that rejoice. The world is not governed by logic, and to do much good in it, especially as Christian men and elders, the words of truth we speak must come warm from our hearts, or they fall cold and pointless. (12)

Chapter 3: Duties of Elders

Five Duties

1. That they sit in session along with the minister, and assist in the administration of discipline and in the spiritual government of the church.
2. That they take a careful oversight of the people's morals and religious principles, of the attendance upon public ordinances and of the state of personal and family religion.
3. That they visit the sick from time to time in their several districts.
4. That they superintend the religious instruction of the young, and assist the minister in ascertaining the qualifications of applicants for admission to sealing ordinances.

5. That they superintend and promote the formation of meetings within their districts for prayer, reading of the Scriptures and Christian fellowship among the members of the church. (13)

(extract from an act of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, passed in 1846)

Two Disadvantages

1. *While he has a general idea of the work to which he has been set apart, there is no prescribed or understood plan laid down for him in the doing of it.*

Each elder has thus been left to do what seemed right in his own eyes. Any fixed plan it would be impossible to lay down, as every elder, every district and every congregation differs so much from every other. We can therefore easily understand how elders who are timid or inexperienced feel a difficulty, and do much less than they might do.

2. *The time when he should visit his district is not naturally suggested.* A minister once said to us regretfully, in reference in his week-day duties, "No bell rings me to my work." The remark applies still more to an elder. No bell, not even the Sabbath-bell, rings him to his work; he can do it at any time. There is no day or hour that naturally reminds him of his duty, a disadvantage under which a deacon or Sabbath-school teacher does not labor. No wonder that with some of us the any time becomes the no time, and especially if we have never so engaged in the work as to have known the blessedness and enjoyment of it. (13-14)

The Solution

We do not suggest that our churches should lay down rules, either as to details of the work elders should do or the time when they should do it... We would rather seek, by bringing under the notice of elders the various plans by which elders of different churches and congregations seek to discharge their duty, to furnish hints as to how we may in our several spheres use the office to which we have been ordained for the good of the souls committed to our care. (14)

The Hours

The time required for the efficient discharge of the elder's duties is not great, especially where the office of the deacon is established. On the average, and generally speaking, two hours a week might be enough, perhaps even less. Most Christian men should be able and willing thus to give one-fiftieth part of their week-day waking hours to this work, and we are sure that neither their family nor their business would be a loser. (14)

Flexibility Required

These differences make it essential that prayerful wisdom should guide each elder, or at least each church-session, to decide as to what plans of usefulness are suitable in each case. It is "as we have opportunity" that we are "to do good unto all men." Let us set our ingenuity to work, that we may be able in the best sense to be all things to all men, that we may save some. In any way, and every way consistent with Scripture and good sense, let us aim at this great end. (16)

Chapter 4: The Elder in His District

The Size of Districts

If a district be too small, the elder is apt to underestimate the importance of his work; if too large, he is apt to think it cannot possibly be overtaken, and thus to do less than he might do.

In the allotment of districts care should be taken by the session that the residence and qualifications of each elder are suitable to the district assigned to him; the right man should be put in the right place.

In large congregations, besides the local district elders, some of the brethren who have suitable qualifications might be appointed to duties instead of districts, such as the superintendence of the congregational Sabbath-school or of the district mission, the care of widows or orphans, of students or young men coming from the country. (16-17)

District Elder Rolls

In addition to the communicants' roll, kept alphabetically, it is well that the session-clerk keep a list of members arranged in districts....An elder's district-roll should contain the names of all the members of the families, not only of those who are communicants, but of all the children. It should show who have communicated at each sacramental season, and the dates of his visits to each family. (17)

Know The Sheep

If possible, every elder should personally know every member of the congregation, which in our smaller congregations it will not be difficult for him to do. If the great ends of our office are, by God's blessing, to be attained, it is plain, in the first place, that the elder must know the people in his district. He must be acquainted with them all, old and young, their history, their occupations, their habits, their ways of thinking. They and their children should be his personal friends, so that they naturally turn to him as to one on whom they can depend as a kind and sympathizing friend and a faithful counselor. He must know them as they are at home, at their own fireside. As Dr. Chalmers said, "The way into a man's heart is in at the door of his house." And he must keep up this knowledge by visiting them from time to time. (18)

The Biggest Question

On entering on his work at first, and as new people come into his district, an elder must endeavor to get into conversation with them individually as to the state of their souls. Is the great question yet settled? Have they said yes or no to the message of peace on earth and goodwill to men?

Elders often feel it difficult to get into this kind of conversation. It should be done, of course, privately, prudently, tenderly; yet it should be done — not in the spirit of "Stand by, for I am holier than thou," but of one who is greatly concerned about their eternal interests. Let us not be content with mere generalities, for our visits are not those of ceremony or merely of courtesy; we have a great business in hand — the great business.

Such conversation, if in the spirit of our Master, will usually be well received, and is often much blessed. Those who are God's children will feel thankful that they have found one to whom they can open their hearts; and those who have but a name to live — their name on the communion-roll only — may be led to fall in with God's way of saving sinners. Many even in this Christian land live twenty, thirty or forty years before they meet with any one who speaks to them directly and personally about their soul's salvation. How backward and shy, alas! are we all to do this! To speak thus with good results our words must be accompanied with prayer and a consistent life. May the Lord baptize us elders with such a spirit of love and power that we shall be able to speak to every one of our people about their soul's salvation, so that none shall ever be able to say, "He visited me often, but he never spoke plainly to me about the state of my soul." Alas! is there any of us who can say in this matter, "I am pure from the blood of all men"? (18-19)

Chapter 5: Ordinary Visitation by The Elder

Frequency of Visitation

The frequency of an elder's ordinary visitation must depend on the nature of the district, the time at his disposal and the mode of his visitation. Some visit throughout their districts every three months, but perhaps in most cases a half-yearly visit may be found sufficient. Be it more or less frequent, however, every elder should have a plan, and keep to it. The day and hour selected should, of course, be convenient for the people, when domestic arrangements will not be disturbed and the household are likely to be all at home. (21)

Visit Everyone

An elder should visit all the people, rich as well as poor. He is apt to visit most frequently where he is most warmly welcomed, but these are not always the families where he may be most useful. Neither should he visit chiefly the poorer members. The richer people are apt to be neglected by the elder. There are many people well-off, as this world goes, who are very lonely, much needing sympathy and Christian kindness, to whom a cheerful visitor can carry sunshine and blessing. (21-22)

Short Visits Are Valuable Too

While endeavoring to keep to a plan of full and regular visitation an elder must not think that a short visit occasionally is of no use. This would be a great mistake. If we are intimate with our people we can often do much good by a kindly look-in, even though we scarcely sit down in the house. (22)

Willing Visits

Let us never seem when visiting as if we grudged every moment, as if we were fidgeting to get away—a habit both rude and injurious. When we come into a house we should seek to bring some of heaven's own sunshine into it. The children must not run away and hide themselves, but be the first to welcome us; for, like their fathers and mothers, they should be all our personal friends. (22-23)

Suitable Conversation

Our conversation when visiting should be suitable to our office and our object. It cannot be too genial and lively, provided it be as becometh the gospel of Christ. "The talk of the lips tendeth only to penury," "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt," "Be kindly-affectioned one to another, with brotherly love" are some of the texts which may guide us as to our conversation. It should be profitable, yet pleasant, lively and interesting—grace seasoned with salt. We should avoid stiffness and formality, still more moroseness or affected solemnity, for we must get at our people's hearts if we are to do them any good. (23)

Happy Visits

Cheerfulness becometh saints, and we would be more cheerful if we walked all the day in the light of His countenance. We would thus present, especially to young people, truth with a winsome face...Did you ever observe the power of a pleasant, genial, or even humorous, remark in opening the fissures of the human heart so as to let you drop in some seed of divine truth? Avoiding foolish talking and jesting, which are never convenient, a vein of humor is a great gift for Christ if ballasted with discretion and humility. Mr. Spurgeon is an example of this, as others have been. A healthy mind and soul are seldom without a little of it. (23)

The tendency in some men to keep themselves aloof from pleasant social intercourse with the circle of kindred and friendship with which God has surrounded them, on the plea that they have no time for it, has no sanction from our Lord's precept and example. They should have time for it, for it is by contact that the leaven spreads till the whole is leavened. The matter of our intercourse is fully as important as the manner of it. (24)

Beware of Congregational Gossip

While we may talk about congregational matters, let us beware of congregational gossip... We should avoid, if possible, all talk about persons, especially neighbors, unless we can speak well of them and to edification. Let the elder forestall all this kind of thing by reference to the last Sabbath sermons, the work of the congregation, or some news in the last Record or other religious periodicals. (24)

How To Start Conversations

Even in the events of the day and their lessons we may, in these times of daily newspapers and telegraphs, find ample scope for most profitable conversation. Let us throw out hints that may be useful, such as the importance of reading regularly through the sixty-six books of the Bible, and not trusting to little "text-books." (24-25)

Personal Dealings Should Be Private Dealings

We have already referred to the duty of every faithful elder dealing personally with each member of a family. This must be done privately, yet even when the children are present there will be many opportunities for earnest religious conversation. Young anxious inquirers may be there, secretly wishing you to speak of what is near their hearts, though, with the reticence of many people on these subjects, they may never have opened their minds even to their father or mother. (25)

Read and Pray

Our visits should be sanctified by the word of God and prayer, though it should not be considered indispensable that at every visit we should conduct a formal exercise. We may read a passage, and if we can add a few remarks on it, so much the better, but they should be homely, practical, interesting and brief. It may be enough at times merely to quote a text. In prayer we should avoid a long preface or peroration, or other formalities. The circumstances of the family and of each member of it, present or absent, should be specially remembered. (25-26)

Chapter 6: The Visitation of the Sick

Often very lonely, they require more frequent visits than ordinary families, and have a special claim on an elder's time and sympathy. (28)

Often weak and sensitive, they are very susceptible of kindness, and grateful for it. (28)

Some may require systematic instruction in the truth; and even where this is not necessary the elder will find it add greater usefulness and interest to his successive visits to speak a little on some one important truth. (28)

On the bed of sickness the Lord ripens his people for glory. (28)

To the elder himself it is often a scene of instruction and revival. (28)

Besides giving them the varied comfort and direction so abundant in the word of life, he may lend them suitable books. (28)

Visits to invalids by children, for example, who can sing to the weary sufferers some of the sweet songs of Zion, may do more good, even to the body, than medicines from the druggist's shop. (29)

In visiting sick people or invalids we should avoid noise or abruptness. A low, quiet voice is usually soothing and pleasant to them, especially if they are weak and nervous. (29)

Don't let us strain them with anything requiring long or continuous attention, and let our change from one subject to another be natural and easy. (29)

Such visits should not be of long duration, and it is best for us to leave immediately after engaging in prayer, giving them perhaps one text to keep near their heart. (29)

It is a good plan occasionally to have a short service in the sick-room of an invalid, to which a few neighbors may be invited. (29)

When the elder does hear of such (serious) illness, he should visit at once. A day's, or even an hour's, unnecessary delay may cause him a long regret. (30)

He should see that the minister also is made aware of the case as soon as possible. (30)

In cases of sudden and severe affliction we may be able to do little more than weep with them that weep, giving the afflicted some word from the merciful and faithful High Priest, and perhaps taking hold of the sufferer's hand — an act of sympathy which has often a wonderful power to calm and soothe in times of deep distress. (30)

Let us seek wisdom to win souls at such a time; kindness and sympathy from us then will never be forgotten. (30)

Chapter 7: Family Worship, The Young, Inquirers

Family Worship

The elder will desire to have family worship established in all the households...He may give hints to those who already have family worship how to make it more interesting and useful to their young people:

- Warn them against tediousness and formality
- Suggest the members of the family read the verses in turn.
- Encourage extempore prayer, even though it be very short, is better than a read form
- If not possible then forms may be recommended.
- Recommend also remembering in family prayer particular subjects at particular times such, for example, as on Saturday morning ministers preparing for their Sabbath work, and the conversion of the Jews; on Sabbath morning, missionaries in foreign lands and Sabbath-school teachers and children.
- Get them to sing praise as well as to read the word and pray - it adds more sunshine to family worship when they can all join in singing. (34)

Religious Education of Children (35-36)

Ministering to Young People (36-39)

Improving the Sabbath (40)

Helping Seekers and Inquirers (41-42)

Instruction and Examination of Young Communicants (42-44)

Chapter 8: Special Means of Doing Good

District Prayer Meetings (46-47)

Hospitality (47)

Fellowship Meetings (48-49)

Correspondence/Letters/Emails (50)

Your district of fifteen or twenty families is a little world, or rather a church in miniature. There are all ages — the little children, the young men, the fathers. And there are all varieties of temper and disposition and of spiritual state — the careless, those at ease in Zion, the anxious, the new-born believer, the fretful, the desponding, the lively, the peaceful, the rejoicing, the steady, the excitable, those who have left their first love, and those who are pressing toward the mark. There are Peters and Thomases, Marys and Marthas, Pliables and Stand-fasts, Little Faiths and Great Hearts; and among them all there is a constant change going on. Your one specific for all cases is, "Looking unto Jesus." For saints and sinners he is the one thing needful. For ourselves and for our people the balm of Gilead and the living Physician are our all-in-all. Looking to him, we are lightened, we are humbled, we are sanctified, changed into his image from glory to glory, the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keeping our hearts and minds. (49-50)

Use of Books (51-52)

Care For Those Who Move Away (52-54)

Work with Deacons And Female Visitors (54-56)

Share in Municipal and Public Work (56)

Chapter 9: Cases of Discipline

The most painful duty for an elder

Dealing with cases of discipline is the most painful — indeed, the only painful — duty an elder has to discharge. Offences, however, will come, and melancholy and saddening they often are, for fleshly lusts still war against the soul. (61)

Show the Spirit of Christ

For the right discharge of the duty of discipline the elder requires the spirit both of faithfulness and of tenderness. These are fully illustrated in our Lord's dealings with offenders, which we should often study. How faithful was he, and yet how tender! Oh that we could deal with erring brethren in the spirit of Jesus Christ ! (61)

Discipline's Two Aims

The first and great end of discipline, as laid down in Scripture, is the restoration and salvation of the offender.

The second is the maintaining of the purity of the Church and freeing it from scandal. The first object must ever be kept prominent. (62)

Do not encourage tittle-tattle

An elder should be very cautious how he listens to ill reports against a member of the Church, If he encourages tittle-tattle of this kind, he will hear plenty of it, to his own vexation. But if a report reaches him which has an apparent look of truth about it, or if he has himself seen anything calling for action on his part, he should lose no time in making inquiry in a private and prudent way. (63)

Follow Matthew 18

First speak to your brother alone, and deal with him faithfully and kindly. Be straightforward and candid. Avoid roundabout ways of opening the subject, as if you had called about some other business. Be in no hurry to bring the matter before the session if there is no public scandal, and always consult with your minister before doing so. Every effort must be made by you privately, in the spirit of the words, "I now tell you even weeping," and you may gain your brother. (63)

The less formality and publicity, at first at least, the better. The supposed publicity and notoriety of sessional dealing is against the hope of penitence, because irritating to an offender; and there should be no delay, for that may give him a pillow for his conscience, as if he had not got full justice. Avoid coldness, harshness or denunciation in your dealings. These are not likely to do any good, and do not come well from a fellow-sinner saved by grace who acts as a servant and representative of Jesus. Let us beware of the idea, so apt to creep into our minds in such circumstances, that if we are just faithful enough we have at least delivered our own soul. No, we only do this when we have prayerfully and humbly done all that we can to bring our erring brother to the feet of Jesus. (63-64)

Chapter 10: Members Encouraged to Work

Involve Others in Serving the Church

We must try to get all the members of the church practically interested in the work of Christ, for "none of us liveth to himself." It was said of a colt, "The Lord hath need of him." Much more may this be said of those who profess to be living members of Christ's body. What each should do will depend on what each can do, for "she hath done what she could" was the Master's word of approval. "As we have opportunity" is the rule laid down for us. What a change would appear on the Church and the world if each professing Christian were doing something — something for Christ — even though it were a very little! Might not the wilderness soon be turned into a fruitful field? (65)

Start in the Family Sphere

Attention to personal religion, regular reading of the word and prayer is the first duty. This, with the care of a family and conscientious attention to business, will leave to many of our people little time for duties outside. A mother may adorn the doctrine more by her care of her husband and children, and by keeping a tidy and well-ordered house, than if she neglect these and engage in visitation or teaching the poor. Home is her first sphere, and a more useful one she cannot find. It is wonderful how much some mothers can do by activity and method with a willing heart. Yet other things must only be done after home-duties. What a field of usefulness is the family! Richer and brighter sheaves are not to be found in God's harvest than can be gathered in by a praying mother. It is well for the elder to keep this in view, and not to seem to underrate home-duties. The husband or sons should be encouraged in their lawful callings, and an elder is often able to give practical help as well as encouragement in these. (66)

Stimulate Interest in Missions

Let us engage the hearts of our people in the cause of missions at home and abroad. Alas! how little do the perishing heathen lie as a burden on our hearts! How little is given to foreign missions in comparison with what is spent on ourselves at home — our houses, our furniture, our gardens, our recreations! The missionary cause is the Church's great work, but it is also the work of every individual member of it. It is the duty of an elder very specially to remind his people of this.

Our people should feel that this subject is near our hearts. Let us often speak of it to them; and it might increase their daily interest in it if we gave each family a missionary-box, into which there might be put occasional thank-offerings for family mercies received. (66-67)

Encourage Service in Various Ministries

Members of the Church who have not many home-duties, and who are anxious to do good, should be invited and encouraged to engage in such work as visiting the poor, teaching in the Sabbath-school, collecting for the various funds of the Church, or distributing tracts, assisting at mothers' meetings, Dorcas meetings, psalmsody classes, etc. You may thus be honored to set some to work who will be far more useful than you have ever been. I have found good results to follow from taking young people to see well-conducted Sabbath-schools and other Christian agencies at work. This tends to develop any desire in them for usefulness, and enables us to give them practical hints that may be of lasting value. (67)

Encourage Young People to Work in Their Own Congregations

It is usually best when young people begin to work that it be in connection with their own congregation. It will be more under the elder's eye, and young and timid people will be encouraged by the sight of well-known faces. They will get acquainted with other working members of the church with whom they may have Christian fellowship, and be kept from a good many dangers that beset those who take up work at their own hand.

The more simple and private kinds of work are always the safest, especially for beginners. Train them to work by faith, and not by sight, so that they will have a motive superior to external discouragements. Don't urge any to engage in many things at once. It may distract and overburden them, and may lead to their giving up such work altogether. And let elders warn young men against neglecting their ordinary business or giving it but a secondary place in their thoughts. (68-69)

Encourage Service in Their Own Vocations

And let them further remind them that, while they may and should become sowers of the precious seed of the word in the Sabbath-school or elsewhere, they should remember that they have a sphere which none but themselves can occupy, in their own families, in their places of business and among their acquaintances. Let them seek the spiritual good of those with whom they come daily in contact. Their lives as well as their lips should be scented with the sweet smell of the Rose of Sharon. As mechanics, clerks, masters, mistresses, servants, teachers, governesses, they should repeat and illustrate the good lessons of the Sabbath by being living epistles all through the busy week from the Monday morning till the Saturday night. (69)

Chapter 11: Fellowship Between Church Members

Encourage Fellowship

One great evil existing in our congregations, especially in large towns, is that many of the members do not know or take an interest in each other. It is a blessed hope that we shall recognize our friends in heaven, but let us begin by first recognizing them on earth.

There is often too much stiffness even among good people. Surely worshipping together twice every Sabbath in the same church, and sitting down together at the same communion-table, is a sufficient introduction. Dr. John Brown of Edinburgh, knowing this tendency, used to say to his large congregation, after reading the list of young communicants and other additions at each communion, "Now, you will consider that I have personally introduced all these to every member of this church." God sets the solitary in families, and there should be a family feeling among the members of a congregation. This feeling an elder must endeavor to promote, especially among those in his own district. Let him interest the neighbor-members in each other. (71-72)

Exemplify Hospitality to Strangers

As akin to the subject of members being acquainted with each other, I would remark that there is too little kindness and hospitality shown to strangers at our church-doors. All such should be cordially welcomed by office-bearers there, and the members should be willing at any time to give up their seats for the occasion to them... Let elders, by precept and example, not be forgetful to entertain strangers at church. A casual visit to a faithful ministry has often become a day never to be forgotten. (72-73)

Chapter 12: Relationship to the Pastor and the Session

The elder's relations to the minister are peculiar and very important. Serving the same Master and solemnly ordained as overseers of the same flock, they should labor together affectionately and faithfully, that the word may have free course and be glorified. (75)

It is both our duty and our privilege to hold up our minister's hands in every way — to be intimate with him; to speak well of him; and to seek to gather up the fruits of his ministry. (75)

Let us ever welcome a call from him for help, relieving him from matters of business or routine, so as to save his time for study or pastoral work. (75)

An elder, being accustomed in business to endless daily details, can do better, and more easily and quickly, many things which would be burdensome to a minister, whose work lies so much in continuous thought. (75)

Regular attendance at the prayer-meetings is not only good for ourselves, but good also as an example. (75)

Let us be regularly and punctually in our seats in church on Sabbath. (76)

An elder's advice may often be of use to a minister, he having a kind of experience which a minister cannot have. Our ministers are settled in congregations early in life, after spending at least eight years in study, often with few opportunities of gaining experience of men and things. The wonder is, not that such young ministers do occasionally make practical mistakes, but that on the whole they act so well and so wisely. It will rarely occur that judicious hints, kindly given by an elder of experience, will not be welcomed by the minister.

A young minister may learn much from his elders, from their local knowledge, as well as from their age and experience in the world; and they should feel it to be their duty to give him, discreetly and confidentially of course, such advice as they may think likely to be useful as to the kind of instruction most needed by the people, the style of preaching best suited to them, subjects for prayer, plans of visiting, etc. Such hints, being the results of experience, will be valued by the minister. There should, indeed, be in all matters connected with the spiritual interests of the flock a constant, confidential and affectionate intercourse between the minister and the elders. Let them welcome and support every proposal he makes in the way of new efforts for doing good — not raising needless objections, but encouraging him in every way possible. (76-78)

In no way can elders help their minister more than by warm-hearted sympathy with him in his work. Every position in life has its own anxieties and cares as to health, means, family upbringing, etc.; but in addition to all these, which other men have, how heavy are the cares and burdens ever lying on the heart of a faithful minister of Christ! No business or profession has anything like them. No department of human labor ever witnessed so much self-sacrifice.

Every faithful minister feels the weight of his burden to be indeed too heavy for him. With head-work and heart-work his labor is never over. Surely it becomes a minister's people, and especially his elders, to give him their hearty sympathy and earnest prayers. Marvelous power, this power of sympathy! "Could ye not watch with me one hour?" Will ye also go away?" "He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy." If the Chief Shepherd's human heart yearned for human sympathy, if his holy soul felt comforted by having his disciples beside him, is it wonderful that his servants get strength and joy also from drinking of this brook by the way? (78-79)

We may urge on our brethren the importance of regular attendance on the meetings of session. If health permit we should attend regularly; we shall otherwise fall back in our knowledge of the business of the congregation and get out of sympathy with the work. It is depressing to the minister and to those who do attend to see few elders present, and often it causes delays which are inconvenient, and maybe injurious to the congregation. (80)

Meetings of session should not be held too often, nor be so protracted as to lead to family inconvenience. (81)

It tends to stimulate the elder's superintendence of his people when, at the regular meetings of session, one or two of the elders are asked to give a brief detail of their mode of visiting and of any interesting occurrences in their district. In the course of the year the session will thus hear something of every district and of every elder's work. This will stimulate visitation and make the session feel that the flock is one, and some points in one elder's report may be very useful to his brethren. The minister, "as being also an elder," may sometimes give an account of his experience and methods of visiting. Where this plan has been tried it has been found interesting and useful. (81)

The elder should often be in communication with the deacon of his district, advising with him as to persons requiring assistance, and aiding him as much as possible in his efforts for gathering in subscriptions for the various funds. (81-82)

Chapter 13: Incidents – Encouragements and Discouragements

Encouragement

"Every life has its lesson," is a remark especially true of every believer. For the last thirty years I have kept a list of the names of all friends who have departed. That is now a very long list, and there are in it many names of the "just made perfect." I am struck with observing that in reference to most of these there is a useful lesson left on my memory. So will every elder find in reference to his people. Each individual believer will be on his mind as a living lesson of some grace of the Spirit. How many testimonies to God's love and faithfulness will be furnished even by the small section of the vineyard of which he is the overseer! The work of the eldership will be in this and many other ways its own reward. (87)

Plan and Adapt

We would also here add the remark that, while each elder should have not only a definite purpose, but also a definite plan of operation, yet it is of great importance, both for his own sake and that of his people, that he should, in his way of carrying out his plans, be ever ready to avail himself of new suggestions. Occasional variety in matters of detail gives a new freshness and interest which help to prevent the feeling of dullness and formality. We must avoid, on the one hand, constant change of plans, and, on the other hand, unvarying routine. The working of our plans should have the benefit of our growing practical experience. (87-88)

Depend on the Holy Spirit

Let us honor the Holy Spirit. We are entirely dependent on him. The more we feel this as churches, as congregations, as pastors, as elders, the more will we say, "All our springs are in thee." We cannot continue to exist as churches unless he adds to the churches daily such as shall be saved, and gives his added people to know the privilege expressed in the words, "Freely ye have received, freely give" We cannot live on the memory of past blessing; we must be daily pleading, "Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?" (90)

Discouragements

Elders will meet with discouragements. In some of the members and adherents there may seem to be little to give us hope that our prayers have been answered. Some who ran well are hindered. In others the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches appear to choke the word, and we may attend deathbeds which want the full assurance of an abundant entrance into the kingdom. But our chief discouragement will come from our own hearts — from our coldness, our unbelief, our lukewarmness, our tendency to get into a formal routine.

Let us encourage ourselves in the Lord our God — in his sure word of promise and his evident answers to prayer. We feel persuaded that in no similar work for Christ — not even in Sabbath-school teaching — are men more encouraged to sow beside all waters than in the duties of the eldership. To be but hewers of wood and drawers of water in such a Master's house would be a great honor, but ours is still greater. As "friends of the Bridegroom," to be helps and witnesses to the betrothal of sinners to Jesus; to stand by and see the salvation of God; to watch the operations of his hand; to guide and encourage his ransomed ones on their way Zionward; and to see many of them safe home before himself, — this is the privilege of a faithful elder. It is but a few short years any of us will have to do this service for our Lord here below. Let us do it heartily, with all our might, and always as to the Lord. (91-92)