

THE NEW
ELDER'S
HANDBOOK

A BIBLICAL GUIDE TO
DEVELOPING FAITHFUL LEADERS



GREG R. SCHARF
AND ARTHUR KOK



BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2018 by Greg R. Scharf and Arthur Kok

Published by Baker Books
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Scharf, Greg, author. | Kok, Arthur, 1980– author.
Title: The new elder’s handbook : a biblical guide to developing faithful leaders / Greg R. Scharf and Arthur Kok.
Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Publishing Group, 2018.
Identifiers: LCCN 2017057408 | ISBN 9780801076343 (pbk.)
Subjects: LCSH: Elders (Church officers)
Classification: LCC BV680 .S33 2018 | DDC 253—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017057408>

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016

Scripture quotations marked CSB have been taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture quotations labeled NET are from the NET BIBLE®, copyright © 2003 by Biblical Studies Press, LLC. www.netbible.com. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



Contents

Introduction 7

Part 1 Vision

1. Who We Aspire to Be: What Characterizes Biblically Qualified Elders? 21
2. Understanding the Power: Ezra's Example 33
3. Making Progress: Moving Forward in Growth 39
4. Maximizing the Process: The Importance of Community 47
5. Identifying Potential Elders 57

Part 2 Training

6. Seventy-Five Questions for New or Prospective Elders 67

Part 3 Two Additional Discipleship Resources

7. Learning to Follow Jesus: A Thematic Resource for Discipling Others 145
8. BA (Biblical Agenda) in Christian Living: A Bible Study Resource for Discipling Others 165

Acknowledgments 179

Suggestions for Further Reading 181

Introduction

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

1 Timothy 3:1

Every church needs qualified elders. They are a joy to a pastor, sharing the load of leadership and the privileges of shepherding. They are a gift to a congregation, guarding the flock and extending themselves in love. And they are God's plan for his church. God loves the church so much that he gave his only Son to die for it. He does not entrust such a treasure to a single individual; he deploys a brotherhood, a cadre, a team so that the church is soaked in prayer, led in wisdom, and fed by the Word. Healthy, faithful churches always have a team of qualified, faithful leaders.

The essential nature of biblically qualified elders is clear in Scripture. Timothy and Titus were admonished by the apostle Paul to appoint qualified elders, and Paul also spelled out the qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). The normal practice was to appoint elders in every town (Acts 14:23). This remains true today. Yet where do such men come from?¹ Often they emerge organically. Pastors or elders spot men who have credible faith, willingness to serve, and

1. Throughout we will refer to elders and elders in training as male. This reflects our understanding of the criteria for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

leadership gifts. But this does not always happen. What then? Or what if the number of qualified leaders is so small that serving elders feel they have signed up for a life sentence, with no one to take up this joyful yet sober responsibility after them? We know what happens: The expectations are lowered, and unqualified but available elders are appointed. Or perhaps the positions remain vacant, and God's people suffer.

Is there something better? How can qualified elders be *raised up*? How might someone *pursue the office* while guarding motivations, making progress, and trusting God to work? That's what this book is about.²

Raising Up Elders: A Pastor's Testimony

As an ordained pastor, I (Greg) have functioned as an elder for over forty years, beginning in that role before I was, well, an elder. After seminary I was an intern and then a curate—what we might call an assistant pastor—at a historic Anglican church: All Souls, Langham Place, in London, England. Then I was called to serve as an assistant minister in the venerable Knox Presbyterian Church in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. In both positions, I did more learning than teaching. Then, I was called to be the first full-time, permanent pastor of a newly planted church of some sixty people: Salem Evangelical Free Church in Fargo, North Dakota. My wife, Ruth, and I committed to this church to stay for ten years. We stayed for nineteen.

A few years into that time, I noticed that whenever I asked someone about his willingness to serve as an elder, he almost always said no. Some looked at the biblical qualifications and immediately ruled

2. We recognize that some of our readers will be pastors who aspire to equip and encourage elders. Other readers will be aspiring elders. Thus you may at times find some material most suited to the group of which you are not a part. In those cases, if you are a pastor, put yourself in the shoes of a prospective elder and envision them profiting from the material. If you are not a pastor or currently serving elder, that material will be more useful to you after you have worked through the training.

themselves out. Some were too busy. Others looked at the fine men who were already serving as elders and felt they could never measure up. Fargo is a university community, and we had many professors, business leaders, and seminary graduates in our church. So some prospective elders disqualified themselves because they perceived themselves to be not sufficiently educated.

As I prayed about the recurring problem of too few qualified elders, it occurred to me that the problem was not with them. It was with me. My thinking was too short-term. Even with the commitment to stick around for ten years, I still assumed that what this church would look like in thirty years was not my responsibility. I thought that was someone else's worry.

Once I repented of this selfish, shortsighted attitude, I did three things differently. First, I asked the Lord to lead me to men who might be willing to be *trained* as elders. I put them on a prayer list. Second, I did not ask them to *serve* as elders. Instead, I asked, "Assuming no promises—you're not promising to serve as an elder, and the congregation is not promising to appoint you—would you be willing to receive some training?" Third, I invited every prospective elder (with his wife) to a dessert night at our home, where I reviewed the expectations of a two-year elder training program. Then I sent them home to pray about this opportunity. I promised the wives that their husbands would be better husbands and fathers if they undertook and faithfully completed this training. Most of the men who came to such gatherings said yes.

I met weekly with the men in the elder training program. I took attendance and required each elder-in-training to spend at least half an hour a week answering the week's question and writing down what he discovered. I went through this two-year cycle three times, with a new group of trainees each time, although some repeated the course. When, during the final cycle, I was called to teach at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, I left the church with at least thirty men who had received the training, and the church has reaped the rewards. One of those elders-in-training is now the senior pastor of

the church.³ Several of the others now serve in other ministries within and beyond that local church. I think of one university professor who faithfully submitted to the training and came to the conclusion, “I am a deacon, not an elder.” He was right, and he has served faithfully in that role and others. Another adapted the material and used it in a church he pastored, and now he oversees denominational credentialing of pastors. Others serve in mission organizations, trades, businesses, and as teachers.

A Noble Aspiration

There are two main lessons that I hope you glean from my story. First, if you are a pastor, God can use you to raise up elders, especially if you are prayerfully deliberate, intentional, and strategic about it. This book, sharpened by my real-world pastoral experience, provides a resource that you can employ to do this. Second, and central to this book, if you aspire to be an elder, it is possible to *pursue the personal attributes* that would make you qualified for the office. Scripture says that anyone who aspires to the office desires a noble work (1 Tim. 3:1), and this book can help you fulfill that aspiration if God has given such a desire to you.

We hope this is you. We hope you have picked up this book because you aspire to be the sort of man who is biblically qualified to serve the church as an elder. Or, if you have been nominated or elected to be an elder, we hope you picked up this book because you passionately desire that the qualifications of eldership be *more consistently true of you*. This pleases our God. And we wrote this book to help you.

But even more, we wrote this book to encourage you. Perhaps you look at your pastor, or an elder you know, or a Christian writer whose books you love, and you think, “My life is miles away from that level of godliness. Sure, I wish I knew the Bible like that but—well, maybe

3. To be fair, he was already a seminary graduate in an intentional apprenticeship in the church during the year he joined the elders-in-training.

someday.” If that’s you, please hear us, dear brother: Those leaders did not reach that place accidentally. And it didn’t happen magically. It happened through God’s grace and the disciplined hard work of walking in the Spirit. Paul’s testimony recorded in 1 Corinthians 15:10 captures the balance perfectly: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.” It happened through slow, steady progress (1 Tim. 4:15). It happened for these pastors and elders because God set a desire in their hearts and they responded in the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

That can be you. Aspiring elder, seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness and ask him to add to you today everything you need to fulfill the noble aspiration to serve him as an elder in the church. Gather some brothers around you and start a journey working through this book. You will find that God works his growth in you. Let this book point you to Scripture in a way that helps you grow in knowledge of the Lord, in godly character, and in skills to serve God’s people. Obey the prompting of God’s Spirit, and let’s get started.

A Resource for Your Journey

So how can this book help? First, it gives you a concrete, tailored training path to follow. If you want to be qualified to serve as an elder, if indeed God was speaking through someone who invited you to consider serving as an elder, don’t quench the Spirit by doing nothing. This book will supply steps of obedience you can take to become qualified.

Second, this book will help you discern if you have the biblical qualifications. How you tackle the biblical study, relate to others who want to be elders, persevere, and relate to your wife and family during this time are some of the indicators of whether you have

the durability, character, and gifting to serve the church faithfully as an elder.

Third, this book will help equip you to be the kind of person who *could* serve as an elder, whether or not the church appoints you to that noble task. In his fine book *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members*,⁴ Benjamin Merkle divides the qualifications for elders into three categories: situational, familial, and moral qualifications. In each domain, there is ample room for any man to grow. For instance, some of the traits he labels “situational qualifications”—desire to serve, ability to teach, not a recent convert, well thought of by outsiders—are matters that we can work on, and, more importantly, that God can work on for us and in us! The same is true to an even greater extent in the case of familial and moral qualifications.

Fourth, this book will drive you to your knees in humility and prayer. That is a good place for any man to be. Just the act of asking God to qualify you to be a teacher of and an example to the flock is a significant step in that direction.

Fifth, this book will foster intentional fellowship in the gospel. Sadly, in some churches, fellowship among men is mainly eating, talking about sports, or listening to inspiring speakers. Frankly, godly men want more; we want gospel fellowship where we feed on the Word of God, pray together, challenge each other, hold each other accountable, and serve together.

Sixth, this training will slow you down. First Timothy 5:22 says, “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.” What church leaders must *not* do—hastily appoint elders—you, as an aspiring elder, must not long for. There is no need to rush things. Eldership is not something anyone should jump into. You will benefit and the church will benefit by letting the Lord do his slow, steady work of sanctifying you.

4. Benjamin Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2009).

This Will Take Some Work

How will these benefits be achieved? The answer is simple but not easy. It will take some consecrated effort. You will need your Bible and a notebook. You will need to invest some focused time every week answering a question or doing an assignment posed by this book. You will need to be involved in some sort of ministry, such as leading a life group or teaching Sunday school; the best way to maximize the benefit of training is to put into practice what you are learning. You will need to commit to attendance and homework requirements and to those with whom you are training.

We achieved these benefits in ways that may not fit your situation, so don't take these as prescriptive; they are only descriptive. You will need to design your own approach that is tailored to your situation. Our groups met early every Tuesday morning. We met first in triplets for prayer and accountability, and we then came together for the training. The training time itself was as Socratic as I could make it. Each trainee was required to have attempted to answer the question of the week, and to write *something* (which I examined but did not grade). In the training hour, I invited individuals to share what they had written or some facet of what they had learned from the study. When necessary, I would chip in a thought or redirect the flow of discussion. I was always well prepared, but often the insights shared by the trainees were better than what I would have told them in a lecture. We ended on time. Just before people left for work, I pointed them to three or four helpful supplementary resources related to next week's question.

Doctrine + Life + the Ability to Teach

Questions are key to this training process. Instead of reading doctrinal information, resolving to shape up with regard to character, or contemplating some skills, we submit ourselves to Scripture and let the Word of God sanctify us as Jesus promised it would: "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17).

So how did we decide which questions to include? Once again, the answer came from experience. Initially, I (Greg) simply worked through a list of fifty subjects that ordination candidates in our denomination study. I soon realized that this did not work very well because, on the one hand, there were no limits to some of these subjects, and, on the other hand, very few parishioners express their needs or concerns to an elder in terms of a systematic-theology category. So I tried to reword each doctrine as a question that a thoughtful member of the congregation might ask an elder. Even so, there wasn't much shape to the process. That is when I remembered Ezra 7:10, which I had memorized while being disciplined by a Navigator: "For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel." Doctrinal accuracy is indispensable for elders, but it is not enough to preserve the health of the church. Truth must shape life, and the truth must be taught to others.

Ezra 7:10 is not the only place in Scripture where these three sorts of qualifications are mentioned together. The apostle Paul wanted them to characterize every believer. He wrote to the Romans, "I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of *goodness*, filled with all *knowledge* and *able to instruct* one another" (Rom. 15:14, emphasis added). There you have them again: character, knowledge, and skill. Elders are meant to exemplify what all Christians should aim for. We are to be models to the flock as well as teachers of it. Consequently, some of the questions in this workbook address character issues and the disciplines that underlie them. Other questions relate to skills and practices entailed in teaching and discipling others. You will notice that fewer biblical texts relate to skills than doctrine and, accordingly, we will endeavor not to go beyond what is written (1 Cor. 4:6). Much mischief happens when we try to make the Bible address matters it is not intending to address! We include the skills category of questions to remind you that these skills are not irrelevant and need to be developed. There is wisdom in the body of Christ and beyond to help with that undertaking, just as an outsider of sorts—Moses's father-in-law, Jethro—offered wise

counsel concerning how to handle complaints and conflicts (Exod. 18). Others in your trainee group or in the ministry that you are engaged in can help you foster these skills.

Here is what you can expect in each week's work: (1) a question (or series of questions) that you are to answer from Scripture, (2) some biblical passages that address this question, and (3) some additional resource materials that you could consult to help you place your answer within the pattern of sound doctrine (Titus 2:1). Each week's assignment may include many more texts than you have time to read, much less to study. Do what you can, but never focus on getting it all done at the expense of noticing the context of the passages. We decided to include enough passages to try to round out the biblical picture rather than making you look elsewhere if our list was too sparse. You will readily discover that many more texts might have been included. Feel free to add them as you go along. Although it is more cumbersome to look them up, we did not usually put the passages in canonical order. We tried to put them in some sort of logical order so that, if you read them in order and write down clear teachings and valid inferences, you will be moving in the direction of sound doctrine. The aim of including passages without telling you what to find in them is to provide you the opportunity to hone your ability to handle the Word of God. That won't happen if we spoon-feed you; it will only happen if we point you in a direction and let you do your own careful study. Your aim is to meet the standard of Titus 1:9: "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it."

Just Begin

We understand that our readers do not all have the same starting point. Some are already careful readers of Scripture; others are not. Ideally, your pastor handles the Word well in the pulpit, letting it

have its say in its way. If that is so, his sound interpretations and the hermeneutic that underlies them model how listeners should study the Bible on their own. If not, you will have some catching up to do. Whatever grade you would give yourself as a Bible reader and student, the only realistic growth strategy is to begin. Start where you are. Prayerfully use all the resources you can get your hands on, and share what you have learned with others in your group. Be teachable when they notice weaknesses, gaps, or imbalance in your answers. Ideally, every training group will have at least one mature, well-trained elder or pastor who can guide the process. Since elders are not to be new converts, our working assumption is that because they aspire to eldership or someone thinks they should be considered for eldership, members of these training groups are already reasonably well-taught. If you discover otherwise in this training process, that is a good thing. It is good for you as a trainee, because you can address and correct it; it is good for the church, because no church should have unqualified elders.

As you go forward, you will see that parts 1 and 2 of this book are primarily for aspiring elders. Part 1 is an on-ramp to the process, and part 2, the heart of the book, contains doctrinal, character-based, and skill-related questions. You will notice that we don't have separate categories for the questions on doctrine, character, and skills and disciplines. We keep them together because in real life these domains are always integrated. We don't do one, then the next, and finally the third; we do them all, all the time, as we will underscore in chapter 1. This book does not supply the answers except in the sense that it constantly points readers back to the Scriptures. The real value is not what it spells out for you but what it helps you to discover, understand, share, and obey.

Part 3 offers two discipleship resources that could be used in several ways. Chapter 7, "Learning to Follow Jesus," takes a thematic approach to the basics of the Christian life. Chapter 8, "BA (Biblical Agenda) in Christian Living," approaches similar basic topics by studying 2 Peter. As a pastor, you may want to use one of these

resources in part 3 to disciple an individual to discover how motivated and consistent he is, as a preview to lengthier eldership training.⁵ If you are an aspiring or current elder, these resources could be a tool to disciple others.

The development of this material has been a collaborative endeavor. It may be helpful for you to know that, in addition to this introduction, I (Greg) wrote chapters 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8. I also supplied the seventy-five questions in chapter 6 that constitute the heart of the book, though each of us took the lead on further developing some of them, and we both edited them and added Bible passages and resource materials. Arthur wrote chapters 3 and 4. We also offered editorial suggestions to each other throughout. We hope you hear our two individual voices and yet our shared passion that the church have biblically qualified elders.

Let me add a final introductory word. If you are an aspiring elder looking to use this resource to prepare yourself for service, remember to be thinking downstream spiritually: Don't merely think of all the benefits that *you* will receive, as if you were their final "consumer." Think of them all—the truths, the skills, the growing character—as things the Lord has entrusted to you for others to whom you minister. Some matters may feel overly elementary to you at this point in your growth, but they may not feel that way to someone you are seeking to equip or to those they are called to serve. Every elder is to guard the gospel so that we can do what Paul exhorted Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 2:2—namely, to entrust it to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. That is what this book aims to do, so that you can do the same. If you are a pastor, I hope you are already

5. If you are an aspiring elder, there are several ways that part 3 of this book may be useful to you as well. First, chapter 5 (on recruitment) may help as you seek to identify other men who can walk through this book with you. Once you have worked through the questions in part 2, you may want to use one of the discipleship resources in part 3 to disciple a younger believer. Alternatively, once your group has completed the questions in part 2, you may want to take on the challenge of discipling a few others together, using one of these resources as your guide. This would not only benefit your church but would also be a way to put into practice all that you learned in part 2.

passing on the gospel to others who will do the same. If not, this is a tailor-made opportunity to fulfill that calling. You may want to work through this material on your own first, adding biblical texts that come to mind or other contemporary references. Alternatively, you could go through it with those elders already serving, asking them to help you discern how it might best be employed in your setting. They could function as something of a pilot group. That would have the added advantage that they would not feel bypassed and would also benefit from the training.



PART 1

VISION

1

Who We Aspire to Be

What Characterizes Biblically Qualified Elders?

For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel.

Ezra 7:10

I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another.

Romans 15:14

Knowledge, obedience, and teaching all belong together. I have already pointed out in the introduction that Ezra 7:10 and Romans 15:14 highlight these same three attributes. What Ezra exemplified, Paul observed and affirmed in the Christians at Rome, not merely in the leaders but in the followers too. Now I want to

make the case that these three characteristics go together. I do this because the temptation that all prospective elders face is to play to our strengths and develop them to the exclusion of weaker areas.

At one level, building on our strengths is the very thing to do. Indeed, God designed the local church to have multiple elders so that each of us can do what God has gifted us to do. As we do that, we can trust God to raise up other elders who are strong where we are weak. That is a good strategy when it comes to spiritual gifts but not, I want to argue, when it comes to these three characteristics: knowledge, obedience, and teaching.

Knowledge and Obedience: A Virtuous Cycle

Let's start with the interplay between knowledge and obedience. In Scripture, these always belong together. To eliminate or shortchange either one undermines the other and may nullify it altogether. Here is why: Knowledge of Scripture is the way we come to know Christ and find salvation through him (2 Tim. 3:15). But the way we know Christ is rarely, if ever, *only* from reading or hearing the Bible. We also know Christ through the people who taught us the gospel. We are like Timothy, of whom Paul wrote, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, *knowing from whom you learned it* and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:14–15, emphasis added). To be the kind of elders who can teach the Bible, as 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9 say we must be, we have to know it, and that requires study. But to teach it effectively, our lives must reflect it. Think of Philipians 4:9: "What you have learned and received and heard *and seen in me*—practice these things" (emphasis added).

Part of our teaching is what is seen in us through practice. Our lives are to show the transforming power of the gospel. That is why obedience (Ezra 7:10) and its fruit, goodness (Rom. 15:14)—what

in this book we often call “character”—are necessary. Thankfully, this does not mean that we need to be perfect. Indeed, “we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7). But the jars-of-clay image means not that we may persist in sin but only that we are fragile, imperfect containers for the treasure of the gospel. That is why Paul could describe himself as the foremost of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) and, without contradiction, could invite others to imitate him (1 Cor. 11:1).

Paul’s strategy for the spread of the gospel was always verbal proclamation reinforced by visible, consistent demonstration of daily cross-bearing and the attendant resurrection power. Notice that Paul sent Timothy to Corinth not merely to restate the gospel message verbally but to provide the visual aid of a gospel-shaped life. Paul writes, “I urge you, then, be imitators of me. That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:16–17). Paul does not separate his message proclaimed “everywhere in every church” from his “ways in Christ.” The two belong together. I don’t think Timothy merely said, “Remember the sort of life Paul lived among you.” I think that, along with verbal proclamation, he too lived that life and proclaimed the gospel message. He was Paul’s faithful child in the faith and bore the family resemblance. People heard the gospel from him and saw the gospel displayed in his life.

We see this same dynamic in 1 Thessalonians 1–2. Paul considered the faith, hope, and love that he saw in the Thessalonian converts to be evidence that they had received the gospel as what it is, the word of God that goes to work in those who believe. But they did not just accept some doctrinally true ideas. The Thessalonian Christians became imitators of Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (1:6) and also of the Judean churches they represented (2:14). Crucially, it was only because they were *imitators* that they could become *examples*: “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you

became an *example* to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:6–7, emphasis added).

How to Increase in the Knowledge of God

Let’s take this one step further. In Colossians 1, the apostle Paul rejoices that the Colossian Christians heard the true gospel and “understood the grace of God in truth” (1:6). That is doctrine. That prompted Paul to keep on praying “that you may be filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (1:9–10). That is godliness.

What should strike us is not merely that we should be praying this for ourselves and others—we should—nor that we should be aiming for mere knowledge. Rather, we should be aiming for knowledge characterized by all wisdom and understanding. This is only part of the good news of this passage. When God grants this sort of knowledge in answer to prayer, we can walk in ways that please the Lord. These ways are not only that we bear fruit in every good work but also that we *increase in the knowledge of God*. The last phrase is significant because it affirms from another angle what I have been arguing in this chapter—namely, that we cannot really grow in our knowledge of God without good works. We should treat this as a positive promise. When we grow in this kind of wise, understanding knowledge and the good works that by definition accompany it, we will be able to further grow in wise knowledge. We might call this a virtuous cycle. Growth in wise knowledge leads to godliness, which leads to greater wise knowledge of God, which paves the way for growing godliness.

So don’t think filling a notebook with truth is what you are aiming for as you engage in this training process. Yes, fill your notebook with truth, but when the truth in your notebook is the right kind of truth—that is, knowledge characterized by wisdom and understanding—that

sort of gospel truth will bear the fruit of good works. That will put you in a position to see more truth in Scripture and to respond more fully to the God of truth, who will reward you with the capacity to keep growing into his likeness.

How Teaching Fits In

Now you might say at this point, “OK, I see the connection between truth and godliness. And I understand that you have to study to be able to be filled with knowledge. But where does the aptitude to teach come in?” Good question.

In Their Teaching, Elders Model What All Christians Are to Do

A case can be made that teaching is the duty of all Christians, and this is a major reason elders need to model it. One of the places we see this most clearly is Colossians 3:16: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you *teach and admonish one another* with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts” (NIV, emphasis added). Moreover, in the Sermon on the Mount, having affirmed absolutely that the law will not pass away until all is fulfilled, Jesus says, “Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever *does* them and *teaches* them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19, emphasis added). I hope you noticed the connection between doing and teaching!

In addition, greatness in the kingdom always involves a missional stance that is not content just to know; it must also teach. Everyone is to know, do, and teach. The writer of Hebrews holds the same conviction that teaching is a normal part of the mature Christian life and that failure to obey the truth restricts the capacity to receive, obey, and teach. Listen to Hebrews 5:11–14, noting especially the phrase I have italicized.

About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though *by this time you ought to be teachers*, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

It does not follow that every Christian has the spiritual gift of teaching or is qualified to serve as an elder. The point rather is that when the gospel takes root and bears fruit, teaching in word and deed should follow, beginning in one's household. If it does not, something is amiss. Among those who have begun to teach by precept and example, some are gifted by God to teach the whole church and help protect it from false doctrine. These, if they meet the character and situational standards, should be considered for appointment as elders.

Teaching Is the Way Elders Guard the Gospel

There is another reason that teaching, along with and inseparable from knowledge and godly obedience, is an inherent qualification required of elders. When the apostle Paul charged Timothy to fulfill his ministry in Ephesus, an overarching responsibility he assigned was to guard the gospel. Without the gospel, there is no church and therefore no need for elders. Notice how Paul words his foundational instruction to Timothy: “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (2 Tim. 1:13–14).

Timothy's responsibility is to guard what has been entrusted to him. That entails “following” the pattern of sound words he heard from Paul. In other words, the received, apostolic, biblical truth is to be adhered to in all it taught and to be obeyed in all it required. As we learned earlier, this is not to be some wooden, by-the-numbers

mastery of ideas or concepts but is to be “in the faith and love that are in Christ.” We can obey this injunction only by virtue of God’s grace manifested in our union with Christ, which brings with it the gift of the Holy Spirit, who indwells us and enables us to guard the gospel. That was the apostle Paul’s testimony: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

How do we do that? How do we guard the gospel? Scripture offers several strategies, but the one that I see as key here, the one that reinforces the necessity of teaching, is in 2 Timothy 2:2–7:

And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him. An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops. Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.

Yes, there are important verses in between (1:15–2:1), but the repetition of “what you have heard from me” in 1:13 and 2:2 ties the *command* to guard the gospel in 1:13–14 with the *means* to do so in 2:2–7. How do we guard the gospel? We guard it ultimately not by hoarding it but by entrusting it. *The best way to keep the gospel safe is to faithfully teach it to those who are equally able to teach it to others.*

This will not happen without the faithful living that these verses describe. We are to live like the undistracted soldier who wants to please his commander, like the disciplined athlete who doesn’t break the rules, and like the hard-working farmer who shares the harvest. Each of these people is purposeful. The soldier fights to please his commander; the athlete runs to win; the farmer toils to share the crop. We too live this sort of disciplined life for a purpose.

We do it to entrust the gospel we heard to as many faithful people as possible.

Some years ago I experienced a vivid example of the importance of this principle. I was preaching in Romania in the days before the fall of the dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. The church was under serious persecution. A faithful pastor had escaped into temporary exile to try to serve the Romanian church from abroad and then return when he could. He needed his few Romanian theological books but had not been able to take them with him in his escape from the country. I was asked if I could put them in my suitcase and take them to him in London. I was willing, but it was too risky in those days. If I had been challenged in customs as I left the country—as I had been once before—the books would have been lost and fellow Christians might have been in greater danger.

In the providence of God, that same week a choir from London was singing in the same church where I was preaching. Each member of the choir agreed to tuck one book or paper into his or her luggage and to reassemble the library when they got to London. The plan worked; the library got to the pastor. Even if one or two or five choristers had had their bags searched and the materials confiscated, most of the library would have made it through. We need not worry that the gospel will not survive or the church will not be built, given Christ's promise of Matthew 16:18, but we do have a key role to play in God's work. We guard the gospel by teaching faithful people who are able to teach others also. We want the gospel to get through to the next generation and to the ends of the earth. Teaching is integral to guarding the gospel.

Doctrine and Life Work Together in Biblically Qualified Elders

Having affirmed that doctrine, character, and skills must go together in the lives of elders, look now at the texts that speak directly of the qualifications of elders. First Timothy 3:1–7 mainly describes

observable character traits required of overseers—the same office as elder.¹ Elders must be above reproach. Indeed, people both inside and outside the church should be able to affirm that elders are above reproach. But in verse 2, nestled among these character traits, is the *aptitude to teach*. It is listed not as an optional extra but as a necessity. “Therefore an overseer *must* be . . . able to teach” (emphasis added). The fact that the aptitude to teach and unimpeachable character are bundled together, and that the emphasis is on public and private goodness, is important. Character alone is not enough; the capacity to teach by itself is insufficient. Truth must be exemplified; the power of the gospel must be seen as well as heard. That is why Paul exhorts Timothy to watch his life *and* doctrine (1 Tim. 4:16). Elders have to watch both, and we cannot watch our teaching unless we “practice these things [and immerse ourselves] in them” (1 Tim. 4:15). That is also why Paul had to describe his sufferings to the Colossian Christians (Col. 1:24–2:5). Without visible evidence of his transformed life, his listeners would not have the whole message.

Titus 1:5–9 directs Titus, who like Timothy is an apostolic representative, to appoint elders who are above reproach (1:6–7). Here, however, the teaching role is expanded: “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (1:9). That verse alone specifies four responsibilities of each qualified elder. First, the verse addresses what he must believe: he must believe sound doctrine as received from the apostles, and not some dubious alternative. Second, the verse addresses how he must believe it: he must hold firmly to this apostolic doctrine, not with some shaky grasp but with a firm one, really believing it. Third, he must grasp it well enough that he can teach it. Fourth, he must be able to rebuke those who contradict it; that is, he must not only know the boundaries of

1. Note that in Acts 20:17 and 28 the terms “elders” and “overseers” refer to the same people. These leaders are to “shepherd” the flock. The words used there are from the same word group as “pastor.” Similarly, 1 Timothy 3:1–7 speaks of “overseers”; Titus 1:5–9 speaks of “elders.”

sound doctrine well enough to recognize heresy but he must also have the courage to name such false teaching and repudiate it.

As always, context is key to application. Notice particularly that Titus, having spoken of refuting false teaching, now in 1:10–16 describes specific false teachers, not mainly in terms of their doctrinal errors, which seem to be Jewish myths of some sort, but in terms of their character. They are insubordinate, empty talkers, motivated by shameful gain, with both minds and consciences defiled. They are unfit for any good work. We should not be surprised that a defiled mind and a defiled conscience go together. This is because an ungodly life (leading to a guilty conscience) and misleading doctrine (readily accepted by a defiled mind) feed each other. By contrast, in Titus 2 Paul exhorts Titus to teach what accords with sound doctrine and then proceeds to describe attitudes and behaviors that adorn the gospel (2:1–10). Lest Titus miss the connection, Paul exhorts him, “Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us” (2:7–8).

Paul is not alone in insisting on the connection between life and doctrine, between knowledge and character. In 1 Peter 5:1–4, Peter exhorts elders to shepherd the flock of God as God wills. Peter tells us how to do this by underscoring three things to avoid, each of which is to be replaced by a godly approach to exercising oversight. First, we are to shepherd God’s flock not under compulsion but willingly. Second, we are to do so not for shameful gain but with sincere eagerness. Third, we are not to domineer over people but rather to be an example to them. The promise that follows is that when we do so we can anticipate receiving the “unfading crown of glory” (5:4).

What I hope you notice is that these largely attitudinal or motivational prohibitions and exhortations concerning how elders are to discharge their duties are embedded in doctrine. Among the doctrinal truths affirmed in the immediate context of this passage are the necessity of gospel obedience (1 Pet. 4:17); the faithfulness of the Creator

(4:19); the historicity of the incarnation (5:1); the reality of glory to come (5:1, 4); the enmity and reality of Satan (5:8); the abundance of God's grace (5:10); and much more. Only those who stand firm in the *true* grace of God (5:12) can live the life he calls us to live. We have to know it before we can live it, and we have to live it in order to adequately teach it. If you have any lingering doubt that truth and godliness are inseparable, read 2 Peter. Peter repeatedly exposes and rebukes *ungodliness* that is always the bedfellow of *false* teaching.

Now that you have seen this pattern, I hope that wherever you turn in the Bible, you will see the connection between truth and godliness. It is, I dare say, on almost every page. Look for it and let it strengthen your resolve to grow in grace—in both the truth of God's grace and the life that you can live because of it. This organic connection should not be something that intimidates us, making us feel that God is asking too much of us. Instead, we should recall that our good God designed the universe so that we can experience the abundant life for which he made us.

Aim for All Three

So as you let the Bible help you integrate study, obedience, and teaching, thank God for the way that he has designed both you and the task of equipping you to serve the church. Yes, one week focus on doctrinal truth to be guarded and taught, and the next week zero in on a skill to be learned, and the third week give yourself to growth in some facet of your character, but rejoice that they all work together by design. Make Philippians 1:9–11 your prayer for yourself and those with whom you partner in this undertaking.

And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.