

THOSE WHO LABOR AMONG US
1 Thessalonians 5:12

Each year the people of Community Baptist Church elect elders and deacons to serve in the ministry in various leadership capacities. In a practical way, these men serve as representatives of the people who are not able to attend all the board meetings or committee meetings (or more likely wouldn't want to). Also, in a practical way, these men serve as representatives of God to the people. That is not to say that God speaks directly to the elders and deacons, giving instruction for the church. No, but God has given clear instruction in His Word about the positions or offices these men occupy in the Church.

Therefore, it is good for us to set aside a service each year to recognize the newly elected servants of the Lord and to remind ourselves of some aspects of God's plan. God has given a plan for the orderly operation of the local expression of the Body of Christ. That plan involves leaders. In general terms, God has explained what these leaders should be like, what kind of work they should do, and how the church as a whole should relate to them.

God did not establish the leadership positions in the church just so that some guys could be in charge. Rather, God desires an orderly operation through which He will be glorified. Again, the best way to glorify God is for us to be conformed to the image of His Son Jesus Christ. That is our goal here at Community. We believe we will more likely work toward that goal if we follow God's instruction about orderliness in the assembly as much as we can understand it and do it.

Those Who Labor.

According to the Constitution of Community Baptist Church, we have leaders who labor who we call elders and deacons. Regarding the office of Elder, we read in the *Constitution of Community Baptist Church, Article 4 - Government, Section 2a - Administration, Elders (pages 9-11)* what we think they are.

“The Elders are chosen representatives of the congregation to govern, discipline, and oversee the needs of the assembly. The specific qualifications for the office of Elder are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9.”

We also read what they do.

- 1) Oversee all organizations within the church.
- 2) Provide pulpit supply when necessary and serve as pulpit committee.
- 3) Examine those desiring membership in Community Baptist Church.
- 4) Exercise church discipline.
- 5) Appoint new Elders.
- 6) Assist the Pastor with worship services and the administration of the ordinances.
- 7) Recommend missionaries to the church for support.
- 8) Oversee all matters concerning music.
- 9) Visitation ministry to the sick and shut-in and to prospective members.

That, in a nutshell, is our understanding of the office of elder or more specifically what we would term a lay elder.

Our constitution also outlines in general terms what we think the office of Deacon entails. Again according to the *Constitution of Community Baptist Church, Article 4 - Government, Section 2b - Service, Deacons (page 11)* we conclude what deacons are.

“Deacons are chosen representatives of the congregation to oversee and attend to the physical needs of the church. Deacons are subservient to the Elders and responsible to them for the fulfillment of their ministries. Their specific qualifications are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13.”

What do they do?

- 1) Make recommendations on the salaries of all monetarily supported laborers of the church, including missionaries.
- 2) Collecting, disbursing and accounting for the gifts and offerings received by the church.

- 3) Ushering and seating for regular services and special programs, which includes provision for parking lot attendants.
- 4) Maintenance, repair, and operations of the existing church buildings, grounds, equipment, and other assets.
- 5) Arrange for a review of the financial records tri-annually.
- 6) The Deacons shall serve as the Trustees of Community Baptist for all legal matters.

Again, these are the conclusions we have drawn about the character and work of the two offices, elder and deacon. However, the context of our text gives more specific information about the leaders of the local church. According to the biblical context, everyone is to encourage each other. *Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing (5:11).*

According to this verse, everyone in the ministry here should be characterized as always calling each other alongside. We are very familiar with the verb Paul used here. It is the word *parakalleo*. Obviously, the word is a compound word made up of *para*, which means with, beside, at, or near, added to the word *kalleo*, which means to call. That is why we often translate the word to mean “to call alongside.” Typically the word is translated in the New Testament to speak of comfort, encouragement, or beseeching.

Therefore, Jesus used the word *parakleitos* (the noun form) as the title for the Holy Spirit. Consider how the Holy Spirit illustrates for us the work we are supposed to be doing in the church. He calls us alongside Himself, God the Father, and God the Son. How does He do that? By calling us alongside the Bible. He uses the truths and promises of the Bible to comfort us and encourage us. In our relationship with Him, He leads us (Romans 8:14) and testifies with our spirit that we are indeed God’s children (Romans 8:16).

The Holy Spirit demonstrates what “calling alongside” looks like. We are to encourage each other with the truths and promises of God’s Word. We are to encourage each other through fellowship, reminding each other that we are God’s children.

Furthermore, God’s plan is for us to be characterized as always constructing each other. The Greek word translated “*building up*” simply means to build a house. We know from practical experience that building a house is a process that begins with a plan, the blueprints, and progresses through orderly steps beginning with the foundation and ending with the paint, trim, and molding. We know

that you cannot jump ahead in the steps. For example, you cannot put the roof on the foundation without first building the walls.

In the same way, our ministry to each other requires a building process. New believers need to be taught and encouraged to practice foundational truths. Mature believers need to learn and rehearse the finer truths of the Bible. All of us are supposed to be involved in encouraging and building up each other all the time. Through personal interaction like sitting down to coffee, to accountability, or prayer meetings, we create opportunities to build each other. Small group interaction is a very effective way to build up others spiritually. The same can be said regarding our Adult Bible Fellowship classes. Even ministry opportunities as we work together in Released Time, Good News Clubs, nursing homes, and prison ministries yield opportunities for us to interact and build each other up while we minister to those outside our assembly.

In order to promote this kind of ministry, God gives us leaders who created opportunities, who show how the care of the church is supposed to be done.

The context of our text helps us understand what all members of the assembly should be doing in ministry. However, as we come to verse twelve, we discover special instruction concerning our relationships with leaders. *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you (1 Thessalonians 5:12).*

Paul identified these leaders as those who are over you and admonish you. The leaders are leading because they are “over you.” The participle translated *over you* means to stand before. In one sense, that speaks of a position of authority. In another sense, it speaks of leading by example. Leaders are supposed to be leading in plain view as others watch to see how ministry is done.

Also we see from this verse that the leaders lead as they admonish. This word means to warn. More accurately it means to direct one’s mind. Leaders in the church help direct the thinking of others through teaching, example, and conversation. Who are these leaders?

Two particular offices in the church are identified in the New Testament. We find this designation in the opening words of Paul’s letter to the Christians in Philippi. *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with*

the overseers and deacons (Philippians 1:1). There are overseers and there are deacons.

The term overseers speaks of men who are gifted or who have spiritual capacities to lead or administer. Three different terms are used interchangeably to describe the variety of work and function in this office. Especially the terms **elder** (*presbuteors*) and **overseer** (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably to describe the same position of leadership in the church. Peter wrote, “*So I exhort the **elders** [presbuteors] among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **shepherd** [poimaino-pastor] the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight** [episkopos], not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly (1 Peter 5:1-2).*” Notice that we have the titles elder, bishop, and pastor all speaking of the same person. Therefore, the exercise of this gift might involve serving by administration, teaching, or preaching.

We also discover in the New Testament that there are various levels of service among the elders. A very important statement to this end is found in Paul’s instruction to Pastor Timothy. “*Let the elders who rule well be considered **worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching***” (1 Timothy 5:17). The next verse in this context speaks of remuneration for labor. It appears then that there must be a distinction here between those elders who are employed by the church and those who serve as laymen. We conclude that vocational elders serve in the position of pastor.

And what about the deacons? These leaders serve the physical matters of the church. A comparison of the qualifications stated in 1 Timothy 3 indicate that the Deacons are to lead by instruction and example as much as the Elders do.

How We Relate.

The relationship between the elders and deacons with the rest of the church is described in our text. *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you (1 Thessalonians 5:12).*

According to God’s plan, brothers are to respect those who labor. *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you*

(v.12a). The use of the word brothers is significant here. It reminds us that the family members of the church are brothers and sisters. It helps us to remember that we are not a religious organization but a family. A religious organization relates only as superior to subordinate. In almost any organization there is a strong sense of hierarchy, authority, and submission. The church isn’t all about hierarchy. It is supposed to be like a family.

In families, father, mother, and children all have their inter-related responsibilities. God gives certain members of the family more responsibility for leadership than others. But they relate to each other as members of the same family. They all have the same name, same lineage, same goals, and same purposes.

This principle of unity was much more obvious about ten generations ago. In those “olden, golden, days” the family farm was a very important element of the American culture. In the mid-nineteenth century over 75% of the American workforce was centered on the family farm. The family farm required unity in work and purpose. Everyone rose early in the morning and was involved in the necessary work of planting, maintaining, milking, harvesting and everything else that went into a successful venture or, as it was in many cases, simply surviving.

Families understand how important it is for leaders and followers to know who they are, know their responsibilities, and work together. Therefore, God’s plan is for the people of the assembly to respect those who labor among us. The leaders are the laborers. The elders and deacons are not superior kind of people. We are laborers like everyone else who the Lord has put to work in His vineyard. The Lord is the Master who decides who needs to do what kind of work in which part of the vineyard. He receives the glory for work successfully accomplished.

We all (including the leaders) are the laborers. It might be a bit discouraging to realize that the Greek word for *ones laboring* means to become weary, tired, exhausted from the work. Being in leadership is not the same as being a king sitting on the throne with servants scurrying to a fro to make life comfortable. Good leaders are *among* the people showing others how to do ministry. Being *among* emphasizes unity and creates opportunity to encourage and build up (v.11).

These leaders who labor among us deserve our respect. What does that look like? Well, a very literal translation of the phrase sounds like this: *Consider them more excessively beyond in love*. As the leaders who God has appointed to the work labor to the point of exhaustion, think very highly of them. The instruction does not require that the people worship or exalt or put leaders in the place of the Master Jesus. However, it does require that the people demonstrate special deference to them.

That special deference flows out of love. Remember that love is not the same as like. God does not require the church to like the leaders. God does require the church to be willing to sacrifice in order to work with the leaders to bring about what is best for the church. It is easy enough for us to understand that God's plan is for the members of the assembly to show high esteem for the leaders. That is an important principle. However, being familiar with the principle and making it work are two different things. Because we are all humans living in flesh-influenced bodies, it can be difficult to show proper respect.

The reason why it can be difficult to show proper respect to leaders is because they *are over you in the Lord (v.12b)*. That word "over" is the key. Human nature tends to struggle with leadership. Equality is the mantra of the day. The word of our day is that it is not fair for someone to be esteemed more highly than another. The progressive thinkers insist that Anglo-Saxon male privilege must be stopped. That isn't what God requires for the church.

Nevertheless friction and ill will easily come to the surface in relationships between the leaders and the led. Often this friction is voiced in questions like, "What makes that person qualified to lead me?" "Why can't I be the leader?" "Who made this rule?" A friend who lives in Australia told me once that it is difficult for men to serve as pastors in the churches because of a common practice called "Tall Poppy." The idea is that many people in the Australian culture think that it is not good for a business, an organization, the culture as a whole, and in this case the church, for one poppy to be taller and more obvious than the other poppies in the field. Therefore, if a poppy gets too tall, it is the responsibility of the other poppies to cut it down.

God's plan is to have some people over other people. It is His plan because the Lord establishes the very concept of leaders. Notice

that the leadership is "*in the Lord*." That means that He approves of it. That is why God has given the qualifications for leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. That is why God the Holy Spirit distributes spiritual capacities for service according to His will.

We are to respect those who are over us even though it is contrary to natural human desires. And furthermore, you are to respect them even though they *admonish you (v.12c)*. Admonition is not always welcome, to say the least. Having someone over us is difficult to live with, and having that person over us telling us what to do is even more intolerable. Human nature recoils at being taught, instructed, questioned, or especially rebuked by another.

As a result of resistance in the matter, leaders often become satisfied with an uneasy truce. We already established that church relationships are a lot like family relationships. In the family relationship, God has determined that the husband is responsible to lead which might require instruction, training, even rebuke. Wives, being human the way they are, often resist someone else telling them what to do. And yet God requires wives to respect their husbands just like people in the church are supposed to respect leaders. But in reality, wives often want to take charge, rebuke their husbands, because they are sure they could do a better job, and they show disgust for the husband. As result, most husbands, who God requires to lead, choose instead to find a secure zone of non-confrontation in the relationship and cease to be leaders.

Too many church leaders have learned to find that zone of non-confrontation, and the result is that saints who need to grow spiritually don't because leadership is afraid to admonition them. But in reality, times of admonishing are good times to show respect. When we don't feel like following, it is a good time to make ourselves follow. When we are offended by admonition, it is a good time to honestly assess whether we actually needed the admonition. When we doubt the ability of leaders, it is a good time to determine if we doubt God also.

Leadership in the church is God's plan. We need to seek out people to whom God has given leadership ability. We need to expect them to lead, let them lead, and esteem them for their leadership. We need to be thankful for the good and faithful leaders God gives us.