

Exegetical Brief: 1 Timothy 5:17—Did All πρεσβύτεροι Proclaim God's Word?

[Pastor Keller serves at St. Stephen Ev. Lutheran Church, Adrian, Michigan.]

Brian R. Keller

Did all of the early New Testament πρεσβύτεροι ("elders") preach and teach? Or were the tasks performed by the πρεσβύτεροι divided in such a way that some were involved in the work of teaching God's Word, while others were not? The NIV gives one answer in its rendering of 1 Timothy 5:17, "*The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.*" This may lead many Bible students to conclude that only some of the elders did the work of preaching and teaching. The NIV Study Bible gives another answer in its note on 1 Timothy 5:17:

All elders were to exercise leadership (3:4,5) and to teach and preach (3:2), and all were to receive honor. But those who excelled in leadership were to be counted worthy of double honor. This was especially true of those who labored at teaching and preaching. (The Greek word translated "work" refers to toil.)¹

Admittedly, this is an exegetical question. What does the Greek text indicate?

Οἱ καλῶς προεστῶτες πρεσβύτεροι

These men are generally called elders in English, though the translation of πρεσβύτεροι can vary to some degree depending on the context. πρεσβύτεροι can refer to men who are older in age (Acts 2:17; 1 Timothy 5:1), to officials among the Jews (Matthew 16:21, Luke 7:3), as well as to public ministers (Acts 15:2; 20:17; 1 Peter 5:1). Of the 66 appearances of this term, the NIV uses "elder(s)" 59 times, "ancients" once (Hebrews 11:2), and some variation of old(er) six times.² Beck (AAT) tended to use the familiar term "pastors" when the πρεσβύτεροι were public ministers.³ Though this translation may not be precise, it might be clearer in meaning to Americans today, since the ministry of πρεσβύτεροι may have been more similar to that of today's pastors than to that of those we usually call elders in our local congregations. At least in the three passages which follow, the early New Testament elders (πρεσβύτεροι) and overseers (ἐπίσκοποι) seem to have been the same men with the same calls. Their work is twice described with ποιμαίνω, "to shepherd."

In Acts 20:17, Paul sends to Ephesus for the elders (πρεσβυτέρους) of the church. The apostle tells these very elders:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (ἐπισκόπους). *Be shepherds of* (ποιμαίνειν, lit. "to shepherd") the church of God, which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

The inspired apostle Peter wrote:

To the *elders* (πρεσβυτέρους) among you, I appeal as a *fellow elder* (συμπρεσβύτερος), a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: *Be shepherds of*

¹ *The Concordia Self-Study Bible* is identical on this passage.

² Cf. Edward W. Goodrick & John R. Kohlenberger III, *The NIV Exhaustive Concordance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 1781.

³ See Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1; also in GWN/NET.

(ποιμάνετε, imperative) God's flock that is under your care, *servicing as overseers* (ἐπισκοποῦντες)" (1 Peter 5:1, 2).⁴

In Titus 1:5, the inspired apostle Paul writes:

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint *elders* (πρεσβυτέρους) in every town, as I directed you.

In the middle of the list of qualifications, an elder is called an "overseer" (ἐπίσκοπον Titus 1:7).⁵ Titus 1:9, then, seems to apply to an elder/overseer, called to public ministry, "He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." The term "elder" seems to call attention to the qualifications and spiritual maturity of the public minister, while "overseer" describes his divinely called task.⁶ Holy Scripture describes the ministry of an elder/overseer with the verb ποιμαίνω (shepherd/pastor). There seems to be good reason to think of the "elders" of 1 Timothy 5:17 in terms more similar to today's "pastors" than those whom we most often call "elders" in our local congregations. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that the specific early New Testament form of public gospel ministry carried out by elders/overseers was identical to the form of today's pastoral office. The so-called "pastoral office" of today may not be identical in every place either, due to different emphases mentioned in the call.

καλῶς—This adverb indicates that this group of elders did their work, "well, commendably, appropriately, properly, correctly."

προεστῶτες—(perfect active participle from προϊσθῆμι) is a proper adjectival participle in the first attributive position, modified by the adverb καλῶς.⁷ Προϊσθῆμι (πρό-"before, in front of, over" + ἵσθῆμι—"stand, set, place") means to "stand in front, be at the head of, to be over" (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12) and therefore, "lead, rule, direct, supervise, guide, preside." The perfect tense indicates that these elders have done this work and continue to do it.

διπλῆς τιμῆς ἀξιούσθωσαν

ἀξιούσθωσαν—(present passive imperative, 3rd plural, from ἀξιόω). Third person imperatives often are translated in English with the words, "Let him/them..." The American Bible reader may easily become confused, thinking that this phrase indicates the idea of mere permission. For example, "Let them go" would usually be understood to mean that permission has been granted. The American reader may not immediately understand the idea of command, which is the usual force of the imperative, in the translation, "Let them."⁸ Most Americans today would say, "They should go," or "They must go," to deliver a third person imperative with the force of a command. A commander in the military would say, "I command them to go."⁹

The usual way to translate ἀξιούσθωσαν would be, "Let them be considered worthy." This could sound like mere permission, "If they want to consider them worthy, let them." Perhaps it is more accurate to translate, "They should be considered worthy." It could even mean, "They must be considered worthy." The present tense contributes the idea of an ongoing (durative) process.¹⁰ The elders who lead well should not merely be considered worthy at 25th anniversary banquets, but repeatedly and continually throughout their ministries. This

⁴ A few mss. omit ἐπισκοποῦντες: N*, B, cop [sa].

⁵ Cf. Greek text and other translations.

⁶ Cp. "Reverend, Pastor, Minister" in today's usage.

⁷ Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 617, 618.

⁸ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 486.

⁹ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 486.

¹⁰ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 485.

is not mere permission to do so, if the congregation feels the need, but a divine command issued through the inspired apostle Paul.

διπλῆς τιμῆς—The genitive of value indicates that the elders who lead well are worthy "of double honor." There are many interpretations of this phrase in commentaries. Context provides the answer. The double honor seems to come from 1) being an elder, and 2) the fact that he rules well. The double honor given seems to include 1) honor itself, including the respect intimated in v.19, and 2) the salary or wages mentioned in v.18.¹¹ Luther wrote about this under the Fourth Commandment in the Large Catechism:

Yet there is need that this also be urged upon the populace, that those who would be Christians are under obligation in the sight of God to esteem them worthy of double honor who minister to their souls, that they deal well with them and provide for them. For that, God is willing to add to you sufficient blessing and will not let you come to want.¹²

We could translate what we have studied so far, "The elders who lead well should be considered worthy of double honor." However, in English "well" may sound as though it goes with what follows, instead of what precedes.¹³ This may be clarified through changing the word order or expanding, "The elders who have been leading in a fitting way (and continue to do so) should be considered worthy of double honor." This writer suggests, "The elders who are good leaders should be considered worthy of double honor."

μάλιστα οἱ κοπιῶντες ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ

μάλιστα—Lexicons cite this as the superlative of the adverb μάλα "very," while μᾶλλον "more" is the comparative. This results in the translation, "above all, most of all, especially."

οἱ κοπιῶντες (present active participle from κοπιάω)—This is an adjectival participle with substantival usage in this clause.¹⁴ The implied substantive is πρεσβύτεροι, remembered from the preceding clause.¹⁵ Substantival participles are often translated with the words, "the one(s) who..." with the verbal idea of the participle rendered as a finite verb following a relative.¹⁶

The answer to the main question asked at the beginning of this article largely depends on the meaning of κοπιῶντες. A careful word study of this one verb will greatly influence the answer. One view simply sees the meaning "work." If κοπιάω is equivalent to ἐργάζομαι in this context, then the answer is that there are some elders who preach and teach, and others who do not. This view would see elders all of whom rule well, and among those who rule well are those who work at preaching and teaching.

A second interpretation explains that κοπιάω says more here. It relies heavily on the nearly two dozen uses of this verb in the New Testament, as well as the history of this term.

In secular Greek κόπος means a.) "beating" or the "weariness" caused by it, and b.) the "exertion" (e.g., of manual work) that brings on physical tiredness. κοπιάω, then, means "to tire," "to wear oneself out."¹⁷

We can find these meanings in the New Testament passages. First, consider the meaning, "to tire or grow weary." Christ, our dear Savior, issued that comforting invitation, "Come to me, all you who are weary (κοπιῶντες) and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Christ commended the Christians in

¹¹ ἄξιός in v.18 is similar to ἀξιούσθωσαν of v.17. Also see the connective γάρ.

¹² *Concordia Triglotta*, 626-627, paragraph 161.

¹³ Cp. NIV, which seems confusing in this respect.

¹⁴ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 619-620.

¹⁵ Cf. Benjamin Chapman, *Greek New Testament Insert* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 26.

¹⁶ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 619.

¹⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament—Abridged*; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 453.

Ephesus, "You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary (κεκοπιάκες)" (Revelation 2:3). We are reminded of Christ's human nature and state of humiliation as we read the inspired words of John 4:6, "Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired (κεκοπιακῶς) as he was from the journey, sat down by the well." In these contexts, κοπιᾶω is not a synonym for ἐργάζομαι.

A second set of passages combines the idea of work with its wearying effort or exhausting nature. One can sense Simon's frustration as he answers the Lord in Luke 5:5, "Master, we've worked hard (κοπιᾶσαντες) all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." Paul said to the elders/overseers of Ephesus, "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work (κοπιῶντες) we must help the weak" (Acts 20:35). The NIV sees "hard work" in Romans 16:12, "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard (τὰς κοπιώσας) in the Lord."

In some contexts it does seem difficult to determine if κοπιᾶω means "work hard" or merely "work." The next several examples are similar in some respects to 1 Timothy 5:17. The inspired apostle seems to have rigorous work in mind in 2 Timothy 2:6, "The hardworking (κοπιῶντα) farmer should be the first to receive a share of the crops." 1 Thessalonians 5:12 is even more similar to the passage under study, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect (εἰδέναι) those who work hard (τοὺς κοπιῶντας) among you, who are over you (προϊσταμένους) in the Lord and who admonish you." Colossians 1:29 is also similar to 1 Timothy 5:17, for the apostle is talking about the hard work involved in preaching and teaching, "To this end I labor (κοπιῶ), struggling (ἀγωνιζόμενος) with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." The same verb combination appears in 1 Timothy 4:10, "for this we labor (κοπιῶμεν) and strive (ἀγωνιζόμεθα)."¹⁸

As we ponder the meaning of οἱ κοπιῶντες in 1 Timothy 5:17, we may find it difficult to decide whether the divinely intended meaning is simply "work" or work with the emphasis on exhausting effort. A survey of the New Testament uses of κοπιᾶω seems to indicate that one can make a solid case for the latter meaning. "The elders who are good leaders should be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard [to the point of exhaustion]" in the area I described next.

ἐν λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ—This phrase can be literally translated, "In [the] Word and [the] teaching."¹⁹ Some might render λόγῳ with active verbal force, "preaching." But wouldn't that meaning be more easily understood from a form of κηρύσσω? It seems more likely to this writer that λόγῳ refers to the objective "Word." Διδασκαλία could be either objective "doctrine," or active "teaching." Most often, διδασκαλία seems to refer to objective "doctrine" in the pastoral epistles. That may be the more likely meaning here too.

Nevertheless, those who work hard in the Word and the doctrine will both study it privately and proclaim it to others, as God has called them. All of the elders mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:17 are good leaders. 1 Timothy 5:20 mentions those who are not good leaders, "Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning." Yet, among those who are good leaders, some are worthy of special mention. They spend themselves in the Word and the doctrine. They are really and truly disciples of Jesus. They faithfully remain in Christ's Word (John 8:31).

Suggested translation: "The elders who are good leaders should be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard in the Word and doctrine."

Perhaps there was a division of duties so that some did more preaching/teaching work than others, and thus worked really hard due to their divine call. Consider the example of a congregation today which might call a head pastor, who does most of the preaching, and an assistant pastor, who may spend more time in visitation,

¹⁸ Cp. the English words, "agony, agonize." The verb evokes the imagery of an athletic contest, and the great struggle involved in striving after victory.

¹⁹ Cf. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 209, "The function of the article is not primarily to make something definite that would otherwise be indefinite," and 243, "It is not necessary for a noun to have the article in order for it to be definite. But conversely, a noun *cannot* be indefinite when it has the article. Thus it *may* be definite without the article, and it *must* be definite with the article." Also see Wallace, p. 247. Λόγῳ and διδασκαλίᾳ are the objects of the preposition ἐν, and seem to be definite. See John 1:1, | Ἐν ἀρχῇ, "in the beginning."

counseling, or youth work. Perhaps some were simply more inclined, by God's powerful grace, to spend more time and energy in God's Word and doctrine. They studied harder and longer, and they worked harder and longer in preaching and teaching it to people. Maybe the "especially" phrase served as a goal for the elders to strive after, and a benchmark for the laity to keep in mind. Those who spent themselves in God's Word were not to remain unnoticed, but were especially worthy of double honor.

We don't know the answer to every curious question our minds can conceive about early New Testament forms of ministry. The first view of this verse maintains that some elders did not preach and teach. The second holds that all of the elders were involved in teaching God's Word in some way, but some worked especially hard in the Word and the doctrine, whether due to call or inclination or gifts, or all of these.

Christ spent himself redeeming all people through agonizing suffering and atoning death. This moved and motivated those believing elders to spend themselves (through "blood, sweat, and tears") putting their time and talents to the greatest possible use, laboring in the Word and the doctrine.

This second view seems to this writer to fit very well with the "able to teach" qualification for elders/overseers (1 Timothy 3:2) and the words, "He [the elder/overseer] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9).