

In Defense of Parity:

A presentation of the parity or equality of elders in the New Testament

CHAPTER FIVE

Careful Exposition of 1 Timothy 5:17

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In any examination and application to our circumstances of a biblical text we must be careful to allow the text to speak for itself first and ask first what its natural sense is. There is a place to re-examine our interpretation of a biblical text on the basis of our practical concerns with regard to the way in which it raises questions or seems to contradict other parts of biblical revelation. Yet we must not allow such concerns too quickly to mold or influence our interpretation of a text lest we read our own systematic theology into every text of the Bible and never learn anything which expands or refines our views.

All this is especially true with regard to [1 Tim. 5:17](#). We must allow it to speak for itself in its native context. We must not manipulate it early in the interpretive process so as make sure that it raises no questions about deeply held convictions. For this reason I intend to open up this text under two headings:

I. Its Historical and Grammatical Interpretation

II. Its Practical and Ecclesiastical Implications

I. Its Historical and Grammatical Interpretation

The theme of [1 Tim. 5:17](#) clearly revolves around two unusual phrases used in it by Paul and used nowhere else in the New Testament. Those unusual phrases are *double honor* and the *elders who rule well*. We may summarize its theme in the following statement. The theme of [1 Tim. 5:17](#) is *Paul's direction to Timothy that well-ruling elders should be considered worthy of double honor*. Double honor and well-ruling elders are the twin difficulties which must be explained in order to understand the text. The interpretation of this text is properly structured around an examination of the meaning of these phrases. We will, therefore seek to ask and answer two questions about this phrase.

- What is double honor?
- Who are the well-ruling elders to be considered worthy of double honor?

What is double honor?

The answer to this question must begin by answering the more basic question, What does honor mean in this text? My conviction is that honor here designates giving something of material value to someone as a mark of the value we attach to them and the esteem and respect in which we hold them. In this case the thing of material value is the regular, financial support of the church. This conclusion is supported by both the usage of this word in the New Testament and its usage in [1 Tim. 5:17](#).

Honor, in the New Testament, often has its usual meaning to us, esteem or respect, but it frequently designates something of material value ([Matt. 27:6-9](#); [Acts 4:34](#); [5:2, 3](#); [7:16](#); [19:19](#)). Thayer's defines the word as follows: *1) a valuing by which the price is fixed 1a) of the price itself 1b) of the price paid or received for a person or thing bought or sold 2) honour which belongs or is shown to one 2a) of the honour which one has by reason of rank and state of office which he holds 2b) deference, reverence.* The English word, honorarium, may illustrate how the idea of honor may cross over into the idea of something of material value.

Which of these meanings we should select for the word as it is used in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) must be determined, of course by the context of its usage there. In this case there is very significant and even determinative data found in the context of [1 Tim. 5:17](#).

The whole of 1 Timothy has for its theme and purpose the giving of directions to Timothy as to how his ministry in the church at Ephesus should be ordered. This theme is found in [1 Tim. 3:14](#) and [15](#), "I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I *write* so that you may know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." The contents of this epistle may be arranged in terms of this key verse and the purpose it states for this letter. In [2:1-15](#) Paul's concern is to give directions about the meetings of the church. In [3:1-13](#) Paul gives directions concerning the officers of the church. In [4:1-16](#) Paul addresses Timothy personally and gives him directions concerning himself and his ministry to the church. [Chapter 5](#) continues this theme. With the beginning of [chapter 5](#) Paul begins to give particular directions to Timothy as to how he should order his ministry to certain classes of people in the church. [Verses 1](#) and [2](#) instruct Timothy as to his ministry to older and younger men and women. [6:1](#) and [2](#) gives directions with regard to slaves in the church. [6:3-15](#) addresses the subject of those advocating a different doctrine. [1 Tim. 6:17-19](#) tells Timothy how to deal with those in the church who are rich. The following outline may help to make this structure clear.

The Theme of 1 Timothy-Instructions to Timothy about His Ministry to the Church at Ephesus ([1 Tim. 3:14-15](#))

- I. Instructions about His Ministry regarding the Overall Organization of the Church ([1 Tim. 2:1-3:13](#))
 - A. The Services of the Church ([1 Tim. 2:1-15](#))
 - B. The Offices of the Church ([1 Tim. 3:1-13](#))
- II. Instruction about His Ministry to Various Classes in the Church ([1 Tim. 4:1-6:19](#))
 - A. To Himself ([4:1-16](#))
 - B. To Different Age Groups ([5:1-2](#))
 - C. To Widows ([5:3-16](#))

- D. To Elders ([5:17-25](#))
- E. To Slaves ([6:1-2](#))
- F. To Erring Teachers ([6:3-5](#))
- G. To Those Who Want To Be Or Are Rich ([6:6-19](#))

In the midst of this treatment of Timothy's ministry to different classes in the church, Paul deals with the classes of the widows and the elders of the church. These two sections are closely related in two different ways. First, they occur successively. [5:3-16](#) addresses the subject of widows. [5:17-22](#) addresses the subject of elders. Second, they both are concerned with the subject of those whom the church financially supports. This is no doubt why they are treated in immediate succession.

What is of great interest to us for our study of honor in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) is that the subject of financial support is addressed by means of the same root word in [1 Tim. 5:3](#). Paul begins his treatment of the financial support of widows by using the verbal form of the word translated, honor, in [verse 17](#). He commands, "Honor widows who are widows indeed." The meaning of this command need not be a matter of any real debate. Paul is commanding that certain widows should be financially supported by the church as a token of the respect and esteem of the church for them.

In particular it is crucial to note that the matter of financial support is inextricably and inseparably bound up with the command to honor the widows. This is put beyond doubt by the succeeding context. In [verse 4](#) Paul proceeds immediately to qualify his command. It is probably that here one of his particular concerns about the situation in Ephesus emerges. Throughout [verse 4-16](#) Paul's intent is to restrict the practice of financially supporting widows only to widows indeed. That is to say, he restricts support to needy widows—those who are truly destitute of anyone who is able to financially provide for them—and to worthy widows—those who have lived an exemplary and godly life. In all of this it is plain that honoring widows means financially supporting them. Paul restricts this honor to widows indeed—those who do not have families or others who may provide for them ([v. 4](#) and [16](#)). Clearly, simple respect and esteem may be due to many widows who have children who can provide for them. Paul's point is, however, that the church should not feel an obligation to honor them by way of financial support. Financial support is clearly key to and inseparable from the idea of honor. Furthermore, the idea of financial support is patent in several of the verses which serve to explain and qualify [verse 3](#). It is the idea of *making some return to their parents* in [verse 4](#). It is the idea of *providing for one's own* in [verse 8](#). It is the idea of *assisting them* in [verse 16](#).

When with this preceding context Paul speaks of double honor in [verse 17](#) using the same root, it is impossible to extract from the meaning of this word the idea of financial support. All of this is made even more plain by the succeeding context of [verse 17](#). [Verse 18](#) explains and confirms [verse 17](#). Note the conjunction, *for*. The language of [verse 18](#), however, makes perfectly plain that financial support is essentially involved in the idea of honor in [verse 17](#). Paul cites the words of [Deut. 25:4](#) ("You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing.") also in [1 Cor. 9:9](#). There the theme is plainly the financial support of ministers of the Word. The phrase "The worker is worthy of his wages", is cited in all likelihood from the words of Jesus in [Luke 10:7](#) and is used there also of the material support of those who preach the gospel. If language is capable of conveying meaning, then we may be sure that the term, honor, as it is used in this context essentially, inseparably,

and inextricably includes financial support. Its meaning is financial support given as a mark of the value and esteem of the church.

This understanding of the meaning of the word, honor, in this context enables us now to address our original question, What is *double* honor? Two clues unlock the meaning of this unusual phrase. The first is the use of double in the New Testament. The second is the use of honor in [1 Tim. 5:3](#).

The first clue is the use of double in the New Testament. This word is used only two other times in the New Testament.

[Matthew 23:15](#) Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.

[Revelation 18:6](#) Pay her back even as she has paid, and give back to her double according to her deeds; in the cup which she has mixed, mix twice as much for her.

The only occurrence of the verb meaning *to double* also occurs in [Revelation 18:6](#). *Double* in these passages is clearly used figuratively. This does not mean, of course, that the word could not be used in a literal fashion, but it does show that it is not at all far-fetched to understand it here in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) in a figurative way. What is the figurative meaning of *double*? It is clearly used figuratively to indicate amplitude or great extent. Double honor is, then, ample material or financial support.

The second clue is the use of honor in [verse 3](#). The connection between [verse 3](#) and [verse 17](#) must be underscored at this point. As we have seen earlier, there is the most intimate connection between the preceding section on the financial support or honoring of widows and [verses 17](#) and [18](#) which also deal with the issue of financial support, the church financially supporting elders. As we have also seen, the thrust of Paul's comments in [verses 3-16](#) is to the effect that, while really needy widows are to be supported, the church is not to be unnecessarily burdened. This suggests that the church was indeed being unduly burdened with the support of widows in Ephesus. At least, it suggests that there were sentiments at work in the church there that could easily lead in that direction. There is the most natural relationship between this thrust and the thrust of verses 17 and 18. If the church was tending on the one hand to be unduly concerned about the support of widows, it was also exhibiting a tendency to neglect the support of the work of the gospel. Hence, on the one hand Paul warns against unduly burdening the church with the honoring of widows in verses 3-16. Then, immediately after this he directs that double honor should be given to the well-ruling elders. The contrast is, I think, obvious. The problem was evidently a tendency either to neglect supporting such elders at all, or to inadequately support them. Perhaps both of these things were problems. To defeat such a tendency Paul directs that well-ruling elders should be considered worthy of double honor.

We can easily see how such a tendency would arise if we examine some instructions Paul had given to the church at Ephesus in previous years. Remember it is the church in Ephesus in which Timothy is exercising his ministry and about which Paul is instructing him ([1 Tim. 1:3](#)). To this church's leaders Paul had addressed some very powerful words of exhortation which could have had the effect (if taken to an extreme) of producing the very tendencies we see implied in [1 Tim. 5:17](#). [Acts 20:17-38](#) is one of the classic and most instructive passages in the New Testament on the subject of biblical eldership. Coincidentally, it also provides the historical backdrop which explains the problems Paul addresses in [1 Tim. 5:17](#).

¹⁷ And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. ¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them, "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, ²¹ solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. ²² And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. ²⁵ And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will see my face no more. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. ²⁷ For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. ²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I have coveted no one's silver or gold or clothes. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. ³⁵ In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" ³⁶ And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. ³⁷ And they began to weep aloud and embraced Paul, and repeatedly kissed him, ³⁸ grieving especially over the word which he had spoken, that they should see his face no more. And they were accompanying him to the ship.

Let me point out to you a number of basic truths about the eldership implied in this passage which lay the foundation for understanding the backdrop of [1 Tim. 5:17](#). In [Acts 20](#):

- (1) There was a single church in Ephesus which had a plurality of elders ([v. 17](#)).
- (2) These elders were also called overseers (bishops in Old English) and shepherds (pastors in Old English) ([v. 18](#)). No distinction is made between some who were elders and others who were bishops or pastors.
- (3) Most (if not all) of these elders worked at ordinary professions and vocations and were not financially supported by the church ([v. 33-35](#)). Probably all of these men were originally called to be elders of the church while continuing their labors in the secular vocations in which they had been laboring. Thus, Paul calls upon them to follow his example of tent-making and be examples of working hard with their own hands and giving to the weak.

Now you can see from these instructions how the very situation implied in [1 Tim. 5](#) could have developed. With Paul's powerful words on this emotional occasion ringing in their ears, the elders would have been loathe to take any money from the church and careful to the point of excess to care for the weak, the widows being the prime example of this category. Hence, it could easily come to pass that the widow's benevolence would be taken to the point of excess and ministerial support be minimal or non-existent in the church in Ephesus.

All of this makes abundantly clear that the contrast intended in the text is between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders. Widows are to be honored (financially). Elders are to be doubly-honored financially. In contrast to widows with their comparatively small needs, well-ruling elders (who as men would have much heavier responsibilities to their families etc.) are to be the objects of a generous and ample material support from the church. Paul's point is not to be taken with strict literality. As we have seen, the word double is intended figuratively. Yet, the use of the word, double, does make plain that the well-ruling elders are to be supported in a way that greatly exceeds the support given to widows. This, by the way, is the interpretation of Calvin. Here is what he says:

... I think it is more probable that a comparison is here drawn between widows and elders. Paul had formerly enjoined that honour should be paid to widows; but elders are more worthy of being honoured than widows, and, with respect to them, ought to receive double honour. (p. 138)

One of the implications of this exegesis must now be pointed out. The contrast in the text is not between honoring all (the rest of) the elders and double honoring well-ruling elders. The contrast is between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders. It may be natural for us to assume that Paul is contrasting honoring elders and double-honoring well-ruling elders. But this is a contrast about which the text is simply silent. It is serious exegetical mistake to exegete [1 Tim. 5:17](#) in terms of a contrast about which the text is completely silent, while ignoring the clear and patent contrast instituted by Paul himself between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders.

Now having dealt with the question, *What is double honor?*, we must now address the issue of...

Who are the well-ruling elders to be considered worthy of double honor?

The answer which Paul gives to this question is in itself clear. Those to be doubly-honored are clearly well-ruling elders. At this point, however, two issues raised by this apparently clear answer must be addressed. On the one side, we must ask the question, What does he mean to imply about the rest of the elders who are not included in the phrase, well-ruling elders? On the other side, we must ask the question, How are “those who work hard at preaching and teaching” related to the class called well-ruling elders?

What does Paul mean to imply about the rest of the elders who are not included in the phrase, well-ruling elders? The difficulty here is that there is a possible contrast between the elders who rule well and the elders who rule badly. Does Paul mean to say that the rest of the elders rule badly and are not therefore to be financially supported? Possible support for this opinion might be gleaned from the succeeding context which speaks of elders who “continue in sin” ([vv. 19, 20](#)).

While elders “who continue in sin” certainly would be included among the general class of the elders who do not rule well, it is wrong and unnecessary to think that the contrast here is between well-ruling elders and badly-ruling elders.

In the first place, it seems quite unlikely that Paul would set up a situation by such language (if it is intended to contrast well and badly) in which every non-supported elder would be viewed as ruling badly. But this is exactly what anyone who assumes such a contrast would be asserting that Paul is doing. If in response to this letter an elder was not

considered worthy of double-honor, then the implication would be that he was ruling ineptly or badly.

In the second place, the meaning of the word, well, clearly allows a different interpretation. Thayer's gives this definition of the word, well: 1) *beautifully, finely, excellently, well* la) *rightly, so that there shall be no room for blame, well, truly* lb) *excellently, nobly, commendably* 1c) *honourably, in honour* 1c1) *in a good place, comfortable* 1d) *to speak well of one, to do good* le) *to be well (of those recovering health)*. Clearly, this definition shows that the word is susceptible of conveying a superlative force. The well-ruling elder is, then, the excellently ruling elder. The contrast, then, would be on this translation between excellently ruling elders and other good and qualified elders. In the following usages of this word in the New Testament it appears to have this force. The Greek word, well, used in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) is in bold type in each text.

[Matthew 15:7](#) You hypocrites, **rightly** did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying,

[Mark 7:6](#) And He said to them, "**Rightly** did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME.'

[Mark 7:9](#) He was also saying to them, "You **nicely** set aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition."

[Mark 7:37](#) And they were utterly astonished, saying, "He has done all things **well**; He makes even the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak."

[Mark 12:28](#) And one of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them **well**, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?"

[Mark 12:32](#) And the scribe said to Him, "**Right**, Teacher, You have truly stated that HE IS ONE; AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE BESIDES HIM;

[Luke 20:39](#) And some of the scribes answered and said, "Teacher, You have spoken **well**."

[Acts 28:25](#) And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit **rightly** spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers,"

[Romans 11:20](#) **Quite right**, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

[1 Corinthians 7:37](#) But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do **well**.

[2 Corinthians 11:4](#) For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted, you bear this **beautifully**.

[1 Tim. 3:1](#) It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a **fine** work he desires to do.

[1 Tim. 3:13](#) For those who have served **well** as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

[James 2:3](#) and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the **fine** clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,"

Furthermore, the emphasis of Paul in this verse is not upon grace, but gift. He speaks generally of ruling and especially of teaching. The Bible makes clear teaching and ruling are gifts that are given in greatly varying degrees to different men ([Rom. 12:7, 8](#); [1 Cor. 12:28](#); [Eph. 4:11](#)). The lack of a high degree of such gifts does not disparage the character or disqualify the person of an elder who does not possess them. Furthermore, it is unlikely in the extreme given the economic situation of the early church that Paul means to direct that every qualified elder should be considered worthy of generous financial support by the church. The church at Ephesus had many elders ([Acts 20:17](#); [1 Tim. 5:17-22](#)) all of whom (apparently) at one point in its life were working to support themselves ([Acts 20:34, 35](#)). It is better, then, to recognize in the adverb, well, a superlative or comparative sense which is intended to contrast not good and bad, but good, better, and best.

What things, then, might keep a man from being a well-ruling elder? Many things that do not disparage his character and general qualifications for the office at all. Such things might include the lack of strong gifts of leading and teaching, the lack of a good education to refine such natural gifts, circumstances like age or ill-health, distractions like an unusual family or work situation, or inexperience due to comparative youthfulness and immaturity. None of these things disqualify a man from the eldership, but they may hinder his being described as an excellently ruling elder.

In conclusion we may say that implicit in Paul's reference to well-ruling elders is the idea that the well-ruling elders are an inner circle in a larger circle of good and qualified elders.

Paul's reference to well-ruling elders is not only implicitly contrasted with a larger circle of qualified elders, but it is also explicitly contrasted with a smaller circle within the circle of well-ruling elders. Paul's language conveys this: "especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." Especially those well-ruling elders who labor in the Word and teaching, the public ministry of the Word, are to be supported. Paul's thought may be illustrated by means of two concentric circles. The outer circle encompasses all well-ruling elders. The inner circle encompasses those elders who (are gifted to) "work hard at preaching and teaching." Financial support (double honor) must be focused in the inner circle and radiate outward as the necessity and ability of the church makes this appropriate.

A question has been raised occasionally about the meaning of the word, especially, which Paul uses here. Some have thought it might mean specifically. If this were the case, it would result in the possible identification of all well-ruling elders as "those who work hard at preaching and teaching". The fact is that there is no lexical evidence for this meaning. Neither is it required in any of its usages in either the LXX or the New Testament. With one voice the lexicons attribute a superlative force to the word and ascribe to it the meaning, especially, in this context.

II. Its Practical and Ecclesiastical Implications

A. Questions to be Answered

1. Doesn't this imply that all the rest of the qualified elders besides those who are described as well-ruling elders should be singly honored, that is financially supported to some extent?

I have two comments on this question. First, if the text did imply this, it would not be such an horrendous thing. Let me explain what I mean. If all elders were remunerated in a basic way for their labors for the church, it might be just and would not need to be an undue burden on the church if handled properly. If a non-vocational elder consistently spends 15 hours per week on eldership duties, there would be nothing wrong or impossible about remunerating him on a part-time basis. Second, the fact is, however, that the text does not imply that all elders should be honored. Let me repeat what I said about this in the earlier exposition.

I have argued that the meaning of double honor in [verse 17](#) is inseparably related to the meaning of honor in [1 Tim. 5:3](#). As we have also seen, the thrust of Paul's comments in [verses 3-16](#) is to the effect that, while really needy widows are to be supported, the church is not to be unnecessarily burdened with the financial support of other widows. This suggests that the church was indeed being unduly burdened with the support of widows in Ephesus. There is the most natural relationship between this thrust and the thrust of [verses 17](#) and [18](#). If the church was tending on the one hand to be unduly concerned about the support of widows, it was also exhibiting a tendency to neglect the support of the work of the gospel. Hence, on the one hand Paul warns against unduly burdening the church with the honoring of widows in [verses 3-16](#). Then, immediately after this he directs that double honor should be given to the well-ruling elders. The contrast is, I think, obvious. The problem was evidently a tendency either to neglect supporting such elders at all, or to inadequately support them. Perhaps both of these things were problems. To defeat such a tendency Paul directs that well-ruling elders should be considered worthy of double honor.

All of this makes abundantly clear that the contrast intended in the text is between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders. Widows are to be honored (financially). Elders are to be doubly-honored financially. In contrast to widows with their comparatively small needs, well-ruling elders are to be the objects of a generous and ample material support from the church. This is the interpretation of Calvin.

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The contrast in the text is not between honoring all (the rest of) the elders and double honoring well-ruling elders. The contrast is between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders. It may be natural for us to assume that Paul is contrasting honoring elders and double-honoring well-ruling elders. But this is a contrast about which the text is simply silent. It is serious exegetical mistake to exegete [1 Tim. 5:17](#) in terms of a contrast about which the text is completely silent, while ignoring the clear and patent contrast instituted by Paul himself between honoring widows and double-honoring well-ruling elders. If this is appreciated, then there is no need to struggle to avoid the implication that Paul would have all elders honored by way of financial support.

It seems to me that the source of a lot of misunderstanding of this passage is the failure to keep distinct two different issues in the text. Those two issues are the issue of financial honor and the issue of diverse elders.

2. Doesn't this imply that the supported elders of the church should be drawn only from those who are elders and already ruling well?

Here someone has latched on to the fact that Paul says that double honor is for those who are already ruling well. Does this mean, then, that it is wrong to give double honor to anyone who does not have some experience already as an elder? Does it mean that it is wrong for a church to call and immediately support a man right out of seminary who has never been an elder? I have several comments on this.

First, it is certainly a valuable thing for any man who would labor fulltime as an elder to grow into that responsible position by working, if possible, as a part-time elder first. If the text did, indeed, imply that this was necessary it would not be so awful an implication. It might save the church of Christ a lot of grief.

Second, in fact, however, the text does not imply any such thing. The text makes a positive statement. It commands that well-ruling elders be considered worthy of double honor. The text does not make a negative statement. It does not say that only well-ruling elders may be remunerated by the church. He does not say that the church may not support widows, church secretaries, or even men who are not elders. He does not even say that no one else is worthy of generous financial support. The positive statement does not necessarily infer the negative prohibition. *Double honor well-ruling elders* does not itself logically imply *double honor no one else*. Thus, the text does not teach that others may not be worthy of generous, financial support.

Third, Paul is in all likelihood addressing a situation which was to some extent wrong and in need of correction. Remember that he had to correct a tendency in the previous verses too broadly to support widows. Now it is likely in our text that he is correcting a tendency too inadequately to support well-ruling elders. It is very possible that well-ruling elders were, in effect, working two jobs in order to serve the church and also feed their families. It is also possible that well-ruling elders were being supported inadequately—at a rate which was more akin to widow's support than double honor. Thus, Paul may be correcting neglect on the part of the church in Ephesus. If this is the case, it is possible that he would have said that such men should have been supported so soon as they became elders because their excellent gifts and graces and usefulness were already manifest. Thus, there is absolutely no reason to think that Paul is requiring a man to work as a non-supported elder before he is supported.

3. Does this passage imply a three office view of the church with pastors or ministers, elders, and deacons?

I ask this question because this passage comes the closest of any passage in the New Testament to justifying a distinction between elders and pastors. It does distinguish between all the elders, the well-ruling elders, and those who labor in the Word. It would be easy to see this last group as the so-called pastors or ministers.

Still this passage clearly does not teach the so-called three-office view of the church. The only official designation found in it is "elder". When Paul comes to speak of those who are potentially or actually vocational pastors, that is to say, supported ministers of the Word, he gives no special title to that privilege or function. He speaks only of "elders who rule well" and "those who work hard at preaching and teaching". The implication of this is that there is no official distinction between elders and vocational pastors or ministers of the Word.

4. Doesn't this passage imply a distinction between ruling and teaching elders?

This passage allows at best ambivalence about the terminology which distinguishes ruling and teaching elders. Sometimes we name and distinguish things by means of their dominant characteristics without intending to draw a hard and fast distinction. If this is all that someone means by this terminology there is no difficulty with what they mean by it. Clearly, there are in this text elders that are distinguished by being excellently ruling elders. Clearly, there are elders whose dominant characteristic is that they labor diligently in preaching and teaching. If we remember that despite these dominant characteristics, all elders must both rule and teach I have no problem.

On the other hand, this passage does not (strictly speaking) teach a distinction between ruling and teaching elders. Paul does not say some elders do not teach at all. If he had said this, he would have contradicted what he said in [1 Tim. 3:2](#) about all elders having to be “able to teach”. If the implication of the ruling/teaching elder distinction is that some elders only rule and do not teach, then this distinction is not taught in the passage. Furthermore, Paul does not say that some elders only teach, but do not rule. This would flatly contradict the whole thrust of the passage which is to the effect that those who work hard at preaching and teaching are found in the circle of those who rule well. We can only use the ruling elder/teaching elder distinction if we remind ourselves constantly that all elders both teach and rule, or they are not true elders.

Finally, this terminology is somewhat deficient because it does not adequately account for the diversity found in the passage. There is not a two-fold, but actually a threefold distinction found in this passage. The passage provides for what some would call a ruling elder to be a full-time or vocational pastor. The ruling/teaching elder distinction does not adequately account for the diversity of Paul’s conception.

B. Lessons to be Applied

Introduction:

All of the lessons mentioned here are built on one fundamental insight which is brought out clearly by this passage. That insight is that there is such an officer in the church which may be called a non-supported or non-vocational pastor. In other words, not all pastors of the church need to be either actually or potentially supported, full-time preachers. Some pastors are “ruling elders” (if the phrase is properly defined). We have seen this reality in a number of ways. First, we have seen that [Acts 20:33-35](#) clearly implies that most or all of the numerous elders at Ephesus originally worked with their own hands and were not supported (certainly not on a full-time basis) by the church. Second, we have seen that the phrase, well or excellently ruling elders in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) contains an implicit contrast not with badly ruling elders, but with the rest of the qualified elders. [1 Tim. 5:17](#) is silent about the subject of such elders being honored or supported, and it clearly restricts double honor to excellently ruling elders. Third, by use of the word especially (in the phrase, *especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching*) Paul focuses the financial support of the church upon those elders especially gifted at the public ministry of the Word. Practically, this would have the effect that some excellently ruling elders--though considered worthy of double honor--would not actually be supported by the church. The priority for the financial support of elders which Paul states here has the effect by itself of creating a class of elders frequently not supported by the church. Fourth, if such excellently ruling elders were supported it would not be because they are professional or vocational preachers. In itself this proves that an eldership need not be composed only of vocational or professional ministers of the Word.

1. This implies that great diversity of gift, function, and support is permissible and even normal among the qualified pastors of a church. The eldership Paul conceives in [1 Tim. 5:17](#) consists of three concentric circles of men: all elders, all well-ruling elders, and all the well-ruling elders who work hard at preaching and teaching.
2. This implies that elderships should not be restricted by the church to supported preachers. It implies that ability to function as a supported preacher is not a biblical qualification for the eldership. It requires that a church repent of requiring such a qualification if indeed it make such demands on potential elders. If a mature church has only supported preachers as elders, it could be an indication of wrong attitudes and/or understanding in the church.
3. This implies that a larger church may occasionally support an elder who does not “work hard at preaching and teaching”, but exercises a valuable and excellent ministry in other respects.
4. This implies that the elders which a church views as worthy of double honor and commits itself actually to support should be supported amply or generously and be given much more than (double) the basic financial sustenance given to a widow.
5. This implies that there is a distinction found in our text between vocational pastor and a non-vocational pastor. Some elders rule well as compared to other qualified elders. These elders are to be viewed as worthy of double honor. According to the church’s ability they are to be amply financially supported so that they can work at their ministry full-time. This makes them vocational pastors. A man’s vocation should be determined (ideally) on the basis of what gifts and skills and opportunities God has given him. A man who rules well manifests that God has given him sufficient gift to pursue the pastorate as a vocation. So all well-ruling elders are potentially vocational pastors and all such who are actually given double honor are actually vocational pastors.

Clearly, then, there is a distinction in the eldership between those who are qualified pastors, and even well-ruling elders, and those who are vocational pastors-supported by the church to pursue the pastoral ministry full-time. Again, the implication is plain. A church and eldership which has only vocational pastors is a very unusual and abnormal church and eldership in New Testament. Potential to be a vocational pastor must not be made a qualification for the eldership.

Appendix: THE USE OF HONOR IN 1 TIM. 6:1 AND 2 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE MEANING OF HONOR IN 1 TIM. 5:17

Having read the foregoing treatment of the meaning of honor in [1 Tim. 5:17](#), a discerning person might well ask this question: What about the use of honor in [1 Tim. 6:1](#) and [2](#)?

¹ Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against. ² And let those who have believers as their masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but let them serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles.

You can see the concern of this question. It seems clear that in this text-especially [verse 2](#) *honor* means respect. I argued on the basis of the context that *honor* does mean respect or

esteem, but something of material value given as a token of esteem or respect. But here is a close contextual use of *honor* which seems to have the meaning respect. Does that not raise doubts about my explanation of honor in [1 Tim. 5:17](#)? That is a good question, and to that good question I have four responses.

First, I want simply to remind you that we saw clear and conclusive evidence from both [1 Tim. 5:3-16](#) and [1 Tim. 5:18](#) that honor clearly means something of financial value.

Second, it must be remembered that [1 Tim. 5:3](#) is more closely related to [1 Tim. 5:17](#) than [1 Tim. 6:1](#). Both [5:3](#) and [5:17](#) are talking about those who are worthy of being honored by the church. [6:1](#) is talking about slaves honoring their masters, a much different subject.

Third, it is not true that honor in [1 Tim. 6:1](#) has nothing to do with something of material value. The service or labor which a slave renders to his master is of great, financial value to the master. Rendering such service which is of benefit to the master is one thing that Paul intends by saying that slaves should regard their own masters as worthy of all honor. Notice the words of [verse 2](#): “let them serve them all the more because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved.”

Fourth, there is a relationship between these three uses of honor in this context, but it is one which proves that honor in the first two occurrences means something of financial value. Notice the progression in [5:3](#), [5:17](#); and [6:1](#): honor, double honor, all honor. The phrase, all honor, in [1 Tim. 6:1](#) is used because Paul intends to broaden the meaning of honor in [1 Tim. 6:1](#) and [2](#). Previously, honor had meant something of material value. Now Paul adds to that meaning of honor, respect ([v. 2](#)). To the material honor, financial support, Paul adds the immaterial honor, respect. Hence, he speaks of “all honor.”

Does this contextual usage of honor, then, raise doubt about the explanation that honor means something of material value? No, far from it! Properly understood the use of honor in [1 Tim. 6:1](#) and [2](#) actually further confirms the idea that in the preceding context honor has essential and primary reference to something of material value given as a token of esteem or respect. The phrase, all honor, deliberately broadens the idea from something of material value to include the idea of respect.