

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Be a faithful elder

*The September 2012 equipping section is from a devotion given by Presbyterian Lay Committee board member **Robert B. Fish** at its Spring 2012 board meeting. Fish, of Parkersburg, W.Va., is an elder at First Presbyterian Church in Parkersburg, and has been a member of the PLC since 1994. He and his wife Barbara, have two sons.*

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To Him be the power for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Peter 5)

The title of this equipping section is taken from the last question asked during ordination of a new ruling elder: Will you be a faithful elder? I'm a positive guy so I restate it even more emphatically: Be a faithful elder! Faithfulness may prove hard to define but it is easily recognizable. As you examine the following four profiles of faithfulness, consider your own faithfulness as an elder.

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Week 1: Profile in faithfulness 1

Read Job 2:9-10

In 1986, I completed one of the items on my personal bucket list, visiting the dungeon of Chillon Castle.

Chillon Castle is on a small island about 100 feet offshore in Lake Geneva, near Geneva, Switzerland. The Swiss call that body of water Lac Léman. The castle was built in the 12th century and expanded and further fortified in the 13th century. It was used at times as a residence and at times as a prison. Its most famous prisoner was François de Bonivard, a Swiss religious reformer and patriot. He was imprisoned there from 1330 to 1336, sometimes chained to one of the seven columns and sometimes in solitary confinement.

About 275 years later, the British poet Lord Byron visited Geneva and wrote an epic poem based on the life of Bonivard. The poem is 392 lines long. Written in the first person, the poem begins, “My hair is gray ...”

Byron tells the story of Bonivard, beginning with the martyrdom of Bonivard’s father, burned at the stake. A similar death comes to one of his brothers and two more of his brothers are killed in combat. The remaining two brothers, together with Bonivard himself are locked in the dungeon and chained to columns.

At first, they do well to keep up their spirits but his nearer brother, the one who was always the great outdoorsman, begins to give up hope and fade away. He died right in front of their eyes but the chains prevent them from comforting him in his last moments. Then, to their horror, the jailers will not even take his body outside for burial. They bury him instead in the floor of the dungeon.

Then, while Bonivard is still mourning the death of the first brother, the other brother also begins to fade. He was the one their father most hoped would avoid this calamity. He was the one in whose face they could most clearly see the face of their mother. Bonivard thought if only he could somehow free himself, he could help his brother. With a mighty force, he broke a link in the old rusty chain and ran to his brother’s side. But it was too late. We pick up Byron’s poem at that point:

I took that hand that lay so still,
Alas! my own was full as chill;
I had not the strength to stir, or strive,
But felt that I was still alive -
A frantic feeling, when we know
That what we love shall ne’er be so.
I know not why
I could not die,
I had no earthly hope - but faith,
And that forbade a selfish death.

So there you have it. Despite all the horrors that had come to him, for Bonivard, it would not even be permitted to allow his own death before completing the mission his faith required.

We see a strong parallel between Bonivard and the prophet Job. He had lost everything as well and then he developed sores all over his body and he could just sit there and scratch the sores.

His wife said to him, “You are still as faithful as ever, aren’t you? Why don’t you curse God and die?”

Job answered, “You are talking nonsense! When God sends us something good, we welcome it. How can we complain when He sends us trouble?” Even in all this suffering Job said nothing against God. (Job 2:9-10, Good News Translation)

Job, too, provides an example of faithfulness under extreme pressure. This should give us great pause as we consider the small pressures that affect our comfortable lives. Profile in faithfulness

1. Be a faithful elder.

For discussion

1. Reflect on at least two other Biblical examples of faithfulness under extreme pressure. Look up the stories and read them again.
2. Reflect on examples of faithfulness under extreme pressure you have witnessed in your own life. How did this person (or people) exhibit faithfulness to God?
3. How can you be a faithful elder during times of small or extreme pressure?

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Week 2: Profile in faithfulness 2

Read: 1 Corinthians 16:13; 1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 3:10-17

The second profile concerns the Clark family. Wendy Mitman Clark is a contributing editor of *Cruising World*. Her office is a 45-foot sailboat that she, her husband and two children are sailing to distant ports. My wife and I are also sailors. We've made over 100 crossings of the Chesapeake Bay and we've sailed off shore in a number of parts of the world. Part of boating is keeping watch. When I was taking my training to become a navigator I learned that, on an ocean crossing the time from when an approaching commercial ship first appears on the horizon until you are close enough to have a collision is a mere 15 minutes, less in reduced visibility. So faithfulness by the one keeping watch is truly a matter of life and death. When two or more people form the crew, the day is broken up into watches of four or six hours. A person can work that watch rotation for the duration of a passage. Sailors making a solo passage – called single-handed sailing – limit their sleep to 15 minute increments. They can do that for the duration of the passage but it's much more dangerous and it's exhausting.

So, I was quite taken with Clark's recent column. In the column, she spoke of the first night that their son stood watch by himself. He had stood watch with one of his parents many times but on that night, he was to be at the helm alone. You can see from this example that it's not possible for one person to stand all the watches alone. An important aspect of being faithful is teaching faithfulness to others, especially the next generation.

It's not just a sea story. We recall many examples of faithful – and unfaithful – watchmen in the Bible. Profile in faithfulness 2. Be a faithful elder.

For discussion

1. Reflect on at least two or three Biblical examples of standing watch. Look up the stories and read them again.
2. Reflect on the people in your life and in your church who are standing watch and teaching faithfulness to new believers. How are they doing this?
3. How can you stand firm and be a faithful watchman of the Bible?

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Week 3: Profile in faithfulness 3

Read Hebrews 11; Hebrews 2:1-12

This profile concerns the Corps of Cadets at West Point. The nickname of the Corps is “the Long Gray Line,” a reference to their cadet uniforms. Arguably, the most famous graduate of West Point was Douglas MacArthur. Most of us think of him as a battlefield general, commanding great armies in World War II and the Korean Conflict. Did you also know that he was a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor? He was recommended for the Medal of Honor for two other acts of heroism. He received the Distinguished Service Cross – the second highest award for valor – five times and the Silver Star seven times.

Two years before his death, MacArthur gave a farewell speech at West Point. He was 82 and this would be his last great public speech. It is one of the great American speeches on patriotism ranking up there with Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death” speech. You can easily find it on the Internet by searching under “Duty Honor Country,” and I recommend reading it. In the speech MacArthur said:

The Long Gray Line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray, would rise from their white crosses, thundering those magic words: Duty, Honor, Country.

He truly understood that the faithful of today carry on a wonderful and worthy practice begun by the faithful of the past. During our church’s ordination service, we observe the act of laying on of hands, forming an unbroken link with other hands going back to the earliest apostles and to Christ Himself.

Remember your heritage. Profile in faithfulness 3. Be a faithful elder.

For discussion

1. Read Hebrews 11. Reflect on the Biblical examples of faithfulness recounted therein. Look up one or more of the Old Testament stories and read them again.
2. Reflect on the people in your life and in your church who taught you the faith through Bible study, sermons and example.
3. How can you be an example of faithfulness to new or younger believers?

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future equipping studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen Fowler LaBerge via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

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Week 4: Profile in faithfulness 4

Read 1 John 1:1-10; Luke 15:11-32

This final profile takes us in a very different direction. For its basis, I selected another work by Lord Byron, not because his works were all about faithfulness but because this second piece fit so well. His dog had died. As poets do, he was moved to write about it. The piece may have had no title, since I found it with variations in the title and with no title at all. It's very short; here are the most familiar 10 lines:

Near this Spot
are deposited the Remains of one
who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the virtues of Man without his Vices.

This praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery
if inscribed over human Ashes,
is but a just tribute to the Memory of
BOATSWAIN, a DOG.

When we are away, our dogs stay in the kennel. We can tell they would much rather be with us, enjoying dog-life in our home. But when we pick them up at the kennel, they greet us with the same enthusiasm if we'd only been gone an hour or if we'd been away for several weeks. In a way, that's similar to our walk with Christ. He doesn't want us to commit sin but when we do and when we return to Him, He grants us the same forgiveness as if we'd only been away an hour or as long as the prodigal son. This is a frequent Bible theme.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

If Christ has been faithful to us, we should also be faithful. Profile in faithfulness 4. Be a faithful elder.

For discussion

1. Reflect on at least two Biblical examples of how God was – and Christ is – faithful to His people.
2. Reflect on the people in your life and in your church who have been faithful to Christ.
3. How can you become even more faithful to Christ?

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week 5: Application

Read I Peter 5; Acts 20:25-38

A life of faithfulness can be challenging. Fortunately, Peter's text gives us some specifics to help.

"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them"

"Not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be;"

Being an elder is a calling, not an order. We can't escape it. Being a faithful elder is something God wants us to do.

"Not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve"

"Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock"

And, skipping to v. 8:

"Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings."

As Christians we are to stand firm. Marcus Aurelius said, "In the morning when you are drowsy at rising yourself, let this thought be present – I am rising to do the work of a human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to do the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this, to lie in the bed-clothes and keep myself warm?" Being a shepherd is not an 8-5 job. It comes with real discomfort and real danger.

When exploring a Bible passage, it's good to comment on what it says, but, when appropriate, we should avoid misunderstanding by noting what it does NOT say.

First, becoming an elder is not a requirement for salvation. Salvation comes to those who believe in our Lord Jesus Christ. All the Biblical statements of gifts of the Spirit show that there are many gifts. Each of us should use our gift and not covet the gifts given to others.

However, regardless of your Christian walk, the lessons in our text from Peter are very useful, especially in secular activities, where we have the greatest opportunity for evangelism.

Secondly, the faithfulness of which we speak is faithfulness to Jesus Christ and is not blind following of a failed leader, congregation or denomination. Christ spoke plainly about this.

And they took offense at Him. But Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town and in his own home." And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith. (Matthew 13:57-58)

But when you enter a town and are not welcomed, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town we wipe from our feet as a warning to you. Yet be sure of this: The kingdom of God has come near.' I tell you, it will be more bearable on

that day for Sodom than for that town. (Luke 10:10-12)

This week's text from I Peter is a very important one. I believe that God has clearly indicated that to us in Holy Scripture. He emphasizes certain messages by repeating them elsewhere in Scripture and this message is clearly repeated in the account of Paul's farewell to the elders at Ephesus, described by William Barclay as one of the most emotional sections of the Bible.

"Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which He bought with His own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

"Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus Himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

When Paul had finished speaking, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship. (Acts 20:25-38)

For discussion

1. What is your calling and your spiritual gifting? How can you more fully use those gifts in that calling for the glory of God the Father?
2. How can you use what you have learned in these lessons in all areas of your life to lead others to Christ?
3. Read the questions and your answers from the previous weeks. List the ways you can commit to being a faithful elder.