

## LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY

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Our blessed Lord Jesus Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it (Eph. 5:25). It is obvious therefore that He would provide for its every need. When He left this earth every preparation was made for the founding, building and direction of the church. To guide the infant Church, Christ sent the Holy Spirit and ordained men called Apostles. He used the Apostles to write the New Testament which would guide the Lord's people after the Apostles died. However, God knew the need among men for "flesh-and-blood" leadership after the Apostles were gone. This need He has met by appointing human overseers for each local assembly in His universal Church. These overseers, also known as bishops or elders, are provided with co-workers and helpers, much as the Apostles were (Acts 6:1-6), called deacons. Thus, according to Phil. 1:1, a New Testament assembly is composed of "saints...bishops and deacons." This is the divine pattern for the New Testament church! So it is supremely important to know what constitutes sound doctrine with respect to the leadership of the local New Testament church.

### I. THE NAMES OF ELDERS

#### A. Elder (Acts 20:17; Titus 1:5)

1. From the Greek word, *presbuteros*, from which we get the English term "presbyter." Hence, of the three basic forms of church government - congregational<sup>1</sup>, episcopalian, presbyterian - the Bible supports a presbyterian (although not in the modern denominational sense). It is unscriptural to distinguish between "teaching elders" and "ruling elders" such a modern Presbyterians do. All of God's elders are to both teach and rule.
2. This term "elder" refers to the man and his office rather than to his function.
3. The term "elder" suggests wisdom that comes to one by advancing age and/or divine gifting.

#### B. Bishop (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; I Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7).

1. From the Greek word, *episkopos*, from which the English word "episcopal" is derived. Thus Biblical church government is also episcopalian, but always with a plurality of overseers.
2. The term "*bishop*" refers to the man's function rather than his person. The Greek word is *epi* (over) *skopos* (see), e.g., to oversee or watch over carefully. Biblical bishops are humble, hardworking servants of God and His

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<sup>1</sup> Congregational (baptist, independent Bible churches, Congregationalist); Episcopalian: Anglican, Episcopal, Methodist, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, etc.), Presbyterian: Presbyterian (denominational), Plymouth Brethren, and those patterned after the "Christian Assemblies."

people, not lofty prelates with magnificent robes and titles accepting adoration from the multitudes.

### C. Others

1. Pastors. In Acts 20:28, 29, the elders or bishops (vv. 17, 28) are instructed to care for “the flock.” The assembly is pictured as sheep and the elders as shepherds. The same word “shepherd” (Greek: *poimen* used in Luke 2:8 is used of God’s leaders in Eph. 4:11 where it is translated “pastors.” In I Peter 5: 1,2, elders are told to be pastors or shepherds and “feed the flock” until the “Chief Shepherd appears. Elders are to be shepherds (pastors) and bishops just like their Lord (I Peter 2:25).
2. Overseers. (See Bishop)
3. Ministers. A term used of the saints in general (Eph.4:12) and individual Christians in particular (Eph. 6:21), regarding either material help (Phil. 2:25) or spiritual help (II Cor. 4:1). Again it denotes servitude not superiority as it so often does today. The term is most befitting for elders although not exclusively so.

**CONCLUSION:** God calls His elders by names He has in His own wisdom selected for them. It is unbecoming for God’s people to reject God’s terminology (whether for elders or deacons) and substitute their own.

## II. THE NUMBER OF ELDERS

- A. Plurality (Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; I Peter 5:1; Acts 11:30). The eldership in the apostolic churches was plural; there is no instance of only one elder or pastor or bishop in a local church. This eliminates the notion of an exclusive and elite clergy which is so commonly practiced today. However, the number is limited to minority group, thus disapproving the notion that every man is an elder.
- B. Exceptions (Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23). There were instances before elders were ordained in churches by Apostles or their delegates, that the Apostles themselves served as overseers (one over a church or churches). This was not considered a permanent arrangement however and was changed as soon as local men qualified elders. So it is in many missionary situations today.
- C. Reasons (I Cor. 12:4-11). Why plurality of elders? No one elder has all spiritual gifts or personality traits. No two are gifted in the same way. God appoints many who complement each other for the good of the whole assembly.

## III. THE QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS

These qualifications are summarized under the headings “public” and “private.” To the world, a man may qualify for public leadership despite scandals in his private life providing his public “image” is acceptable. To the Christian such double standards are not possible. The Bible makes it clear in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 that an elder’s private life as well as his public life must be scrutinized and found exemplary.

## A. Public Life

1. In the Community.
  - a. "Blameless (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) — reputable, irreproachable (not sinless)
  - b. "Good report" (I Tim. 3:7) — positive aspect of virtue; complements "blameless"
2. In the Church
  - a. "Apt to teach" (I Tim. 3:2) - able to help God's people with problems by using Scriptures in preaching, counseling, or conversing. Teaching ability without knowledge of Scriptures is not enough!
  - b. "Holding fast the faithful word" (Titus 1:9) - able to defend the faith against false teaching. Ability to detect, expose and confute error.
  - c. "Lover of good men" (Titus 1:8). - careful about intimate friendships, selecting them on the basis of God's Word.

## B. Private Life

1. Personal
  - a. "Vigilant" (I Tim 3:2) - temperate, moderate, discreet. No "extremists" may be bishops.
  - b. "Sober" or "sober-minded" (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) - not sad or melancholic but temperate, self-controlled, serious about eternal matters.
  - c. "Good behavior" (I Tim. 3:2) - orderly, not careless or slipshod.
  - d. "Not given to wine" (I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7) - able to control his physical appetite for wine, etc.; not self-indulgent.
  - e. "No striker" (I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). - doesn't use emotional violence on others (man or beast). This does not preclude thoughtful and moderate discipline children, etc. Does not try to intimidate.
  - f. "Not greedy of filthy lucre" (I Tim 3:3; Titus 1:7) - uses his money for Christ; lives modestly - Could mean to live well under his means to allow freedom for meeting ministry needs.  
Does not "serve Christ" from a money motive.
  - g. "Patient" (I Tim 3:3) - gentle, meek , long-suffering
  - h. "Not a brawler" (I Tim. 3:3) - not contentious, argumentative, nor pugnacious
  - i. "Not covetous" (I Tim 3:3) - not demanding immediate or illicit gratification of intense desires; grasping.
  - j. "Not a novice" (Titus 3:6) - spiritually mature; not necessarily old, but certainly trained, seasoned.
  - k. "Not self-willed" (Titus1:7) - not stubborn or inflexible on non-essentials.
  - l. "Not soon angry" (Titus 1:7) - not volatile, irritable.
  - m. "Just" (Titus 1:8) - righteous, fair in judgment.
  - n. "Holy" (Titus 1:8) - dedicated to God and purity.
  - o. "Temperate" (Titus 1:8) - moderate.

## 2. Domestic

- a. "Husband of one wife" (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) - not a polygamist, possibly not a bachelor.
- b. "Having faithful children" (Titus 1:6; I Tim. 3:4-5) - having children who believe and are not profligate or unruly.
- c. "Given to hospitality" (I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8) - his home open to the Lord's people and to any who need physical or spiritual help.

**CONCLUSION:** To qualify as an elder, a man's public and private life must be faultless on these listed points. It is important to observe closely these Scriptural guidelines. If a recognized elder fails, without repentance, in any point, he must be removed from office. - Every one of the saints should aspire to these qualifications; the Bible does require that one have a good reputation by the community outside. Men who do not exhibit any of these qualifications should not be considered for ministry as an elder.

## IV. THE DUTIES OF ELDERS

- A. To Teach (I Tim. 3:2, 5:17; I Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28). "Feeding the flock" means ministering the Word of God and makes the elder a shepherd. Pastoral gifting includes ability to teach the Scripture. But ability to teach the Scripture does not automatically qualify the teacher for shepherding ministry (See also II Tim. 4:2; Titus 2:1, 15)
- B. To Guard (Acts 20:28-29; Titus 1:9-14). Both the "flock" and the sound doctrine are to be protected from "wolves" i.e., those who would teach both doctrinal and moral error. And This is another pastoral (shepherding) function of all elders.
- C. To Oversee (I Peter 5:2-3; Heb. 13:17) Watching over the welfare of the "flock" (This is the third pastoral or shepherding function all elders.). This is not to be done reluctantly, or for monetary gain, but as those who serve the congregation.
- D. To Support (Acts 20:35) Financial and material help given to the "weak". Instead of thinking of making a living off the flock; they should share their living with the flock.
- E. To Rule (I Tim. 3:4-5; 5:17; Heb. 13:7,17) In matters not specifically settled by Scripture, and yet in the mind of the assembly need to be officially decided, it is the awesome duty of the elders to rule in such matters. Since these rulings affect the whole church and since the elders must "give account" to the Chief Shepherd, they will discharge this duty thoughtfully and prayerfully. Note that such ruling authority does not reside in one man in the church; nor in the voting congregation (except by permission of the elders, e.g., Acts 6:1-6; nor in a city-, state-, nation- or world-wide hierarchy of bishops.

**CONCLUSION:** These duties imply careful oversight of pulpit ministry and ordinances but not just these areas. These duties imply that elders must be submissive to the Word of God and view their work as humble service, not top-down rule. They imply the complete autonomy of the local church, though in fellowship with all other believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **V. THE APPOINTMENT OF ELDERS**

“A church may meet in solemn session to appoint elders, but their vote does not put within a man the heart of an elder” (Wm MacDonald). Only the Holy Spirit can make a man an elder! See Acts 20:28. Interview? Ordination exam?

## **VI. THE RESPONSES TO ELDERS**

A. Recognition (I Thess. 5:12) - Saints are to “know” their elders, not appoint, elect or ordain them. God has already appointed them! How can they be “known” or recognized? God has carefully described them for us in the Bible both as to their character (qualifications) and actions (duties). As they live and work in the assembly, the church recognizes them as divinely-appointed bishops. Future elders will be active, wholesome young men in the assembly, noticeable in the services by their regularity and gifted participation and in the fellowship by personal involvement in the needs and problems of others. Whether assembly recognition takes the form of consensus opinion (expressed on paper, or not) or appointment by existing elders, seems to be dependent on circumstances. The method is not clear from Scripture, but the need for recognition is clear! (The Apostles did ordain the divinely-appointed elders - Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5 - where the churches were young and the New Testament was not available in written form).

B. Obedience (Heb. 13:17) - Where the elders rule, the saints are to obey. If the elders exceed the bounds of Scripture, the saints must expel them or desert them. The decision of godly elders cannot be debated or put to a vote. It is as if God has spoken.

C. Respect (I Thess. 5:13; I Tim. 5:1) - Love and loyalty.

D. Protection (I Tim 5:19) - Saints are to shelter elders from malicious rumors that are bound to arise occasionally.

E. Remembrance (Heb. 13:7) - Keep their godly example in mind.

F. Remuneration. (I Tim 5:17-18) - Some elders deserve financial support to continue their distinctive ministry.

## **VII THE REWARD OF ELDERS**

“When the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away” (I Peter 5:4).