

## ELDERS

*"They have set up kings, but not by me: they have made princes, and I knew it not."*  
Hosea 8:4

Elders are an essential part of the church life. God has given them to the church for her benefit. Without their function and ministry, it would be very difficult for the church to operate properly. Unfortunately, misunderstanding and abuse of this God-ordained work may instead create problems in the church. Many of these problems stem from the fact that too often men do not understand God's plan for elders and begin to function in ways which are detrimental to the body. Let us therefore spend a little time to investigate exactly what an elder should be.

Chiefly, an elder's job is to shepherd the flock of God. In order for us to better understand this, let us break down the concept of shepherding into three sub-functions or smaller categories. A proper shepherd must be able to do three things. First of all, he must oversee or watch over the flock. This means that he is to watch diligently and carefully to make sure nothing evil or destructive happens to any of the members of the flock which are under his care.

The word "overseer," which is found in Acts 20:28, is exactly the same word in the Greek language as that which is translated "bishop" in other places. This word in the original Greek is "EPISKOPOS" and means literally "to watch over." Such overseeing is not the same as that which we would associate with an overseer of slaves or a taskmaster who may exercise dictatorial powers. It is perhaps more akin to the job of a security guard who watches out for and protects certain property. Thus, the first responsibility of an elder is to watch over and protect the church of God.

The second duty of an elder is to lead. "To lead" means "to go before" the flock in all things. An elder must walk with the Lord in such a way that the flock can see his example and follow. To lead a flock does not mean to get behind the sheep and drive them in the direction that we think they should be going. Nor does it mean to regulate or control the lives of any individuals. This leading occurs when an elder has taken it upon himself to walk purely and rightly towards the goal to which God has directed him. By seeing his example, the flock will be able to follow (I Pet 5:3).

In the King James version of the Bible, we have the word "rule" applied to the position of an elder. We read in I Timothy, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour (I Tim 5:17)." This word "rule" has perhaps misguided or misled some in their understanding of eldership. This word in the Greek is "PROISTEMI." According to Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, this word literally means "to stand before; hence, to lead." Such leading is not what we as Americans

would generally associate with the idea of ruling. Our concept is probably the kind of ruling that a king might do. This could basically be described as "controlling," "lording it over," or "reigning" over the flock.,

Biblically, the word merely means to "stand out in front of" and "to lead" the flock of God in the way they should be going. No thought of commanding or controlling is conveyed. Understanding the work of an elder in this way should help eliminate many problems with men abusing and misusing the authority as an elder which God has given them.

The third function and responsibility of an elder is to feed the flock of God (I Pet 5:2). In order to fulfill this responsibility, an elder must have an intimate relationship with God and a thorough understanding of His holy Word. Feeding is accomplished through teaching, and teaching must be the result of an elder's personal experience with the Father. Without such experience, it is impossible for any teacher to convey nourishment. No one can impart to another anything more than they themselves possess. Therefore, a true elder will have a close association with God so that he may feed the flock of God properly.

In the New Testament, elders are not associated per se with church meetings. They are associated with the church as a whole—with the entire body of Christ in each city (Tit 1:5). Nowhere do we find elders appointed for each church meeting. In fact, as far as we can see from the New Testament, elders have no specific function at all in the church meetings. Their ministry is largely outside the meetings. Theirs is a general ministry to the body of Christ as a whole. Although some elders do function quite frequently in church meetings, they are those who have other gifts as well. Perhaps they are also prophets or teachers, or have other gifts of ministry. Such elders may be prominent individuals in church meetings; however, their eldership is not something for meetings but for the daily shepherding of the sheep.

Since some believers will no doubt raise the question of an elder's jurisdiction, it seems appropriate to discuss this idea briefly. An elder's authority does extend beyond those members of Christ's body with whom he meets. He is responsible to God for all of the body of Christ with whom he has any intimate contact. His jurisdiction extends to all believers whom he knows and with whom he associates frequently. Some have pointed out that an elder's authority should not extend beyond the boundaries of a city. Such a situation is found in the Roman Catholic Church where we have bishops ruling over larger areas. To say such a thing should really not be necessary. There is no need for an elder to try to shepherd sheep with whom he has no contact or knowledge. A shepherd can only shepherd sheep whom he knows and who know him. These are the only ones that he can properly lead in the Lord. Therefore, simple practicality limits an elder's authority and jurisdiction. Let us remember, however, that this in no way indicates that such responsibility is limited to those with whom he meets.

It should be mentioned here that elders who are functioning properly will have some contact and association with other true elders in their vicinity. These men must cooperate and be in fellowship with one another to lead the church in a proper way. Such loving cooperation will greatly benefit Christ's body. There is no need for elders to compete amongst themselves for followers. If their hearts are right with God and their concern only for Him, this will never be a problem. May those in positions of leadership be careful not to lead the sheep astray through petty strife or jealousy.

For obvious practical reasons, it is essential for all of the flock of God to know who the elders are. This must be why the Holy Spirit, working through the Apostle Paul, appointed elders or had them appointed in every church (Acts 14:23). It is of the

utmost necessity that Christians know the elders so that they may benefit from them. For this reason Paul, through the Holy Spirit, pointed out who these men were.\* The sheep need this knowledge. They need to realize who it is that they can look to for leadership and guidance, and who they can go to for wise, mature fellowship and counsel.

Elders are men who are appointed by God. This fact is of foremost importance if we are to properly under

\*NOTE: The word "ordain" in Titus 1:5 is the Greek word "KATHISTEMI," which can also be translated "appoint." "Not a formal, ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the appointment for the recognition of the churches of those who have already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit, and have given evidence of this in their life and service." VINE

stand eldership. The appointment of elders comes from the Holy Spirit and not from men. Since God is placing the members in the body as it pleases Him, He is the one to do the choosing. He is the one building the church. So it is that we should be led through the Holy Spirit to appoint elders. In fact, these men were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, as were we all. Part of His plan was to make certain men with the life, the maturity, the understanding, and all of the other qualifications necessary for eldership.\*

After these men are born again, have gained some experience of His life, and have a history of faithfulness, God sees to it that they are appointed to be elders. Elders who have been appointed only by man and not according to the will of God, mean nothing and can do nothing. Their appointment only confuses the situation in the church and makes it more difficult for people to understand and follow Christ. In order to properly experience the church today, we need to understand eldership correctly. We must understand their calling, their appointment and their ministry. Let us also be careful not to appoint elders only for our specific meeting or group, so that we do not create additional division and confusion in the body of Christ.

Some have insisted that the elders must be appointed by apostles. This does seem to be the experience of the New Testament believers. It is logical that God would use those most sensitive to His authority to make this appointment. However in these days, when the apostles are not generally recognized, absolute insistence upon this method does not seem to be practicable. God will not be bound by any outward forms. The crucial thing is that the elder's appointment originates with God and not the instruments through whom the appointment is made.

\*NOTE: The words "bishop" and "overseer" are translations of exactly the same word in the Greek language, which is "EPISKOPOS." This word means literally "to look or watch over." The term "elder" comes from the Greek word "PRESBUTEROS," which is an adjective used when referring to an old man. The word "elder," therefore, denotes maturity and spiritual experience while the words "bishop" and "overseer" indicate the nature of the work being done.