

Introduction

When the subject of church government is considered, there are two extremes which must be avoided because they are without scriptural foundation. Those two extremes are:

- a) A leadership of unqualified men by the criteria of the scriptures. Such do not enrich the flock spiritually.
- b) No leadership at all, which results in anarchy or abuse of Christian liberty. I do not speak of a little congregation of perhaps ten to twelve people, yet even in that there will be those to whom the saints look and respect. When a sizable church is without leadership, then it falls into anarchy and every man doing what is right in his own eyes.

No Evangelist or Bible Teacher can interfere with the affairs of a local church. They can, at times, be asked for their advice. That does not mean it has to be taken. The saints at Corinth asked Paul for his understandings on matters (1 Cor. 7:1).

The Scope of Their Activity

There are saints who sincerely believe that there ought to be a central oversight over an area. It is very easy to say, "Well they are wrong". However, I have never, in almost 60 years, ever heard a speaker explain the following Scripture where the book of Acts would appear to teach such, for it reads: "To send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea; Which also they did, and sent it to the elders" (Acts 11:29-30). Does this indicate an oversight over an area?

Others will insist that there is a central oversight over a city and they will turn to Titus, to whom Paul wrote: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders IN EVERY CITY, as I had appointed thee" (Titus 1:5). Does this mean a central oversight over a city?

Others will argue that there were elders in every church and they will read: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Phil. 1:1).

Two indisputable matters are:

- a) The scriptures never contradict each other.
- b) No verse can be taken in isolation from all the other verses which deal with the subject.

From the following table it is seen that the norm for New Testament churches is the plurality of elders in one church.

Reference	The Church is singular	Men is plural
Acts 14:23	In every church	Elders
Acts 20:17	Elders of the church at Ephesus	Elders
Acts 20:28	Overseers to feed the church of God.	Overseers
Phil. 1:1	Bishops at Philippi	Overseers
1 Thess. 5:12-13	This was to the church of the Thessalonians (ch.1:1), not churches but church, singular	Know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you The word "them" indicates a plurality
Heb. 13:7, 17, 24	A church is intimated	Remember them (plural) Considering the end of their (plural) faith
Jam. 5:14	Call for the elders of the church	Elders
1 Pet. 5:1	A church is intimated	Elders

The Church

Elders - The Scope of Their Activity and Process For The Work - Part 7

Because the tenor of the scriptures teach a plurality of elders in a local church, then Acts 11:29-30 and Titus 1:5 must be interpreted in that light. We can never isolate a scripture and teach a practice or doctrine, especially when it is contrary to the balance of the same theme in other passages.

They Are a Distinct Group

Elders are a distinct group, they ideally are all equals in authority. No one man due to age, length of time in the church, education, or financial resources is qualified to be the “main” man. This is the ideal and Biblical. Unfortunately, there has through the years been seen men in positions of leadership, for which they were never fitted by God. They had the place due to social status, family associations, personal ambition, etc.

It has been said that the expression “church of God” applies to the corporate church and others say it always refers to the local church.

- a) The first observation is that to say there are “elders over the corporate universal church of God” is error because the church began at Pentecost and will continue to the rapture. No man or group of men have, on this earth, lived for that entire period!
- b) Furthermore, if we say this does apply to the corporate church but we do not mean all the church from Pentecost to the rapture, then we have to make a new definition of what the “church” is. In this case, the “church” is the aggregate of all believers on the earth at one time.
- c) Both of these are foreign to the scriptures. The expression “church of God” is found in eight verses, Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:5. In several instances it refers to the saints of an area. Paul persecuted the church of God, that is the saints in Jerusalem and was journeying to Damascus to afflict the saints there (Acts 9:1-2; 1 Cor. 15:9). When Paul wrote to the Corinthians the Spirit divided humanity into three groups: “Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32). However, in all the other references the clause distinctly refers to the local church.

In Summarizing, The Scriptures Teach:

- 1) In a church, ideally there is a multiplicity of men referred to as elders. Never is there one man over a single gathering, or a number of churches.
- 2) Only men can be elders. While it is gloriously true that we are all one in Christ and no distinctions between male and female, nevertheless, salvation does not irradiate the governmental positioning's of God. Christian children are still to be submissive to their parents (Eph. 6:1); Christian employees still must be submissive to their employers (Eph. 6:5); wives are to be submissive to their husbands (Eph. 5:24; husbands must love their wives (Eph. 5:25), and only men can be elders (1 Tim. 3:1).

The Ideal Chronological Order Before Being Ordained Or Appointed

It is irrelevant which avenue of spiritual or secular work an individual is involved with, there is always a starting point. In the spiritual sphere, an individual may be unaware of the ultimate outcome of an exercise before God, but it always begins with an interest in a particular work. No one sets out to be an evangelist, etc. At the beginning they are simply aware that, by the Holy Spirit, there is a love and burden for the eternal welfare of individuals. Those individuals may be children, adults, or in a different county. It can begin with a crisis as with one brother who was a tremendous children's evangelist, whose burden for children intensified when his own little child died. The exercise of heart begins the pathway which opens up to God's ultimate purpose.

- 1) For an elder, the pathway begins with a concern for the spiritual development for the people of God. Long before there is any outward manifestation of his burden, he will be spending time interceding with God for the

preservation of the saints. He will seek clarification from the Lord, if it is His will for the him to pursue this pathway. He will seek the Lord to open ways for him to feed and care for the sheep. So far, this is all behind closed doors and a matter in his heart alone. Thus, he has a desire he sets his heart upon, and has an intensive passion which is begotten by the Holy Spirit. This is not a position of recognition, rather it will cost time, money, and concerns burdened hearts. There is no money in this, no house provided, or car. This demands 100% for the glory of divine persons are stake. He will work with the Holy Spirit to liberate the saints from satanic influences by feeding and caring for them. This man agonizes over a hurting sheep and is not at ease until he has done all to have them restored. Concerning such a one, God says: "He desireth a good work" (1 Tim. 3:1).

- 2) Then two things happen simultaneously:
 - a) Being convicted that this is the path God is directing him in, and without saying anything to anyone, he reviews the qualifications and sets his heart and mind to be all that God expects him to be. He will not change the qualifications because of his deficiencies, but will face where he has shortcomings and seek the enablement of the Holy Spirit to counteract them. For example, if he is by nature short tempered, he will pray for help to be changed and set his mind to not be quick tempered. This preparation is not a sudden thing, but a prolonged process.
 - b) At the same time he will, without fanfare, visit the saints in hospitals, in their homes, take them out for a coffee and get to know them, for the shepherd must know the sheep (Jn. 10:14). Sadly, there are those referred to as elders who knew not the voice of the Chief Shepherd, but hearing the voice of a man, moved into the position of leadership.
 - c) Very quickly and without any announcement the sheep respond to the individual, they go to him with their problems, and knowing he will keep all in confidence, they can speak openly to him. With shepherd care he listens and hears what they are not just saying outwardly, but what their heart is saying.
- 3) Those who are elders will recognize the features the man has, but knowing the scriptures, "Lay hands suddenly on no man" (1 Tim. 5:22), they will proceed cautiously, for there is the danger of false elders (Acts 20:28). Elders ideally ought to follow the biblical example and will pray, and possibly fast before any final decision is made. The future of the church may well rest on their decision. They may even ask his thoughts on situations while not mentioning that they are considering him to be a fellow-elder, thus "testing" him in real situations. Only after a time of waiting upon God, and deep consideration, will they ask him to work with them. If he accepts, it will be accepted with humility.
- 4) The man is not announced that he is on the oversight and then does the work. The announcement is nothing more than an acknowledgment of the work of grace in the heart of the man, and declaring their oneness with God in His ongoing desire for the assembly. Moses was, by God, told to lay his hands on Joshua before the people, thus Joshua was by divine choice in a place of leadership, appointed by a man to be recognized as being in that position by divine choice and appointment (Num. 27:22-23; Deut. 34:9).

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

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