

The Church

Elders - Questions - Part 11

Introduction

From time to time decisions are made by elders that the congregation does not at first appearance agree with. The question is, "What if I, one of the congregation, do not agree with a decision they make. What can I do about it?" Some would say, "They know best and accept it". Others will say, "You do not question the elders." I can say in my almost 55 years of being in local churches, I have seen decisions made I did not agree with and have spoken to one of the elders and asked why. The problem is not in asking "Why?", it is the tone in which it is asked. If a child, in defiance, asks a parent on some decision they make, the response will not be the same as if they ask with a concern. Even the Lord asked, "Why" (Matt. 27:46). No individual or group of men are so removed from the congregation that they cannot explain why a decision was made. I still might not agree with it, but at least I know why it was made.

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- 1) What if a decision is made I do not agree with and it is a moral issue?
 - a) The first thing is the recognition that I am not in the place of leadership, and must never start a coup or gather a number of the saints around me in an uprising. As a member of the congregation I must never rail against them, but I can meet with one or all of them to explain my understanding and ask for clarification. They possibly know data not available to me. Even if I do not agree with them, I must never use the platform as a means of stirring up strife, or trying to get them to conform to that which is correct even if I know what they are doing is wrong. I ask myself, "Do these men know what the scriptures teach?" If they do, and refuse to listen and obey God, who do I think I am that they will listen and obey me? If the issue is so severe, then I have two options:
 - i) I can leave the church in fellowship with the saints, and pray God to deal with the situation.
 - ii) I can stay and try to strengthen the things which remain (Rev. 3:2), but this is only possible if there are those who want to do what is Biblical. If this is not possible and things are so bad, an individual may have no choice but to leave and go to another church.I know of one church where one man rules, money was missing, and there is an individual in the gathering who is living common law. I ask, could you stay in such a church, and where would you go when there are no other churches close by?
- 2) What if a decision is made I do not agree with and it is a non moral issue?
 - a) Leave it alone, let it be. For instance, "Should it be grape juice or wine at the Lord's Supper/communion service?"; "Should it be leaven or unleavened bread at the Lord's Supper/communion service?"; "Should the vessel for collecting the finances from the saints be a plate, a bag or a box, and should it be placed at the door or passed around?" Really, does it effect the worship, will sinners be prevented from salvation because of it, will it hinder the spiritual development of the saints?
- 3) Why not have women elders?
 - a) The answer to this is quite simple, the scriptures will not permit such. If they are the final court of appeal being God's authoritative voice to humanity, then the matter is finished. They do not permit a woman elder. The evidence for such is, there is one constantly emphasized qualification, the individual must be a male. Being an elder is a work that is restricted to men as seen from three avenues of truth:
 - i) The law of impossibility due to the precise meaning of words used. "How could a woman fulfil the following references in 1 Timothy 3:1-7? The elder is to be "a man" (v.1); "the husband of one wife" (v.2); "his, his" (v.4); "Man, his, he" (v.5); "he" (v.6); "He, he" (v.7)?
 - ii) The law of impossibility due to the biblical role of women. Even though Philip had four daughters who prophesied, they never told Paul what would befall him. The Lord brought Agabus from Judea to inform him (Acts 21:9-11). The Holy Spirit never used a woman to write a Biblical book, Miriam only began to lead the women in singing after Moses had

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begun (Ex. 15:1, 20); Deborah was a judge but never led the people in victory but was the main support of Barak (Jud. 4:4-9).

iii) The law of scriptural precedence. Throughout the Old Testament only men were chosen by God to be the heads of the people (Num. 1:5-16); to be leaders as Moses, Aaron, and Hur (Ex. 17:10); to be judges as Gideon (Josh. 6:11); or Samson (Josh. 13:24); to be prophets as Isaiah (2 Kgs. 19:2); or Nahum (Nah. 1:1); to be a prime worker as Nehemiah (Neh. 1:1); and Ezra (Ezra 7:6).

b) This does not mean that women are not spiritual. There are untold numbers of women who are far more spiritual and learned than those who are the elders in the church. It is my conviction that women are oftentimes under-appreciated and underutilized in the church. There are many gifted women who could do a better job at preaching and teaching than many men, however, the subject is not “gift” but God's governmental order. God has made Christ the Head of the church (Eph. 1:19-23), and as the Head He has determined the roles for each of the sexes. Men are to be the elders therefore, to have women elders is to act contrary to the scriptures. I say again, there are major works for women to fulfill, and her work in this context is to be the support of her husband in the work God has given him.

4) What is the difference between an elder and a deacon?

a) In 1 Timothy 3 the qualifications for elders are given and then that of deacons. This indicates that within the sphere of church official positions, they are two different works. Both positions serve and it is taken from Acts 6 that deacons are chosen by the church, and it says, “they have to be proved” (1 Tim. 3:10). However, this does not mean the elder does not have to be proven first for in 1 Tim. 3:10 it says, “And let these ALSO first be proved”. By the addition of the word “also”, it is teaching that any announcement to the congregation the individual will have already shown the qualifications of being a shepherd to the sheep.

b) An elder has a more restricted work than a deacon in that his responsibilities are spiritual; caring for the sheep; being able to lead the Bible Study; arranging for speakers and special outreaches; looking for other methods to build the saints; and watching for any unrest, etc.

c) The word translated “deacon” is a much broader meaning than that of an elder. The Greek word “diakonos” simply means, “one who serves”, irrespective of what the service is. Like the trunk of a tree which splits into two branches, the word “deacon” can refer to an individual holding an “official” position in the church (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8-13), or it can refer to anyone doing a service to the saints. It is in this way Phoebe is referred to as a “servant, a diakonos”, a deacon in the church at Cenchrea (Rom. 16:1); Paul was a missionary evangelist, a “minister, a diakonos” (Col. 1:25), as was Timothy (1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Tim. 4:6) and Tychicus (Eph. 6:21; Col. 4:7); and the governments of the land (Rom. 13:4).

d) Within the local church context I see this work as those men in the church who have a leadership position whether it is superintendent for Sunday School; leading Bible studies or home study groups; responsibility for the finances; and care of the building, etc.

5) Why did God give elders?

a) In His wonderful wisdom and foreknowledge God knew our natural tendencies. Being the omniscient God, He is never taken by surprise. He foresaw every situation and every need of a local church. Therefore, He provides certain men to be leaders who will feed and care for His people. Their work is to assist the saints in their ongoing spiritual development. The following is only some of those works:

i) Feed the saints (1 Pet. 5:2)

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- ii) Rule over the saints. There can be a misunderstanding or disagreement concerning the word “rule”, therefore, it is to be observed that the Greek words do not mean to be dictatorial, “We are the bosses” attitude. There are two Greek words translated “rule” in the context of the local church. The elders have the governmental responsibility of the church’s preservation and development (1 Tim. 5:7). That means they are to:
 - 1. “Proistēmi” which means to “stand before” and is used of a family (1 Tim. 3:4), and is translated “maintain” (Titus 3:8, 14). Therefore, when “proistēmi” is used of elders (1 Tim. 5:17), it means to lead and maintain order among the congregation.
 - 2. “Hēgeomai” is used of elders in Heb. 13:7, 17, 24. This word means “to guide”.
 - iii) Share in the responsibility of caring for the saints (Acts 21:8)
 - iv) Oversee the saints (Acts 20:28)
 - v) Protect the doctrine (Titus 1:9)
- 6) Why have a multiplicity of elders in the local church?
- a) “In the multitude of counsellors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). By having several elders there is more security during times of persecution. Also, if one or a couple of the elders are killed, they are there to support the saints. Multiple elders are needed to help amalgamate and mentor those who are showing signs of desire in that work; to give a united front in protecting against the inroads of error; to protect the church from becoming autocratic (3 Jn. 9-10); and to prevent one man from being run ragged through having to bear all the problems of the people of God alone (Ex. 18:13-27). When Jethro came to Moses and saw the enormity of the task of one man adjudicating the people, Jethro suggested Moses to get others to help in the work. The caring of the saints is too big for any one man.
- 7) Can a church exist without elders?
- a) In the entire New Testament there are only two cases of churches without elders. When Paul and Barnabas were returning home on their first missionary journey they visited the cities they had been to before and then ordained elders. The churches had been newly planted and time had been needed for men to be recognized as those who had a burden for the saints (Acts 14:23).
 - b) Titus was sent by Paul to Crete to correct the things which were lacking. One of them was to ordain elders which evidently they did not have (Titus 1:5).
- 8) When does a man become an elder?
- a) When he is invited to help in the overseeing of the flock? When the announcement is made that he is an overseer? The answer is a resounding “No”. The individual is an elder when he does the work, whither he is on an official board or not. This leads to the following question:
 - i) How long is an individual on the oversight, until death?
 - 1. The answer is a resounding “No”. This is not a position one holds till death. There are those who do insist that an elder can never be removed through old age, etc. This is a flagrant rejection of reality for a man can only be an elder for as long as he is doing the work. When he is no longer able to function because of age, etc., then he is no longer an elder. If through reason of age, or any impairment he can no longer function, then he must be set aside either by resignation or others doing this for him.
- An illustration: My elderly mum was very alert to everything, then she began to fade and was in danger of bad decision making. I did not tell her she was losing the ability to function but over several years assisted her and that assisting grew more and more until she was quite happy to let others look after everything. She was “mum” and was treated with all the love and tenderness that could be shown. That is how it ought to be if an elder does not recognize his own failing ability to function.

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**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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