

THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

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Introduction

The problem of authority is always with us. Most of the world does not even recognize the existence of God anymore, much less His authority. There have been those in the church through the years who have sought to destroy the delegated authority God has given to bishops in the local churches, but generally, such influences were rather isolated. However, parallel to “anti-authority”, “anti-establishment” philosophy beginning in the 1960s among many worldlings, there has been an even louder cry from within the church against the authority of elders, represented by the following from one prominent editor:

What authority do elders have over their flock, which that flock does not willingly give them?
None!

Did any of us ever consider where we get New Testament authority for elders making decisions?

We are of the opinion that questions are safer in the hands of the “church” than in the hands of any “ship.”

None of the qualities mentioned in either Timothy or Titus have to do with decision-making.

Many additional similar statements are indicative of this trend.

While some opine that the church is suffering from a growing “authority syndrome,” it is my judgment that the direr threat is a growing “anti-authority syndrome.” I submit that God places a plurality of elders/bishops/pastors over each local church in which men of Scriptural qualifications can be found (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–10). I further submit that these men are charged with keeping their respective churches free from error in doctrine, practice, and morals, and with making decisions relative to the expedient exercise of the work of the church. Let us consider the Scriptural evidence.

Elders and Elders’ Meetings

Some have hinted, while others have openly affirmed, that there is no Scriptural basis for elders even to meet separately from the church in order to make decisions affecting the church. The first time the New Testament mentions elders in the church is in Acts 11:30. Luke wrote that the contribution of the church in Antioch for the brethren in Judea was sent “to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” The Antioch brethren sent it **for** any who had need, but sent it **to** the elders. Why? I conclude that they were the proper administrators of it—which required some decision-making.

Some like to use the “Jerusalem Conference” (Acts 15:1–29) as an example of a decision reached by the “whole church,” but careful analysis of the context proves otherwise. Paul and Barnabas were sent primarily to the “apostles and elders” to settle the question of circumcision (v. 2). They first reported on their work to the whole church (v. 4), but when the Judaizers raised the issue of circumcision, Luke states that the “apostles and elders were gathered together to consider of this matter” (vv. 5–6). This was a separate meeting from that of verse 4. Paul’s record supports this conclusion (Gal. 2:2; 9). Later, “the multitude” again listened to Paul and Barnabas as well as James (Acts 15:12–13) and expressed their agreement with the letter that was to be circulated to Gentile brethren (v. 22). Luke describes the letter as “ordained of the apostles and elders” (16:4). Clearly, there was a separate, private meeting involving both elders and apostles in which this matter was decided, rather than leaving it to a congregational vote.

As Paul returned from his third preaching trip he stopped at Miletus where he called to him the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17). Upon reaching Jerusalem, he met with the elders there (21:18). Obviously, it was not an uncommon practice for elders in the early church to meet separately from the church to discuss and make decisions regarding “church business.”

Words Referring to Elders and Their Work

The words chosen by the Holy Spirit to describe elders and their responsibilities are words that indicate the authority God has given them. All of the page numbers following the quotations below refer to *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, American Book Co., 1889:

1. **Episkopos** (and kindred forms), translated “bishop,” “overseer,” “oversight” (Acts 20:28; Phi. 1:1; 1 TIm. 3:1–2; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2): “An overseer, a man charged with...seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent; ...specifically the superintendent, head or overseer of any Christian church” (p. 243).
2. **Oikonomos**, translated “steward” (Tit. 1:7): “the manager of a household or of household affairs; especially a steward, manager, superintendent...to whom the head of the house or proprietor has entrusted the management of his affairs, the care of receipts and expenditures,...a bishop (or overseer) is called *oikonomos theou*, of God as the head and master of the Christian theocracy” (pp. 440-441). (If elders cannot make decisions or set policy in matters of expediency, how can they be overseers, superintendents, managers, or stewards?)
3. **Poimaino** (and related noun, *poimen*), translated “feed,” “pastor” (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2): “to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep; ...to rule, govern: of rulers, ...of the overseers (pastors) of the church, ...to furnish pasturage or food; to nourish” (p. 527). When shepherds see one of the flock straying towards a precipice, have they no authority to prevent a fatal

fall? When they see a wolf devouring the lambs, must they call all of the flock together before they can decide that he must be stopped and how to stop him (John 10:12)? Notice the use of *poimaino* in Rev. 2:26–27: “...to him will I give **authority** (*exousian*) **over** the nations: and he **shall rule** (*poimaino*) them with a rod of iron...” (emph. DM). Admittedly, the word **includes** the element of feeding and tending, but also of **ruling with authority**.

4. **Proistemi**, translated “over,” “rule”: “to set or place before; to set over; to be over, to superintend, preside over, rule: 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 The. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4” (p. 539).
5. **Peithesthe**, translated “obey” (Heb. 13:17). The form in this passage is in the middle voice, meaning: “to listen to, obey, yield to; comply with...Heb. 13:17; Jam. 3:3” (p. 497). James 3:3 speaks of the response of the horse to the bridle, a response to authority. The church is to obey its elders.
6. **Hegeomi**, translated “rule over” (Heb. 13:17): “to lead, to go before; to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over: a prince, of regal power; a governor, viceroy, chief; leading as respects influence, controlling in counsel; ...the overseers or leaders of Christian churches” (p. 276). Admittedly, this word **includes** the persuasion of one’s influence, but it is also translated “governor” (Mat. 27:2; Acts 7:10). It is a word of authority.
7. **Hupeiko**, translated “submit to” (Heb. 13:17): “to resist no longer, but to give way, yield; to yield to authority and admonition, to submit” (p. 638). This is what saints are to do in relation to their elders instead of trying to overthrow their authority.

Each of the foregoing terms is either laden with authority or shows the proper response to the authority that God has given to elders.

Elders and “Church Discipline”

Three key passages of Scripture place the responsibility of leadership in discipline in the local church upon elders. Paul warns the Ephesian elders: “...grievous wolves, ...speaking perverse things, will draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore, watch ye...” (Acts 20:29–31). A qualification of every elder requires that he know how to “rule his own house” so that he may “take care of the church” (1 Tim. 3:5). Also, in the setting of the qualifications of elders, Paul says that elders are to convict the gainsayers (unruly men, vain talkers, and deceivers who must be silenced) (Tit. 1:9-11). Can responsible elders allow the church to be fed doctrinal poison while they timidly refuse to stop it? Those who would deny the authority of elders deny them the right to protect the flock from such dangers. If these words do not enjoin elders to lead the church in matters of discipline, giving them the authority to carry out the duty, what words would? How can such great responsibilities be fulfilled without some sober, prayerful, decision-making meetings?

In my judgment it is most likely that the ones opposing the authority of elders with such zeal are ultimately aiming at their disciplinary leadership. If the authority of elders can be so undermined that they will not attempt discipline where needed, or, if when they attempt it, the

church has been so conditioned by false teaching that it will not follow the elders in the discipline, then the church is at the mercy of any doctrine or practice that any one might wish to impose upon it. There is already a great famine of Scriptural discipline among the churches. It is difficult to imagine what sort of worldliness one would have to practice or what false doctrine one would have to promote in order to draw even the mildest reproof in most churches. I suggest that a major contributing factor to this sad condition has been the gradual rising tide of teaching against the authority of elders. This has both caused some elders to be uncertain of their own God-given authority and some members of the church to reject the authority God has given these men.

Practical Considerations

Churches can admittedly function without the leadership of elders, but they are almost always handicapped. It is the general, long-standing, and, I believe, correct view of the matter, that churches without qualified elders exist in an immature state. The ideal projected in the New Testament is to have Scripturally qualified elders who function as true spiritual leaders in every church (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5). This leadership **innately** includes the making of decisions. Those who presently are blaspheming the decision-making role of elders are very inconsistent when it comes to practicalities. Some of these men are preachers who were hired to preach by elders who made the decision to hire them. The last raise in pay they got (and accepted) was a result of a decision of the elders. The Gospel meetings they preach in are a result of decisions of elders. One very well-known preacher who has spoken out so forcefully against the decision-making role and the authority of elders in general, nonetheless urges elders to subscribe to the paper he edits for the entire church they oversee—and he sends it to them without qualm of conscience when they so decide.

It is neither practical nor Scriptural to leave the fate of a church in the hands of a “majority vote” arrangement where a spiritual neophytes, doctrinal extremist, 12-year-old boy, and such like has as much voice as a loyal, seasoned saint—in spite of the fact that the church has elders. To prevent this very thing is why the Lord placed the local church under men who meet strict qualifications thereby proving their loyalty to Christ and His Word. However, it is the stated intent of some to allow elders no more authority in a church than that of the newest, weakest, most radical, or youngest member thereof. Should they succeed in their plans it is very doubtful that any of them would long be content to live with the unscriptural situation they helped create because of its manifest impracticality.

Abuses of Authority

Those who oppose the authority of elders (except that exercised by “influence”) often remind us of Peter’s warning: “neither as lording it over the charge allotted you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:3). The application usually made of this statement is to the effect that since elders are not to “lord it over” the flock, this precludes any exercise of authority. If this verse forbids the very authority that several other passages enjoin, then we have a serious contradiction in the Scripture. Contrariwise, there is no conflict at all between this verse and the authority-laden verses previously considered. The truth taught by Peter concerns the **proper exercise** of authority by elders, to keep them aware of the possible temptation to abuse it. Anyone who works under several elderships over a period of years will likely encounter one or more elders who have a tyrannical spirit. I certainly have had this experience. In spite of the warning against the abuse of authority, it will likely continue, because elders are human beings like the rest of us. However, an **abuse** of authority can never be rightly used to offset the **proper use** of authority. These men must certainly exercise the powerful leadership to be found in being an “ensample” (*tupos*, type, pattern). Each one of these men is to represent to both the world and the church just what a genuine Christian is (1 Tim. 3:7), and there is great power in such leadership. However, this power of example does not at all diminish the authority God has given elders.

Conclusion

I believe I have produced Scriptural evidence that elders (as a group; never independently of his fellow-elders) possess authority over the local church. I further believe I have shown that there is both implicit and explicit teaching in the New Testament that elders are to meet and make decisions concerning the work of the church they oversee. Rebellion against the Word of the Lord is rebellion against the Lord himself (John 12:48). Likewise, rebellion against God’s appointed leaders who are faithfully serving is rebellion against God (Num. 16:1–35). With these truths before us, it is not difficult to see why the qualifications of elders are so strict and why the saints are commanded to obey and submit to these men. To rebel against them or to incite others to rebel against them out of selfishness, stubbornness, pride, jealousy or any other sinful motive is to rebel against the authority of God!

Wise elders will counsel their brethren and weigh their wishes in making decisions about matters of expediency. They will also delegate much of the practical, detailed decision-making to deacons and to others. However, the final responsibility for making decisions in the local

church in matters of expediting the work and keeping the church true to the Book will always rest upon the church's elders/bishops/pastors.

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