

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ELDERS AND DEACONS TO KEEP THE “UNITY OF THE SPIRIT...”

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Introduction

More than any other group of men, whether considered on a congregational basis or in the church as a whole, elders are in a position to promote and preserve the pure faith and the unity and peace among brethren, both on the local level and throughout the church as a whole. A generally known fact of uninspired church history is that some of the earliest departures from the ancient order manifested themselves in the corruption of God’s pattern for congregational elders. These corruptions over five centuries evolved into the papacy monster that burdens our world yet today.

Their emphases, their examples, the things they teach, the decisions they make (or shrink from making), the doctrines, practices, and/or people they promote, and the doctrines, practices, and/or people elders oppose all have great potential for unity and peace or for disastrous schism, disruption, and apostasy. Deacons can be either great contributors to the unity of God’s people or a powerful hindrance to the same. It is therefore most appropriate for us to refresh our minds concerning what the New Testament teaches about elders and deacons as their respective roles relate to unity.

In Ephesians 4:1–3, Paul wrote: “I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”ⁱ No one can say with certainty when the elders of the Ephesian church were appointed, but it was well before Paul addressed this epistle to Ephesus. Some two or three years before he wrote this letter from his first imprisonment at Rome, he met with these men at Miletus (Acts 20:17–38). Perhaps he appointed them during his prolonged stay in Ephesus on his third preaching trip (Acts 19:1–12).ⁱⁱ

Paul addressed this letter to “the saints that are at Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1), but one may logically assume that whoever delivered it did so into the hands of the elders, who then read it to the congregation. In his meeting with them at Miletus, Paul had charged these elders—men responsible for the oversight, leadership, and protection of the congregation—first to take heed unto themselves and then to the congregation (Acts 20:28–31).ⁱⁱⁱ Thus the Ephesian elders, upon receipt of this letter, would surely have felt the obligation first to apply it to themselves and

then to the church. If there were deacons at Ephesus, as trusted assistants to the elders and servants of the church, their responsibility to “serve well” and “gain a good standing” and “great boldness in the faith” (1 Tim. 3:13) would have obligated them to apply scrupulously the doctrine of this letter to themselves, in full cooperation with their overseers, also.

As they lived in a way befitting their calling to be saints in lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, and loving forbearance, they were charged with “giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” *Giving diligence (endeavouring, KJV)*, is from the strong term, *spoudazontes*, which, according to Vine, connotes “to hasten to do a thing, to exert oneself, endeavor, give diligence.”^{iv} Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich add the following emphases: “be zealous or eager, take pains, make every effort.”^v The ASV almost always renders this term with the word *diligence* or *diligent* (Eph. 4:3; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:9, 21; Tit. 3:12; Heb. 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:10, 15; 3:14) varying only with *zealous* (Gal. 2:10) and *endeavored* (1 The. 2:17). Notable differences in KJV renderings are *study* (2 Tim. 2:15),^{vi} *labour* (Heb. 4:11, and *endeavour* (2 Pet. 1:15). From these definitions of the word rendered *give diligence*, Paul conveyed the urgency of the duty of “keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” They were to zealously give this task their very best effort.

The end of our diligent effort is “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Note that the charge is not to **create**, but **preserve** or **maintain** a unity that already existed. Said unity does not occur through our human efforts, but it “automatically” occurs as individuals obey the Gospel plan of salvation (Acts 2:37–47) and remain faithful to the Word of God. They thereby become one “in Christ” with all others who are in Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). This initially-attained unity among brethren through the Gospel is precious, and we are to strive mightily to preserve it.

Note also that the charge is not to maintain “unity” without qualification, just for the sake of “unity” itself. While some elevate unity as the ultimate goal, the Scriptures teach us to exalt Truth and submission thereto above all else. Jesus said: “If ye abide in my word, then are ye truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31–32). All who “know” the Truth in the sense of obeying it and abiding in it will be one, whether they number two, two hundred, or two thousand persons.^{vii}

In spite of Paul’s ringing challenge that we are to strive mightily to maintain unity, this challenge is not without exception. God does not authorize every sort of unity. To state it otherwise, in some cases, the Holy Spirit **forbids** us to be united with others. In such cases,

God **requires** separation/division. In Ephesians 5, Paul forbade fellowship/unity with “the unfruitful works of darkness” (vv. 5–7, 11). He likewise forbade God’s people to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14–18). He proscribes unity with some who are children of God (Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:9–11; 2 The. 3:6; Tit. 3:10). To unite with impenitent teachers or practitioners of error makes one guilty of their errors (2 John 9–11). These kinds of division are more than merely acceptable; they are obligatory. “Factions” (“heresies,” KJV) that disrupt unity are sometimes necessary in order to demonstrate who the faithful (and the unfaithful) are (1 Cor. 11:19).

The unity we are to guard zealously is qualified as being “of the Spirit.” Barnes avers that *unity of the Spirit* means a harmonious attitude or “spirit” or a “united spirit” (which, the grammar will apparently bear, and since *spirit* is not capitalized in the original).^{viii} Matthew Henry takes the same view and then erroneously concludes that the phrase allows diversity in such things as “form and mode of worship” (his version of “unity in diversity”).^{ix} This explanation of the phrase, among other things, creates an absurd redundancy; emphasis upon godly attitudes is the entire point of verse 2 (i.e., lowliness, meekness, longsuffering, loving forbearance).

Contextually, it is more natural to consider *of the Spirit* as “the genitive of **originating cause**—the unity which the Spirit produces or works,” as Salmond states.^x The seven singular elements that immediately follow (vv. 4–6), revealed by the Spirit through Paul as the bases of Scriptural unity, lend credence to this view. Other denominational commentators agree with Salmond, among them Vincent,^{xi} Erdman,^{xii} and Blaikie.^{xiii} The translators have rightly, therefore, capitalized *Spirit*, reflecting Paul’s reference to the Holy Spirit rather than to the human spirit.

Several brethren have supplied good expressions of both the meaning of *unity of the Spirit* and the means by which He produces said unity. John T. Hinds wrote that Paul’s meaning is that “Christians are required to walk as the Holy Spirit teaches. As the teaching applies to all alike, obedience to it will bring that unity which is necessary in the one body.”^{xiv} Lipscomb and Shepherd commented: “Christians are to give diligence to stand **one in the teachings of the Spirit**, to be united in walking according to his instructions.”^{xv} Leslie G. Thomas got it right in his comments on wrong and right views of *unity of the Spirit*:

It appears that some people have the idea that the unity of the Spirit consists primarily in a fraternal feeling toward each other, even though widely different viewpoints regarding teaching and practice may be held by them. But the only way in which faithful Christians can keep the unity of the Spirit is for them to do their best to follow the course which the writers of the New Testament prescribe for them.^{xvi}

We do well to emphasize that the unity that occurs and obtains among those who obey the Gospel and continue to “walk in the light, as he is in the light” (1 John 1:7) **does not require agreement** in optional matters. There was no “unity” between those who ate only herbs and those who ate “all things,” including meat, and God was not concerned over such differences (Rom. 14:1–3). We are to “receive one another” as brethren (remain one) in all such matters of opinion (e.g., what time to meet, the way to take care of widows and orphans, how many cups shall be on the Lord’s table, whether to rent or own a meeting place, et al.) (15:7). “Weaker” brethren who have narrow scruples about such matters are not to judge “stronger” brethren who do not have such scruples. “Stronger” brethren are to take care not to despise “weaker” brethren or to cause them to sin by the inconsiderate exercise of their liberty in Christ (14:3, 13, 15, 20–21). To the Corinthians Paul identified the eating of meat offered to idols as optional, but stated the same cautions concerning it as he did regarding the behaviors he discussed in Romans 14 (1 Cor. 8:7–13; 10:23–33). Only in such matters of **option** and **opinion** do the Scriptures not only allow, but urge and mandate, that we practice “unity in diversity”—the only circumstance among brethren when this principle is acceptable.

Contrariwise, when the Bible demands conformity (and therefore unity), it does so only in **matters of obligation**. Such is the correct application of Paul’s plea to the Corinthians:

Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment (1 Cor. 1:10).

If this exhortation demands absolute conformity in optional things, as some allege, Paul contradicted himself when he discussed the eating of meats offered to idols (1 Cor. 8, 10) and when he wrote Romans 14. The “sharp contention” between Paul and Barnabas concerning John Mark (Acts 15:37–39) clearly demonstrates that brethren may strongly disagree in their opinions, yet remain one in Christ and maintain the “unity of the Spirit” regarding His obligatory injunctions.

Brethren who diligently strive to preserve the “unity of the Spirit” will be bound together in peace and harmony. As succeeding information will demonstrate, elders have an enormous responsibility to keep the unity we have in Christ regarding both obligatory and optional practices in the church. The Holy Spirit has not thrust this duty upon them without practical preparation and qualification.

The Qualifications of Elders

Scriptural elders (bishops, pastors) are made—that is, designated—such by the Holy Spirit (Acts. 20:28).^{xvii} He does not thus appoint them in any direct or miraculous way. Rather, He does by (1) so stipulating the qualifications for those who would serve in this capacity (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:6–9), and then (2) charging faithful saints to seek out and appoint such men to be elders (v. 5). When men are named “elders” who lack one or more of the traits the Holy Spirit demands they must have, they are “made elders” by mere imperfect men, not by the Holy Spirit.

As previously emphasized, no other group of men has a more direct effect or greater impact on the unity in local congregations (and thereby in the church as a whole) than their respective elderships. The spiritual strength of each company of bishops relates directly to the qualifications of its individual constituents. This fact explains why their qualifications are so strict and why we must carefully follow “all things according to the pattern” (Heb. 8:5b) regarding these Scriptural standards. There is no more crucial time in the life of a congregation than when men are being considered for elder appointment. This is serious business indeed!

The scope of this chapter is too broad to embrace a study of each of the specific elder qualifications. I will only observe a few pertinent principles relating to them:

1. The qualifications are mandatory, as indicated by the word *must*, either stated or implied, before each of them (1 Tim. 3:2–7; Tit. 1:7–9).
2. Each man must possess each one of the qualifications to some degree (note the singularity of the terms: *a man, he, the bishop*, et al. [1 Tim. 3:1–2] and *any man, the husband, the bishop, that he may*, et al. [Tit. 1:6–7, 9]). These requirements are not satisfied if they all appear merely in the aggregate of the men, while some individual pastors lack one or more of them.
3. Were these qualifications entirely arbitrary it would still be incumbent upon us to honor them, but they are neither random nor arbitrary—they are imminently practical. They relate directly to and indicate one’s preparation for the work and responsibilities of overseers of the Lord’s people. Therefore, a man bereft of these qualifications will be unable to fulfill the Spirit-given responsibilities of an elder.
4. It follows from the preceding principle that each elder must have each qualification to some degree **before he is appointed**. Some have expressed the idea that a “good-hearted” man who has **some** of the qualifications can be appointed and begin serving as an elder, with the anticipation that he will “grow into” the ones he lacks. Not so! This approach negates the very purpose of the qualifications: to limit the eldership to men who have **already achieved** the spiritual maturity vouchsafed by them. “And let these also first be proved,” stated explicitly concerning deacons (1 Tim. 3:10), is clearly implied concerning elders as well. In principle, it is “all or nothing at all”: If we can dispense with one or two of these inspired requirements, we

can dispense with all of them. Besides, if a man is genuinely “good-hearted” he will not allow himself to be appointed if he is unqualified in any respect.

Unqualified “elders” are doomed to failure in every respect (at least as the Lord evaluates them) in their responsibilities, including the duty to “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The Appointment of Elders

The Scriptures teach both by direct statement and account of action that men who are willing to serve and who meet the Scriptural qualifications, and none others, should be appointed as elders in the local churches (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–11). However, without specific precedent or instructions on the way to select such men, we are left to our own wisdom, in keeping with general principles of Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor. 14:40). When it is perceived that some men in the congregation may meet the Scriptural qualifications to serve as elders, wisdom suggests a thorough study of the qualifications, work, and responsibilities of elders, either in Bible classes or in sermons.

Upon completion of these studies, some sort of selection procedure is necessary.^{xviii} The common practice is to ask the congregation to submit within a certain time frame (e.g., two weeks) the names of men whom they believe are qualified.^{xix} If an eldership already exists and men are being added to it, the suggested names should be given to the elders. If no eldership exists, the men of the congregation may appoint a committee of men to receive the suggested names. These names are then reviewed, and the existing elders (if there are such) or the committee should then interview the suggested men concerning such things as their evaluation of themselves in light of the qualifications and their willingness to serve.

Once the names have been screened, it is prudent then to place them before the church, asking anyone who has a Scriptural objection to any of the men to state it in writing and sign it (again, within a limited time frame). If any such objections are lodged, they should be resolved, involving the accuser(s) facing the accused, if necessary. The purpose of this exercise is to prevent, if possible, the appointment of anyone who is not qualified. Though earlier stated, it is impossible to overemphasize the significance of the appointment of elders relative to a congregation’s direction and future. Lamentably, even when the greatest of care is taken, men are sometimes appointed who bring disaster upon the church.

Following the selection process, it is evident that some means must be employed to determine the point at which the ones selected cease being non-elders and begin to serve as elders. However, as in the selection, so in the appointment, the Bible does not give specific

instructions concerning the procedure we should follow. The “ceremony” involved in the appointment is therefore left to local discretion. In my experience, the installation program for elders (and deacons, where such are involved) has been carried out on a Lord’s day morning, when the largest number of members of the church will be present.^{xx}

The Removal of Disqualified Elders

Even when a congregation appoints as elders only men who meet the Holy Spirit’s qualifications, those elders are still fallible human beings, subject to temptation and error. Various elders have succumbed to such sins as immorality, dishonesty, and drunkenness. Others fall prey to doctrinal error. When an elder becomes involved in sin and/or error, he has failed the very standard he had to meet for his appointment—the Scriptural qualifications. By the same Scriptural rule that a man must fulfill each of the qualifications to be appointed an elder, a man must continue to fulfill each of the qualifications to remain an elder. For one who has failed one or more of the qualifications to continue to be considered an “elder” is therefore a corruption of the office and the designation. Ideally, when an elder falls into sin or error, he will repent and resign, but unfortunately, not all are willing to do so. (Note: Although an elder may repent of sin, his sin will usually have destroyed his reputation and influence, making the end of his service as an elder necessary.) When an errant elder will not voluntarily resign from the eldership, how may a congregation remove him?

One solution, practiced mainly among liberal churches, is a reevaluation/reaffirmation process.^{xxi} Generally, the process involves the appointment of an “administrative committee” (excluding any elders), which stands between the existing elders and the congregation, sets up the voting percentage formula for reevaluation, reaffirmation, or removal, and is generally vested with authority over the entire process (said “administrative committee” obviously outranks the elders during this procedure). Some congregations have a stated tenure limitation for both elders and deacons, after which time they can choose to resign or submit themselves for reevaluation and possible reappointment.

I see many unauthorized and dangerous elements in this procedure:

1. It professes to “reappoint” (the practical meaning of reaffirming or reconfirming) men who are **already** appointed and who have not resigned (both contradictory and nonsensical).
2. It renders duly selected and appointed elders only “de facto” or “quasi” elders during the reevaluation process.
3. It places an administrative or screening committee in authority to which the elders must give account and submit.

4. It prevents elders (who are to oversee all of the members and all of the work of all of the congregation) from having any voice in or oversight over who will serve as elders.
5. It sets a precedent that will be very difficult to abandon. It will thenceforth appear unfair to those to whom it was originally applied if all succeeding elders are not likewise subjected to it.
6. It adds, at least in some cases, the qualification of “leadership characteristics” to the qualifications found in the New Testament.
7. It may result in removing certain unqualified men from the eldership, but it also provides an opportunity for forces of error to gain control of the eldership of a congregation quickly and easily with a minimum number of people by removal of qualified men. What if the elders in a congregation are qualified men who are determined to keep the church pure, but in the reevaluation process a twenty-six percent element of liberals in the church turn in negative ballots? Just this easily (and unscripturally) can a dedicated, qualified eldership be restructured. (Of course, elders “who are determined to keep the church pure” will not consent such an unauthorized process.)
8. It creates a great potential for dissension and division in a congregation should the elders dare contradict the committee, the existence of which they have authorized and whose policies and procedures have been sanctioned by the congregation.
9. It gives an opportunity for fraud, deceit, and favoritism in the process of tabulation of the ballots by the committee members.
10. It could encourage an elder who is being reevaluated to engage in politicking and “promise-making” in order to be able to attain the necessary percentage of votes for reaffirmation.
11. It establishes arbitrary percentages for “reaffirmation” or “deaffirmation.”
12. It necessarily tabulates the percentages **only** of those who **actually** participate in the balloting, which may represent much smaller percentages of the actual membership.
13. It allows a small percentage of the members of a congregation to determine who its elders will be and how long they will serve.
14. It smacks more of the standards of failure and success employed by secular business enterprises rather than the standards set forth in the New Testament.
15. It replaces the Scriptural mandate, “them that sin rebuke before all” (1 Tim. 5:20) with “in the event an elder is not reaffirmed by the congregation, he should be given opportunity to retire with dignity.”
16. It supplants the Scriptural instruction for dealing with sin and/or failure in qualifications of elders (1 Tim. 5:19) with a humanly contrived scheme of detailed and intricate “reevaluation” relating more to “leadership characteristics” as subjectively perceived than to Scriptural qualifications.^{xxii}

By engaging in the foregoing program (not just once, but twice in a twelve year span [1990, 2002]), the Brown Trail Church of Christ in Bedford, Texas, alienated thousands of

faithful brethren who recognized the practice as unauthorized by Scripture. This alienation included a large number of the Brown Trail members who left the congregation on both occasions because they could not accept this illegitimate practice. Further, the sinful behavior of this eldership destroyed the amicable relationship many faithful brethren far and wide had long enjoyed with Brown Trail. The division caused by the erroneous behavior of these elders well illustrates the effect elders can have on unity, in both the local congregation and abroad.

However, those unfortunate decisions and the schismatic fallout that immediately followed from them was only the beginning of their destructive effects. The principal promoter of the 1990 elder reevaluation/reaffirmation program at Brown Trail was brother Dave Miller, director of the congregation's TV program, "Truth in Love," and formerly the preacher at Brown Trail. He also served on the "administrative committee" that planned and executed the process. Although he was in the process of moving to Montgomery, Alabama, when the second procedure was conducted (2002), he nonetheless defended it. As will be more fully discussed below, his leadership in and subsequent defense of this scheme has led to an even deeper division and alienation among once amiable brethren.^{xxiii}

One of the proffered justifications for the elder reevaluation/reaffirmation program by its apologists (e.g., Dave Miller and B.J. Clark)^{xxiv} is that, as with the appointment of elders, so with the removal of elders, the New Testament sets forth no specific procedure, leaving the matter to human wisdom. Even if this were the case (which it is not), the many violations of Scriptural principles (as noted above) associated with this practice hardly bespeak any sort of "wisdom" but that which is "earthly, sensual, devilish" (Jam. 3:15).

Contrary to the foregoing assertion, the New Testament sets forth the means of removing elders who are guilty of sin and will not repent. Marvin Weir discussed this fact effectively in the following comments:

The apostle Paul says, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses. Them that sin reprove in the sight of all, that the rest also may be in fear" (1 Tim. 5:19–20). Anyone who sins and refuses to repent must be marked and withdrawn from (Rom. 16:17–18; 2 The. 3:6). The same people who select one to serve as an elder because he is Scripturally qualified (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–11) can also reject that one because he no longer meets the Scriptural qualifications. Existing elders can and should reject a fellow elder who is no longer Scripturally qualified to serve. The "reaffirmation" process, however, is not based upon Scriptural objections. The "I feel that one is doing a bad or good job" is totally subjective!^{xxv}

Significantly, Miller stated in his September 23, 2005, defense that "**the elders themselves...initiated the process and implemented it** from beginning to end" (his emph).

Assuming this was the case, it is no defense at all. To argue that a practice is authorized merely because fallible elders decide to do it is very dangerous ground. Many unauthorized and erroneous practices, “initiated,” “instigated,” and “executed” by elders, characterize hundreds of congregations nowadays. “Eldership authorization” and “Scripture authorization” may be and sometimes are vastly different, as this case exemplifies. Again, assuming that the elders were the “instigators” of their own reevaluation/reaffirmation program, this case serves as a prime demonstration of the vast effect the decisions of even one local eldership may have on “the unity of the Spirit.”

Errant elders should indeed be removed. Perhaps, however, only the Judgment Day will reveal the full extent of the division that has resulted from the unauthorized, aberrant program to remove unwanted elders, as described above.

Elder-Deacon Relationships

Deacons are a special class of servants whom the elders can entrust with various delegated responsibilities relating to the local congregation. These men often have roles of considerable influence as they carry out their assigned duties, and they therefore have considerable opportunities to help or hinder the “unity of the Spirit.” We should thus not be surprised to find specific qualifications for them, almost as stringent as those for elders (1 Tim. 3:8–10, 12). Hasty and careless appointment of men who have not demonstrated one or more of these qualifications invites congregational trouble. Many elderships have found their influence for good undermined by headstrong, self-willed, power-hungry “deacons” who were not committed to the Lord and His Word.

Through the years various erroneous concepts have surfaced regarding the relationship elders and deacons sustain to each other. Among them are the following:

1. **Elders and deacons are coordinate with each other.** In this concept, deacons are treated, or the elders allow the deacons to consider themselves, as “co-elders,” or “junior elders” at least. This kind of thinking prevails when elders and deacons meet together and when deacons’ votes on decisions are counted with those of the elders. Deacons have even been known to out-vote elders, which means they, instead of the elders, are directing the course of the congregation. I moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1962, to work with a congregation that had three elders and twenty-six deacons in a congregation of about two hundred members. I was very young, and this was my second congregation as a preacher. In my youthful inexperience (I was twenty-four), I failed to inquire how the congregation came to have such an unusual number of deacons. I learned to my dismay after I arrived that the elders had invited every male adult to be a deacon, and twenty-six had answered the call. In a joint

meeting where the votes of all counted, one can readily see that the deacons would be in complete control. Prayers sometimes reflect the “coordinate” error relating to elders and deacons. I have heard brethren pray that “the elders and deacons will make the right decisions,” which confuses the respective roles of these groups of men.

2. **Elders and deacons are independent of each other.** This misconception holds that elders have authority over “spiritual matters,” while deacons have authority over “physical” and financial matters pertaining to the local church. It further holds that neither group has authority in the sphere of the other.
3. **Elders and deacons are dependent on each other.** This misapprehension goes beyond the mutual dependence each member of a congregation should have concerning other members. Instead, it views elders and deacons as bodies of men somewhat parallel to the House and the Senate in our federal government. Elders must pass on the decisions of the deacons, and deacons must pass on the decisions of the elders before said decisions can be enacted.

All of the foregoing situations violate the New Testament’s clear distinction between elders and deacons regarding their authority and their relationship to each other. One of the words the Holy Spirit used in reference to elders is *episkopos*, signifying a “superintendent, guardian, bishop.”^{xxvi} Thus Paul described the elders of the Ephesian Church as “bishops” (“overseers,” KJV) (Acts 20:28). Paul said these men were bishops/overseers, superintendents “to all the flock”—the entire congregation, which included deacons, assuming there were such.

Deacon is translated from *diakonos*, meaning a servant or helper.^{xxvii} These respective terms (i.e., *episkopos*, *diakonos*) reflect the proper relationship of these two bodies of men: Local elderships are over the deacons; deacons are servants or helpers of the elders. They are thus under their authority, having no authority except what elders delegate to them. The following passages well illustrate this relationship:

Let the **elders** that **rule** well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17; emph. DM).

Obey them that have the **rule** over you, and **submit** to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls... (Heb. 13:17; emph. DM).

For they that have **served** well as **deacons** gain to themselves a good standing, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 3:13; emph. DM).

Note that the Holy Spirit gave elders the responsibility of **ruling** while he gave deacons the responsibility of **servicing**. Elders who uphold this Scriptural relationship will not allow deacons to pressure them into decisions that are harmful to the congregation. A notable case of a reversal of the elder/deacon roles involves the ultra-liberal Highland Church in Abilene, Texas. In the 1970s, the elders, some of whom were still faithful men at the time, rightly fired Lynn

Anderson, the Highland preacher, because of his liberalism. The deacons promptly called a meeting in which they demanded the elders re-hire him, and the elders capitulated. “The rest is history,” as the saying goes. Anderson, self-appointed “Change Agent in Chief” in the church, with the backing of those deacons, stayed there several more years and moved increasingly further to the left, taking the church with him. It is today merely a misnamed denomination, so marred by liberalism that likely even some denominations would not fellowship it.

Maverick deacons will seek to dissuade elders from doing what is right or persuade them to do what is wrong. In the aforementioned congregation with twenty-six “deacons,” two of them were very worldly and had some wealth and influence. Both of them smoked, and the wives of both smoked, paraded publicly in immodest apparel, and were known to visit the dance floor. These two women wanted ashtrays in the classroom so they could smoke during ladies’ Bible class (remember, this was in the early 1960s). My preaching against these sins was not well received by them, so these two families began withholding their contributions and putting them in a special bank account (I later learned that one of the “elders” was aware of their behavior). When it was evident that “the time of my departure was at hand,” I resigned. The next Lord’s day, the withheld contributions were dumped in the collection plate, to the great delight and with the full approval of the elders. The church suffered greatly because those elders forgot that their first loyalty was to the Lord and His Word and that Deacons were to submit to rather than control and dominate them and thereby the congregation.

Wise elders will consult with deacons on important decisions regarding the work of the congregation. They should consider and evaluate the suggestions and ideas of deacons (rich and not so rich alike). However, elders fail to be bishops (i.e., overseers, superintendents) when they allow deacons or any other individuals in the congregation to pressure them into decisions that represent compromise with error or evil and that they would not otherwise have made. Contrariwise, when elders have abandoned or violated Scripture, deacons should then use all of the Scriptural influence possible to effect their repentance or their removal from the eldership.

Congregations that have Godly elders who are determined to keep the church pure and deacons who are likewise faithful to the Word are fortunate indeed—and far too few. When elders and deacons stand devoted to the Truth and supportive of one another in their respective roles, Satan will have a difficult time taking control of and destroying the unity of that congregation, which is just as the Lord planned it.

Elder-Trustee Relationships^{xxviii}

Church trustees are men to whom the congregation's real and/or physical property are legally committed in trust. Churches existed long before the concept of trustees of church property. So far as we know not a single congregation on the New Testament map owned any property, and thus trustees would have been superfluous. In more modern times, with congregations owning property involving vast amounts of financial expenditure and investment in many cases, the creation of church trusteeships has become rather common. While churches are **permitted** by law to have trustees, they are **not required** to do so, at least in my home state of Texas. I do not know what legal variables there may be from state to state concerning trustees. It is possible that some states require them. I suppose that, in those cases where a church has elders, but no trustees, the elders would be considered de facto trustees in any questions that might arise involving church property. It is possible for the elders and the trustees to be the same men.

My understanding of the role of trustees, as stated above, is that these men hold in trust the real and physical property of the congregation on behalf of the congregation. Many congregations have certain restrictions written into their property deeds. Perhaps the most common one has to do with the prohibition of using instrumental music in worship. This restriction has its roots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when liberals stole hundreds of buildings from faithful brethren. In a congregation with such a deed restriction, trustees would be responsible for seeing that the restriction was not violated.

If the elders (in a church with separate trustees) should become liberal and should try to introduce instruments of music into the worship (or other unauthorized practices or doctrines), the trustees would have the legal responsibility to oppose the unfaithful elders in order to protect the church property according to the deed restriction. However, trustees have no ruling authority in a congregation (with or without elders) apart from their duty to preserve and protect the church's property for its Scriptural functions of worship, teaching, and edification. In churches with elders, the elders are charged with the complete oversight of all of the activities of the church (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17), including oversight of the property. However, the preceding statements assume that these men will fulfill their dual charge to remain faithful themselves and to maintain the faithfulness of the congregation.

In churches with trustees, but with no elders, it is especially necessary to clearly set forth the limits of the responsibilities and powers of the trustees lest they, as sometimes occurs with committees, become a quasi-eldership. We know of one congregation with trustees that lost its

eldership because one of its two elders moved away. At least some of the trustees (one of whom was also the treasurer) began to make decisions and pronouncements without consulting the other men of the congregation. These trustees obviously took upon themselves eldership authority. Of course, there is no Scriptural authority for any such behavior.

When a church decides to appoint trustees, it has no specific Scriptural qualifications for these men to which it can turn. However, given the nature of their responsibility, obviously these should be men who both know and love the Truth, and who therefore have the ability to recognize error. No only so, but they should be men with enough backbone to protect the church's property should it ever be jeopardized, whether by attack from without or corruption from within. Trustees are human, and they can also apostatize (witness what has happened to the trustees of some of the universities operated by our brethren!). The congregation should remain vigilant for any sign of the weakening of convictions in any of the trustees, and it should replace them with faithful men without delay in such cases.

The Authority of Elders

In the two previous sections I touched on the subject of the authority of elderships in local churches, but I will now address it more directly. A few decades ago, certain brethren began to challenge the idea that elders, acting as an eldership, have any authority to make decisions in and concerning the local congregation. With one accord they cited Peter's warning concerning elders as proof of their contention: "Neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). They alleged that Peter teaches that the only authority elders can wield is through the influence of their personal example and teaching (which, of course, excludes any decision-making as an eldership).

A leader in this anti-authority push was the late Reuel Lemmons. While serving as Editor of *Firm Foundation*, he championed this view in an infamous and volatile editorial.^{xxix} Among other things, he denied that elders had the right either to meet or to make decisions relative to the work of the congregation, averring that all decisions should be made in congregational meetings. I rebutted his editorial, and to his credit, he published my response, along with some additional editorial comments.^{xxx} Among other things, I presented a study of seven Greek terms (*episkopos*, *oikonomos*, *poimaino*, *proistemi*, *peithesthe*, *hegeomai*, *hupeiko*) relating to elders, their work, and the relationship between members of the church and elders, demonstrating that all of them are laden with the concept of authority.

I further noted that 1 Peter 5:3 was not a proscription of the **exercise** of authority per se, but of the **abuse** of authority (such as that of Diotrefes, 3 John 9–10). I also emphasized

Lemmons' inconsistencies: (1) He regularly preached where elders **met and made decisions** about such things as continuing his employment, the amount of his salary, and who would preach in his absence, (2) he preached in congregations all over the country at the invitation of elderships that **met and made the decision** to invite him, and (3) that in one of his recent editorials (March 29, 1977) he had urged elderships to **make the decision** (requiring their meeting) to allow more missionaries to make their appeals for support.

Paul told the Thessalonians to “know them that labor among you, and **are over you in the Lord**, and admonish you” (1 The. 5:12, emph. DM). The inspired writer commanded the Hebrew saints:

Remember them that had **the rule over you**, men that spake unto you the word of God; and considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith.... **Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them:** for **they watch** in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account...” Heb. 13:7, 13a, emph. DM).

Only to elders in each congregation has the Lord given the weighty responsibility of being watchmen over the souls of the congregation they oversee (Acts 20:28–31), taking care of the church of God (1 Tim. 3:5), and being stewards of God’s household (Tit. 1:7).

The pattern of elderships in the New Testament church reveals the following: (1) Never one elder over one congregation, (2) never one elder over more than one congregation; (3) never more than one elder over more than one congregation, and (4) always more than one elder over each congregation (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Tit. 1:5; Jam. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1).

We must understand and honor the extent of the authority of elders. They have no power to “legislate” concerning revealed doctrine or practice of the church in the sense that the Lord has given us Divine legislation through His Word. The Lord, through the Holy Spirit, has given us the perfected revelation in His New Testament (1 Cor. 13:10); the faith has been once for all delivered to us (Jude 3). Angels or men who dare to alter it are under the anathema of Almighty God (Gal. 1:8–9). In carrying out all of the obligations God has legislated, optional expedients are available that involve human judgments. The realm of determining the most expedient way to fulfill every obligation is the realm of the elders’ authority. The practicality of the qualifications pertains, at least in part, to equipping elders to make such decisions wisely.

Furthermore, the authority the Lord delegated to elders rests in **the elders as a group** or **the eldership** in each congregation. By this I mean that individual elders, apart from their fellow elders, have no more authority in the local church than does any other member. The very

fact that each congregation must have a plurality of elders implies this conclusion, otherwise congregations would be able to have only one elder over them.

One of the elders where I preached as a very young man (the church that had twenty-six deacons, incidentally) was not particularly fond of me because of my straightforward preaching. Each time I got up to preach, he habitually assumed a comfortable position on the front pew with legs crossed at the ankles and hands clasped below his abundant abdomen and proceeded to go to sleep. The invitation song would wake him up, during the singing of which he would then proceed toward the rear of the auditorium, distributing chewing gum to the children (a very spiritual minded man, he was). He approached me on one occasion and told me my sermons were too long and that henceforth I was to preach no longer than twenty minutes. I immediately asked him if this was a decision of the eldership or his personal scruple. I knew the answer before I asked the question, which he confirmed as true. So I continued to preach as I had been preaching. As only one elder, he had no more authority over me than a twelve-year old who had just been baptized.

Elders should take care not to make decisions, state policy, approve purchases, or do other such things independent of their fellow elders. Elders who fail in this respect can destroy the “unity of the Spirit” both in the eldership and the congregation. When members ask an elder about such matters, he is always wise to indicate that he will need to consult with his fellow elder(s) before responding. **The authority in the local church resides in the eldership rather than in individual elders.**

Feeding and Protecting the Church^{xxx}

When the Lord Jesus returned to the Father, He first entrusted the church to the apostles (Mat. 16:18–19; John 14:16–18), who had the responsibility of receiving the revealed Word (John 16:13) and delivering it faithfully (Mark 16:15–16; John 17:18, 20). This Word was not only the Gospel to be given to the lost world for its salvation. It was the constitution—the law of Christ—for His church. While the apostles lived, the church was under these inspired ambassadors of Prince Immanuel (2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20). However, just as the Lord in His flesh would not be with His disciples indefinitely, neither would the apostles.

They left behind that perfected Word which is fully capable (without any direct Divine intervention or assistance) of perfecting the saints who will yield themselves to it (Acts 20:32; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). However, the Head of the church also entrusted her to other human hands upon the departure of the apostles. This grave responsibility would not be to one man or to a small council in some geographical global headquarters, but rather to a small group of men on the

local level of His church—men in every congregation of His people. These men He denominated “elders,” “bishops,” “pastors.”^{xxxii}

As previously noted, elders must meet stringent inspired qualifications before being given charge of the congregation (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–9). Also, as noted, it is their sacred duty first to engage in self-examination, then in congregational-examination (Acts 20:28). Their work involves two responsibilities to the congregation: (1) They are to feed/tend/nourish the church so that she might develop spiritually to the extent of her potential and remain pure (Acts 20:28b; Tit. 1:9b; 1 Pet. 5:2). (2) Equally important, they are to protect her from evil men and their damnable doctrines (Acts. 20:29–31; Tit. 1:9b–11).

Derelict Elders and Widespread Apostasy

The losses to liberalism the church has experienced over the past several decades could not or would not have occurred had not numerous elders (and some entire elderships) been guilty of serious dereliction of duty. It is not our intent to place upon these men a burden greater than they deserve or than does Scripture—or to discourage any from becoming elders. However, it still remains a crystal-clear and undeniable observation that, had elders led, bishops overseen, and pastors tended as they should have, the church would not be in such throes of apostasy as we see on every hand. Additionally, the fellowship crisis that began in June 2005 with the Apologetics Press scandal, sundering the long-time harmony among brethren otherwise sound in the faith, could never have occurred had elderships not made serious compromises with error.

Because elderships have failed, hundreds of congregations have been lost to error, likely never to be reclaimed for the Truth. Increasingly, elderships have shown their pleasure in keeping a preacher (sometimes at a most handsome salary) who preaches a different “gospel.” These super-sweet, ooey-goey, touchy-feely, pasted-smile, story-telling, stage-prancing, “dynamic,” after-dinner-speaker type “preachers” have been much in demand in congregational pulpits and by university lectureships in recent years. They are being supported, rewarded, and promoted by elderships and/or congregations that languish in Biblical beriberi and spiritual scurvy, so blind they are incapable of seeing their woeful condition. Instead of being on guard to protect their flocks from such wolves, so many elderships invite these wolves in to devour the sheep. The wolves are so generally welcome that they do not even have to bother putting on a sheep costume (Mat. 7:15). At the same time, good men who love the Lord and His Truth more than life—and who will preach it regardless of the cost or persecution—are encountering more and more difficulty in finding congregations that desire or will long endure their services.^{xxxiii}

Vast numbers of elders have demonstrated their fondness for the toned-down, tortured, and compromised “gospel” which is characteristic of so many pulpiteers. Such elders would not knowingly allow a man who has no better sense than to preach “the whole counsel of God” within five miles of their respective pulpits. This behavior is perhaps the ultimate demonstration of bartering one’s birthright of the pure, unadulterated Gospel of the Son of God for a mess of erroneous pottage that is not only vastly inferior, but damnable to boot.

Misguided preachers, university administrators and professors, and publishers have led the great leftward departure, but who has enabled them to do so? One group above all others must be blamed—elderships in the local congregations who either went to sleep on their watches or who chose to abandon the Truth. I stress again—the role of these men has been (and continues to be) absolutely pivotal regarding the health and welfare of the church of Christ. Bishops, more than any others, had (and have) both the opportunity and obligation to build up the churches, to prevent false doctrine and practice, and to oppose and expose them and their purveyors when they appear. Weak, ignorant, overly-benevolent, or sometimes outright liberal elders have allowed compromising preachers (and occasionally under-taught and over-zealous “youth ministers”) to continue to spew out their errors and promote their innovations, when such men (and sometimes women) should have long before been disciplined, disfellowshipped, or dismissed—or all three.

Likewise, elders have been silent about the apostasy on the various university campuses operated by our brethren. Elders have continued to promote or allow the promotion of these assembly lines that keep producing heretics. Elders go on announcing or allowing the announcement of their lecture programs and encouraging parents to send their children to them at a most susceptible time of their young lives. Faithful elders will warn their congregations about instead of promoting such schools. A large number of elderships issuing such warnings a few years ago, telling the presidents of the schools they would continue to oppose them until the schools were cleaned up, might have made a difference. Sad to say, most elderships have followed the lead of the schools and continue to encourage them in their apostasy. The digression represented on almost all of the campuses has played a major role in the apostate-liberal division in the church.

Elders are supposed to be “mouth-stoppers” of such men (Tit. 1:9–11), but many of them are “mouth-supporters” of them! They have kept corrupt preachers in their pulpits until they converted much of the church (and sometimes the elders). (Ironically, it has been the man who is determined to preach only and all of the Bible without fear or favor who is most often run out

of town by misguided elders in recent years.) Many elderships have become so numbers-happy that they are willing to allow almost anything to be taught or practiced if it will draw the crowds or keep certain ones (and their money) from leaving. Now most of those elderships would not consider inviting and/or supporting anyone besides such religious renegades. Consequently, in many places (and especially in the larger congregations and in congregations situated in the larger metropolitan areas) the church is drowning in a cesspool of error.

Elders must practice a zero-tolerance policy toward any and all religious error. Many churches have been undermined by and lost to various erroneous “isms” advocated by brethren through the years because elders were inattentive, apathetic, ignorant, or cowardly. The current monster of liberalism in the church could have been slain aborning had elders been informed, alert, and courageous enough to allow it no place at all in their respective congregations. Instead, in hundreds (thousands?) of cases they have tolerated it in its earliest manifestations as merely a harmless “different approach.”

The Duty To Be Informed

Many elders (and preachers) boast that they do not know what is “going on” in the church at large and that they do not want to know. Some seem to think that it is beneath them to even read or take part in any discussions about “brotherhood problems.” Actually, part of their responsibility as faithful flock-tenders is to know such things, yet so many consciously avoid such knowledge. If their congregations have not already paid a heavy price for such folly, it is certain that they will in time.

Elders sometimes defend such negligence by saying that they “do not like to read of brotherhood controversies” or that learning of such “makes them uncomfortable.” Often elders view the grievous propagation of error and its exposure by faithful brethren as nothing more than “personality conflicts.” Alas, far too many seem more concerned with not having their pitiful little “comfort zones” disturbed than they are with fulfilling their God-given obligations. The first-century elders may not have liked what Paul wrote that so often most definitely dealt with “brotherhood controversies,” but he nevertheless (1) wrote them and (2) expected them to read (and heed) them. Moreover, Paul, Peter, James, and John obviously expected the entire congregations to which they wrote to be apprised of their words, grievous problems and all.

The Duty To Inform, Warn, and Protect

Elders sometimes foolishly justify their failure to inform the brethren of dangerous tides and trends in the brotherhood by claiming, “We don’t have those problems here.” They should be thankful if that is so, but they could easily find one or more of “those problem” in their laps

the next day or week. Prevention of problems from such sources is far more effective and less harmful than dealing with them after the fact. Wise elderships will find and access the sources by which they may inform themselves about the “winds of doctrine” blowing about among brethren, and they will keep their respective congregations informed. No better way to do this can be found than to subscribe to such periodicals as *Contending for the Faith* and *Defender*, not only for themselves, but also for every family in the congregation.

Elderships are God’s wall of defense for His church. God has made elders watchmen for the wolves who would devour the flock (Acts 20:29–31; cf. Mat. 7:15–16). These men are accountable for congregational welfare, safety, and purity in doctrine and practice. They are therefore directly responsible to God for that which is taught in the classrooms, the pulpit, the church bulletin, and all other teaching media employed by the congregation. Although they must be men who are able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2b; Tit. 1:9), they need not do all of the teaching personally (impossible even in an average-size congregation). However, they are obligated to know and control what is being taught. This responsibility involves their use only of teachers who are both morally and doctrinally sound. They may obtain this information by personal interview, written questionnaire, or some other means, but failure to do it equals grave neglect. They dare not merely assume that all is well in these matters. It is their business as overseers and pastors to find out—to know.

One who claims to be a Gospel preacher has no excuse for perverting the Gospel and he does not repent will be damned eternally for so doing (Gal. 1:6–9). However, I reiterate that the ultimate blame for the rampant division and apostasy in the church must be laid at the feet of elders. They could (and should) have denied rotten preachers the pulpits and support they gave and are giving them. It is their business to do this—“the buck stops” with them. Many elders who are sound in the faith still seem to be in a state of denial relative to their pivotal role—they just do not seem to “get it.”

Some otherwise faithful elderships seem to see no inconsistency in inviting a false teacher for a Gospel meeting or workshop of some sort (“We won’t let him teach error while he’s here”). They allow articles by apostates to be published in the church bulletin. (They are often so ill-informed that they have no idea who the apostates are.) Even if no error is taught in such sermons or articles to which the congregation is exposed, the elders have given said preacher and/or author credibility in the minds of the informed for the times when these men teach their error.

Few elderships seem to have any policy regarding what programs/events are to be announced from the pulpit, on bulletin boards, or in the church bulletin, which announcements publicize and implicitly endorse and encourage error. Such announcements place the congregation in fellowship with the promoted error. This practice encourages members to participate in activities they should avoid and to bid Godspeed to brethren with whom they should have no fellowship (2 John 9–11).

Many elders seem to feel no responsibility concerning the content of the congregation's Website, which may contain links to heretics and errant institutions, unworthy of any favorable mention. (One is made to wonder how many elders even know what is on the congregation's Website.) The responsibility of elders involves warning brethren about brotherhood organizations and institutions that are unauthorized by Scripture. A case in point is the "Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Agency," organized and operating in the realm of benevolence on much the same order as a missionary society does in evangelism. Not only is its organization unauthorized, it has no scruples about joining hands with liberals and denominationalists. The "Lads to Leaders" program is another unauthorized organization. It feeds off local congregations and supplants them in some respects when it has its conventions. Those who participate from sound congregations are unavoidably thrown into fellowship situations with members of apostate congregations who are present.

So very many elderships have not given such matters any investigation, thought, or attention at all. All such elder apathy gives unsound men, institutions, and programs undeserved credibility and implied endorsement. Men who are "holding to the faithful word," enabling them to "exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers" do not so behave (Tit. 1:9). After decades of much negligence by so many elderships, it is no wonder so many congregations have been swallowed by error.

The Obligation To Withdraw from the Disorderly

We should contemplate with shame and sorrow how few elderships ever lead their congregations in withdrawing from erring, impenitent members, as commanded in various passages (e.g., Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 15:9–11; 2 The. 3:6, 14; et al.). It is evident that elders have often been willing to wink at immorality, sinful divisive behavior, and false doctrine, rather than deal Scripturally with it, as numerous inspired directives demand. Few indeed are the elders who have the courage to mark an errant congregation or a false teacher not a member of the local congregation.^{xxxiv} This neglect has resulted in severely weakened churches in some

cases, in congregations having fellowship with those who are not in fellowship with God in others, and in the apostasy of entire congregations on a broad scale.

Elders fail miserably if they are unwilling to lead the church boldly in its Divine obligation to withdraw from those who will not repent of their impurity of life or teaching. Ironically, the excuse often given for this failure is that to withdraw fellowship from some brother or sister will divide the church (i.e., “some will leave”). Such excusers fail to realize that “dividing the church” from the offenders is the **very purpose of the mandate**. Harboring an impenitent sinner may preserve “unity,” but it will be a “unity” that God abhors and rejects. The Corinthian church was apparently “united” in its tolerance of the fornicator (1 Cor. 5:1–2), but Paul ordered “division” (vv. 5–7, 9–11).

Illustrations of Elder-Caused Division

The delinquency of elders as described above not only effects congregational unity, but brotherhood unity as well. Elders who allow or encourage the propagation of error at home contribute to the propagation of error generally throughout the church. Congregations under such men eventually become alienated from faithful congregations with which they were once united in the Truth. This fact has been observable for many years as once-sound congregations have been captured by doctrinal error, causing faithful congregations to cease fellowshiping them.

No better illustration of this fact exists than the sad recent history of the Pearl Street Church of Christ in Denton, Texas. For more than a score of years, its name was a synonym for faithfulness all over the world, principally because of its hosting of the Annual Denton Lectures (1982–2002). In February 2001 a new eldership was appointed, consisting of four men (of which I was one). In August 2001, one of the elders made it known in an elder’s meeting that he held the direct-operation-of-the-Holy Spirit error of brother Mac Deaver. This announcement came as a great shock, the potential implications of which brother Gary Summers (Pearl Street’s preacher at the time) and I immediately perceived. Our best efforts over the next twenty-one months could not dissuade him from his error, and the other two elders elected to remain silent during most of our many discussions. Eventually, the other elders compromised and “cast their lots” with the errant elder, resulting in the departure of both brother Summers and me in May 2003.

Initially, anticipating the adverse brotherhood reaction when these matters became known, in response to a barrage of questions from many quarters, the remaining elders stoutly denied their agreement with Deaver’s errors. They removed most doubts about their position

when they sponsored the spring 2004 mailing of Deaver's *Biblical Notes Quarterly*.^{xxxv} The Pearl Street elders employed Deaver as their preacher in August 2005, thus erasing any remaining doubts about their doctrinal stance. This tragic chain of events demonstrates the way one determined dominating Diotrephes in an eldership can almost single-handedly destroy a congregation. The Pearl Street Church suffered a grievous division, leaving only a few dozen members. Additionally, few congregations or individuals (besides the small cadre of Deaver devotees) have had anything to do with this congregation since these developments, though once highly esteemed by the faithful and equally despised by the liberals. **The decision and direction of these elders destroyed a long-term, beautiful unity.**

The role of elderships in brotherhood unity has been powerfully reemphasized since June 2005, as elderships that once strongly opposed error and promoted the Truth have abandoned that noble posture. The principal issue involved has been the decision of various elderships to defend and endorse, rather than expose and oppose, a false teacher by the name of Dave Miller (as referenced and described above) in order to support the institution he directs (Apologetics Press). The behavior of the elders of the Highland Church in Dalton, Georgia, dramatically proves the foregoing proposition. As sponsors and overseers of the Gospel Broadcasting Network, they determined (perhaps sometime in 2004) to use the services of brother Miller in their programming. When the elders of the Northside Congregation in Calhoun, Georgia, questioned their planned use of him, the Highland elders elected to defend him.^{xxxvi} In the course of their defense, on October 30, 2005, they led the congregation in withdrawing fellowship from the **elders** of the Northside church (specifically **not** withdrawing from the Northside preacher or congregation—an utter absurdity and impossibility). The Highland elders thereby implicitly withdrew from every eldership, preacher, congregation, and individual citizen of the kingdom who refuses to ignore the errors of Dave Miller. Lamentably, many elderships have followed the lead of the Highland elders, and the Lord's church has experienced a grievous division that has only grown worse with the passing of time.

Conclusion

There is no greater, more demanding, or more fulfilling work in the entire world than that of serving as an elder/bishop/pastor in the Lord's church. However, the greater the potential for good if one serves well, the greater the potential for harm if one fails. I heartily commend the many faithful elders of past and present—they deserve much honor. There is likely not a more thankless task than is theirs. It has been this writer's great delight and encouragement to work with several such righteous shepherds over the years. I have also felt the burdens of being an

elder, and they are often heavy indeed. Let us encourage such worthy men, and let us pray that, in His providence, the God of Heaven will raise up more great men for this great work.

Preachers, elders, deacons, and all other members are precious to the Lord and important for the church to be what He desires it to be. However, the elders in any congregation occupy a more crucial position than any others. The Lord appointed them to nurture and to keep His church pure. The congregation is ultimately a reflection of its eldership more than of any other element or factor. If elders fail at the point of tending the flock, particularly at the point of providing it with sound teaching and protecting it from error, they fail utterly, and so will the congregation they oversee. Every such failure eventually affects the unity of the Lord's people, both at home and elsewhere.

Endnotes

ⁱ All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

ⁱⁱ It is well known that Paul included the qualifications for elders (and deacons) in his first letter to Timothy (3:1–7), who was at Ephesus at the time (1:3). Since Paul wrote this letter at least some 5–7 years **after** we know there were elders at Ephesus (Acts 20:17–38), Paul must have given the qualifications to Timothy for the purpose of replacing an eldership that had ceased to exist or of adding to the existing eldership.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17) are also described as “bishops” (v. 28, “overseers,” KJV; 1 Tim. 3:1–2; Tit. 1:5, 7). Paul charged the Ephesian elders to “feed” the church (Acts 20:28b), just as Peter instructed elders to “tend” their individual “flocks” (1 Pet. 5:1–2). *Feed* and *tend* translate the same Greek verb (*poimaino*), referring to the role of a shepherd or a pastor. *Poimaino* is the verb form of the noun, *poimen*—pastor. It is found in the plural form in Ephesians 4:11 and is rendered *pastors*. Thus the New Testament identifies elders, bishops, and pastors as the same group of men. *Pastor* is never used in reference to a Gospel preacher unless the preacher was also an elder/bishop, as was true of the apostle Peter (1 Pet. 5:1).

^{iv} W.E. Vine, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, Old Testament section ed., Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc.), 1996, p. 169 (New Testament section).

^v Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press), 1957, p. 771.

^{vi} The KJV rendering of 2 Tim. 2:15, *study to shew thyself approved, ...* while not incorrect at the time the KJV was translated, consistently misleads modern English-speaking readers. English dictionaries over the past fifty years or more define *study* primarily in terms of applying the mind to seek and acquire knowledge by reading, research, investigation, et cetera. My 1975 edition of the *Random House College Dictionary* is a case in point. Only after listing seven distinct shades of meanings and implications of *study*, all related to the foregoing definition, it gives as number 8, *zealous endeavor or assiduous effort, the actual meaning of Paul's term*. Without question, the New Testament urges us by precept and example to apply our minds to learning more of and about the Bible (Acts 17:11; 2 Pet. 3:18; et al.), but this was not Paul's aim in the exhortation to Timothy. Yet, this misapprehension, because of the word *study*, regularly causes readers to misapply Paul's statement to mean: “Study [the Bible] to shew thyself approved....” Paul's meaning is that Timothy (and we) must diligently strive in every way to live so as to have God's approval and to be unashamed servants before Him. While this diligent effort will include being good students, enabling us to “handle aright the word of truth,” Paul's

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- order to Timothy is much broader than merely “studying the Book.” Ironically, if we “handle aright” 2 Tim. 2:15, we will not limit the apostle’s exhortation to “book leaning.”
- ^{vii} This fundamental principle exposes the folly of liberals in the church of Christ who have sought to forge and force an artificial “unity” between the Independent Christian Church (ICC) and us over the past twenty plus years (and especially over the past two years). There would have been no need to seek unity with that denomination had its members 150 years ago remained devoted to the Truth. Their digression and apostasy sundered the wonderful unity that once existed. Unity will naturally follow when they become more zealous for the Truth than they are for unity or other lesser ambitions, and repent of their errors. The zeal of liberals in the church for “unity” with the ICC (in spite of its lack of respect for the authority of Scripture) is likewise utterly misspent. They may as well join the ICC, for they are already one with them in their elevation of unity over Truth. It is highly presumptuous on their part to think they can drag those of us who are still set for the defense of the Gospel along with them. But has anyone ever seen a liberal that was not presumptuous?
- ^{viii} Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament—Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1957), p. 72.
- ^{ix} Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible* (New York, NY, Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), 6:702.
- ^x S.D.F. Salmond, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Printing Co., 1980 rep.), 3:21.
- ^{xi} Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub. Co., n.d.), 3:386.
- ^{xii} Charles Erdman, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 84.
- ^{xiii} W.G. Blaikie, *The Pulpit Commentary—Ephesians*, ed. H.D.M. Spence, Joseph F. Exell (New York, NY: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950), 20:2:147. While correctly stating that *unity* here refers to “the unity of which the Spirit is the Author,” Blaikie seems to imply (incorrectly) that the Spirit produces unity in a direct manner: “In all in whom he works savingly, the Spirit produces a certain oneness in faith, in repentance, in knowledge, in their views of sin, grace, Christ, the world, etc.”
- ^{xiv} John T. Hinds, *Annual Lesson Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1935), p. 126.
- ^{xv} David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles*, ed. J.W. Shepherd (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1939), 4:71.
- ^{xvi} Leslie G. Thomas, *Teacher’s Annual Lesson Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1967), p. 55.
- ^{xvii} Portions of this section appeared in a similar form in my chapter, “Exalting Jesus Christ as an Elder,” *Exalting Jesus Christ*, ed. Don Walker (San Antonio, TX: Shenandoah Church of Christ, 1999).
- ^{xviii} I recommend the use of a prospective elder evaluation form of some sort to help brethren think seriously about the men whose names they might suggest for possible elders. A sample of such a form, containing all of the Scriptural qualifications and responsibilities of elders, may be found in the February 2000 *Gospel Journal*, of which I was editor at the time, p. 13.
- ^{xix} The nearest situation in the New Testament to the selection of elders or deacons is the selection of the seven Jerusalem brethren to “serve tables.” In this case, the apostles stated: “Look ye out therefore, brethren, from among you seven men...” (Acts 6:3). While some believe these men were the first deacons, I find no evidence to so describe them. Contrariwise, (1) their qualifications are quite different from those who were in fact deacons (1 Tim 3:8–10, 12–13), (2) if these were deacons, the Jerusalem church had deacons before and without first having elders, a situation unknown elsewhere in the New Testament churches, and (3) the seven brethren are never called “deacons.” That they were assigned a responsibility that is in keeping with that which deacons might be given is conceded. However, this fact does not make of them deacons.

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- ^{xx} I have compiled from my files over the years “A Suggested Program for Appointment of Elders,” which I published in the February 2000 *Gospel Journal*, pp. 26–28. These suggestions may be adapted for the appointment of elders and deacons or of deacons only.
- ^{xxi} For a detailed study of this practice and documentation of various congregations that employ it, see the author’s “Reevaluation/Reaffirmation of Elders?” *Leadership*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ, 1997), pp. 83–104. The cases studied include the Brown Trail Church of Christ, Bedford, Texas, that once had a deserved reputation for soundness until it enacted this procedure in 1990. It repeated the procedure in 2002. See also “An Expose of Dave Miller’s Sermon on Reevaluation and Reaffirmation of Elders,” by Michael Hatcher in *Profiles in Apostasy #1*, ed. David P. Brown (Spring, TX: Contending for the Faith, 2010).
- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxiii} For a fuller account of the effect Dave Miller and his defenders have had on unity and fellowship, see my chapter, “The Divine Nature and Fellowship,” in *Fellowship—From God or Man?* ed. David P. Brown (Spring, TX: Contending for the Faith, 2007), pp. 6–23.
- ^{xxiv} Miller, in his April 8, 1990, sermon advocating the practice at Brown Trail and in his September 23, 2005, written statement, titled “For Honorable Brethren Who Sincerely Want to Know.” Clark, in his comments as part of an Open Forum panel in the 2006 Lectures at Farmington, MO.
- ^{xxv} Marvin W. Weir, “Change Agents and Leadership.” *The Gospel Journal* 3 (October 2002): 26.
- ^{xxvi} Bauer, p. 299.
- ^{xxvii} Bauer, p. 183.
- ^{xxviii} I originally wrote the material in this section, with slight modification, for the 2001 Florida School of Preaching Lectures: “Committee/Trustee Rule and Reaffirmation,” *Do You Understand Leadership?* Ed. Brian R. Kenyon (Lakeland, FL: Florida School of Preaching, 2001).
- ^{xxix} Reuel Lemmons, “Who Calls the Shots?” *Firm Foundation* 94, 31 (August 2, 1977): 2.
- ^{xxx} Dub McClish, “Reply to ‘Who Calls the Shots?’” *Firm Foundation* 94, 46 (November 15, 1977) 6; Lemmons, “More on Who Calls the Shots?”: 2.
- ^{xxxi} I originally wrote the material in this section, though with considerable modification, for the February 2000 *Gospel Journal*, of which I was editor at the time. The MS appeared as my “Editorial Perspective,” titled “Elders—Their Crucial Role.”
- ^{xxxii} See Endnote 3 above.
- ^{xxxiii} I wrote a passage similar to this for the 1996 Bellview Lectures: “Exposition of Jeremiah 1:4–10,” *Preaching God Demands*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ, 1996), pp. 41–60.
- ^{xxxiv} For a study on the subject of a congregation withdrawing from another congregation, see my chapter, “One Congregation May Withdraw from Another Congregation” in *God Hath Spoken, Affirming Truth and Reproving Error* (Memphis, TN: Memphis School of Preaching, 1999), pp. 665–90.
- ^{xxxv} Pearl Street furnished the funds, the mailing list, and the mailing permit for Deaver’s Spring 2004 *Biblical Notes Quarterly*, a special issue defending his errors in response to our February 2004 special issue of *The Gospel Journal*, which exposed his errors.
- ^{xxxvi} I first registered my objection to the use of brother Miller by GBN in a brief note to the late brother Barry Gilreath, Sr., GBN’s Executive Director, on February 26, 2005. I did so in explaining why we could not print a full-page ad for GBN in the March *Gospel Journal*, of which I was editor at the time. Upon receiving an inquiry from Gilreath asking for further details concerning my objections, I responded on March 17, 2005, in a 9-page letter, to which I never received a response.

[Note: I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the Contending for the Faith Lectures, hosted by the Spring, TX, Church of Christ, February 24–27, 2008. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Unity—From God or Man?* ed. David P. Brown (Spring, TX: Contending for the Faith.)].