

Elders – Their Crucial Role

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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. 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). 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 (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.”

Elders must meet stringent inspired qualifications before being given charge of the congregation (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9). It is their sacred duty first to engage in self-examination, then in congregational-examination (Acts 20:28). Their responsibility is two-fold: (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).

The losses to liberalism the church has experienced over the past forty years 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 can or should bear or to discourage any from becoming elders. However, it still remains a crystal-clear conclusion that, had elders led, bishops overseen, and pastors shepherded as they should have, the church would not be in such throes of apostasy as we see on every hand.

Elderships are God’s wall of defense for His church – accountable for congregational welfare and safety – and are directly responsible to God for that which is taught in the classrooms, the pulpit, the church bulletin, and all other teaching media they supply. They need

not do all of the teaching personally (impossible even in an average-size congregation), but **they must know what is being taught**. This knowledge includes the material that is used and that which is taught in the Bible classes. Also, elders need to know that the teachers are both morally and doctrinally sound. They must do this by personal interview, written questionnaire, or some other means, or be guilty of 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.

Hundreds of congregations have been lost to error in the last four decades, likely never to be reclaimed for the Truth. Misguided preachers and professors have led the departure, but who has enabled them to do so? One group above all others must be blamed – elderships in the local congregations who went to sleep on their watches. We stress again – the role of these men has been (and continues to be) absolutely pivotal to 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 if they appear. Weak, ignorant, overly-benevolent, or sometimes outright liberal elders have allowed compromising preachers (and occasionally under-taught and over-zealous “youth directors”) to continue to spew out their errors and promote their innovations, when these men should have been sent packing long before.

Elders are supposed to be “mouth-stoppers” of such men (Tit. 1:9-11), but sadly, many of them are “mouth-supporters” of them! They have kept corrupt preachers in their pulpits till they converted much of the church (and sometimes the elders). (Ironically, it is 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 nowadays.) 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 think of inviting in and supporting any **besides** such religious wolves, further devouring the flock. Consequently, in many places (and especially in the larger metropolitan areas) the church is drowning in a sea 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 either inattentive, apathetic, ignorant, or cowardly. The current monster of liberalism in the church could have been killed aborning had elders been informed, alert, and strong enough to allow it no place at all in their respective congregations.

Instead, in hundreds of cases it was tolerated in its earliest manifestations as merely a harmless “different approach.” Many elders (and preachers) boast that they do not know what is “going on” in the church and that they do not want to know. Their congregations are paying the price for such folly.

One who claims to be a Gospel preacher has no excuse for perverting the Gospel and will be damned eternally for so doing (Gal. 1:6-9). However, we reiterate, the ultimate blame for the rampant 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 was 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 conservative 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”) or in publishing in the church bulletin an article written by such a man. Likewise, they will allow programs to be announced from the pulpit, on bulletin boards, and through the church bulletin on which false teachers are featured, which simply gives the unworthy teacher undeserved credibility and implied endorsement.

We should contemplate with shame and sorrow how few elderships ever lead their congregations in withdrawing from erring, impenitent members. It is evident that elders have all too often been willing to wink at immorality and sinful divisive behavior, as well as false doctrine, rather than deal Scripturally with it. This neglect has resulted in severely weakened churches in some cases and in apostasy of the entire congregation in many others. Elders fail miserably if they are unwilling to lead the church boldly in its Divine mandate to withdraw from those who will not repent of their impurity of life or teaching.

There is no greater or more demanding 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. We unhesitatingly 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. 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. However, the elders in any congregation occupy a crucial position more than any others. The Lord appointed them to nurture and to keep His church pure. The congregation is 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.

[Note: I wrote this MS and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the February 2000 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, of which I was editor at the time.]

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