

Elders Are Not “Lords Over” the Local Church

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Every context in the New Testament having to do with the responsibilities of elders of the church speaks of the authority of the eldership. This is plain enough in the English translations, but it becomes even more convincing when one studies the Greek terms involved. The realm of their authority is not legislative, for such belongs only to Christ (Heb. 1:1-2; Jam. 4:12, et al.). He finished his legislative work with the completed New Testament (Jude 3; Rev. 22:18-19, et al.). The authority delegated to elders relates to keeping the local church which they oversee doctrinally and morally pure (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:9-11, etc.). Theirs is a ruling, leading, stewarding, and superintending work (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:4; Tit. 1:7; Heb. 13:17). Their work necessarily includes determining expedient matters in the local church.

The authority entrusted to these men is one of the principal reasons why their qualifications are so clearly defined (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9). Said qualifications are intended to be a safeguard against appointing unworthy and unscrupulous men to the eldership. However, because of fleshly weaknesses, men of base motives are sometimes appointed who abuse the authority God placed in their hands. In other cases, men of pristine character at the time of their appointment have become power-obsessed after being appointed. In either case, the result is the same: men who seek to be tyrants over God’s people.

The Lord forbade any such spirit of tyranny in his church, whether exercised by elders, preachers, deacons, a member of the local church who is wealthy or politically powerful, or any other member. The demeanor demanded by Jesus’ law is to see how much one can serve others rather than how much power one can exert over others (Mat. 20:25-28). Since there would be a special temptation to those serving as elders to unduly wield authority over their brethren, Peter, himself an elder (1 Pet. 5:1), gives a special warning: “Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint...neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock” (vv. 2-3). To “lord it over” the church is to rule it with an iron-handed, dictatorial spirit. Let us, however, be careful to understand that this warning does not negate the overseeing authority God has given elders. Rather, it is intended to govern it, keeping it in proper limits.

In addition to Peter’s warning, certain of the aforementioned qualifications of elders would specifically preclude their running “roughshod” over the church in a high-handed,

imperious manner. Elders must be men who are gentle (1 Tim. 3:3), not self-willed (Tit. 1:7). Let the reader contrast the implications of these qualifications with the actions of an eldership that never discusses the work of the church with the church members, not even the deacons or the preacher, to obtain the benefits of their suggestions. Instead, it decides, totally independent of any counsel with others, what shall be done and how it shall be done and hands it down as an edict for all to do "because we said so." Such a spirit is ungodly as it is unwise, typified by Diotrephes, "who loveth to have the preeminence" (3 John 9). Such tactics encourage spiritual mutiny against an eldership. God-fearing, God-loving elders do not so operate.

Let it not be inferred from the foregoing comments that elders must always consult the whole church or even any part of the church before they can make any decisions. Such a practice, being erroneously urged by some, makes elders mere figureheads and transfers authority God has given them to a "majority vote" arrangement. However, elders are wise when they stay in touch with the thinking of sober-minded, Scripturally sound and wise members outside of the eldership, calling upon this valuable resource to assist them in their decisions. Such a practice will also preserve them blameless to the charge of "lording it over" the church.

The abuse of authority by some elders is being unjustifiably used by some brethren to deny them any authority. However, it is never valid to use the abuse of a principle to argue against the principle itself. The principle stands sure in the Scriptures: God has delegated caretaker, decision-making, authority in the local church to elders and it is a repudiation of Scripture to deny it. Nevertheless, we must remain aware that the authority God has given to elders is subject to abuse. Such an awareness will help spare the churches of the devastating effects of peremptory pastors.

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