

Do Elders Have Authority?

Dub McClish

There is a strong element in the church which denies that elders have any authority in a local congregation, except that which inheres in their example (which equals no authority at all). Often the advocates of this view seek Scriptural support in 1 Peter 5:3: "Neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you but making yourselves ensamples to the flock." Admittedly, this warns about the misuse of authority by elders and emphasizes that elders must be good examples to the church. However, this is a "far cry" from the "no-authority" doctrine they seek.

The immediate context of this verse establishes the Scriptural authority of the eldership in the local church: "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, . . ." (v. 2a). The word "tend" means to do the work of a shepherd. Have shepherds no authority over their flocks, concerning food and water, moving/staying, entering/leaving the sheepfold? "Exercising the oversight" means to manage or superintend what is entrusted to one's administration. Authority necessarily inheres in this responsibility. A superintendent or manager cannot do his work only by "example"; neither can God's spiritual overseers. Verse 5a also speaks of the authority of elders: "Likewise, ye younger, be subject unto the elders" (Note: the Greek term is actually plural, "the elders"). The context is discussing "official" elders, not merely "older men," as some aver. The injunction is to "be subject" to the elders. Peter used the same expression ("be subject") in commanding saints to obey the laws of men (1 Pet. 2:13). He also used a different form of this same word to instruct servants to be subject to their masters and wives to their husbands (1 Pet. 2:18; 3:1). The authority of human laws, masters, and husbands goes far beyond mere "example"! By the same twisted "logic" that denies the God-given authority of elders one could as well argue that rulers, employers, and husbands have no God-given authority.

The authority "termites" who keep eating away at the authority of elders would leave the local congregation without effective leadership, an easy prey for almost any spiritual "wolf" that might come along. Could it be that this is the aim of those who are so zealous to deny the Scriptural authority of elders? Indeed, 1 Peter 5:1-5 does not favor their position. Rather, on either side of Peter's warning of the abuse of authority (v. 3), he placed strong balancing statements which confirm the authority of elders (vv. 2, 5)! The very warning of the abuse of their authority implies that they have authority!

[**Note:** I wrote this article for and it was published in *The Edifier*, weekly bulletin of Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, June 29, 1989, of which I was editor.]

Attribution: From *thescripturecache.com*; Dub McClish, owner and administrator.