"Elders in Every Church"
Dub McClish

The words of the title above are from a passage in which Luke describes work that Paul and Barnabas did as they made their way back to Antioch on Paul's initial preaching trip. Speaking of the churches they had established, the inspired historian stated:

> And when they had appointed for them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed (Acts 14:23).

No church of the Lord's people had elders when it began. Therefore, each congregation in its early days has had to function with some other expedient arrangement for decision-making in optional matters. Given the Scriptural teaching concerning the authority of men in both the home and the church (1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22–24; 1 Tim. 2:8–12; et al.), the only way for congregations devoid of elders to function is through the decisions of its male members.

This arrangement is not always satisfactory, since the weakest and least informed brother has an equal voice (i.e., vote) with those who are strong as they discuss various matters, and it is possible that these brethren may sometimes outnumber those who are spiritually mature. Operating a church through men's meetings should always be considered a **temporary arrangement** until such a time as two or more men in the church can meet the Scriptural qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:5–11)—and be thus appointed.

If we had nothing besides the appointment of "elders in every church" by Paul and Barnabas, it would be sufficient to indicate that this arrangement is the Lord's plan for the government and guidance of His churches. After all, Paul taught the same thing "everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17b). But there is much more. When Paul left Titus in Crete, he specifically charged him "that thou shouldest set in order the things that were wanting and appoint elders in every city" (Tit. 1:5). Apparently, the absence of elders in the congregations was one of the things "that were wanting."

Though he did not state the same charge to Timothy at Ephesus, he implied as much by stating the qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1–7) and then giving instructions regarding the church's behavior toward them (5:17–22). Paul addressed the elders of that church on his third preaching trip (Acts 20:17–35). The Jerusalem and Philippian churches had elders (Acts 11:30; 15:2–4; 21:18; Phi. 1:1). Various congregations to which Peter and James wrote had elders (1 Pet. 5:1; Jam. 5:14). Hebrews 13:17 can hardly refer to any besides elders. It appears that any

churches in apostolic times that had no eldership simply did not at the time have men qualified thus to serve.

It is evident that the **Scriptural pattern** is for each congregation to have its own eldership—assuming the presence of qualified men. Moreover, from the foregoing, the conclusion is inescapable that the appointment and rule of such elders is not optional; **it is obligatory**. The Lord does not allow each congregation to decide whether it shall or shall not have an eldership when qualified men exist. While it is axiomatic that a congregation can function faithfully without an eldership, it is appropriate to ask, "How long can a church **remain** faithful without an eldership?" Scripture clearly implies the answer: "Only as long as it does not have two or more men who meet the elder qualifications."

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