

What Are Elders For, Anyway?

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Introduction

The foregoing title seems appropriate when we hear and read what some say about elders. When elders refused to let brethren teach their “anti” hobbies in the mid-20th century, they attacked the authority of those elders by labeling them as “pontifical bishops.” Subsequently, the all-out assault on all authority by the 1960s generation has apparently had its effect on attitudes in the church toward elders and their authority.

In 1973 the elders where I preached announced at the conclusion of the Sunday morning assembly that the church sadly must withdraw from a brother. Before the assembly could be dismissed, another brother stood from his pew near the back of the auditorium and challenged the authority of the elders to take such action without first “consulting” the membership; he then took the withdrawn-from brother and his wife out to lunch.

The late Reuel Lemmons had moved far to the left doctrinally by the time of his passing several years ago. One of the early signs of his “evolution” was his infamous *Firm Foundation* editorial (August 2, 1977), titled, “Who Calls the Shots?” In it he allied himself with radical anti-authority voices in the church that were growing ever louder. The issue of the authority of elders continues to surface. I have had several conversations with brethren in a distant city concerning grievous problems in their congregation directly relating to this subject.

The Scriptures set forth in the clearest possible terms the authority which the Lord has delegated to elderships (not to individual elders) in local churches. Often resistance to this authority surfaces mainly when it becomes necessary for the elders to lead the church in withdrawing from impenitent sinners, as in the case above. I have observed three classes of those who thus resist:

1. Some folk are simply ignorant of what the New Testament teaches. They do not study their Bibles. They do not read any sound publications that would inform them. They never attend an edifying, faith-building lectureship, and perhaps their local preacher has neglected the subject.
2. Others react emotionally rather than rationally, perhaps because the disciplined brother or sister is kindred or a dear friend. (“I don’t care what you say about him; he’s my friend and I’m going to defend him,” as an **elder** where I preached once said about a false teacher in the congregation.) They may defend the sinner because they have the same sins in their own lives (per millions of defenders of Bill Clinton’s outrageous wickedness).

3. Still others reject the authority of elders because they want to have free rein to teach their heresies, commandeer congregations, and restructure them as denominations. Their principal “argument” is that the only “rule” elders may exercise is by their example (which is no “rule” at all). These brethren “despise dominion” (2 Pet. 2:10).

We obviously need to study this subject seriously. I submit that it is God’s will that a plurality of elders/bishops/pastors serve as superintendents over each local congregation in which Scripturally qualified men may be found. This oversight involves keeping the church free from doctrinal error and moral pollution, as measured by the New Testament, as well as the authority necessary to fulfill this oversight. There are four distinct major areas of their work, which overlap to some extent. Although it is clear enough from the English, it will be further helpful to examine the Greek words the Holy Spirit used to convey eldership authority. For the sake of brevity, I will cite definitions given by Joseph Henry Thayer in his recognized standard, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1889 edition.

Overseeing, Supervising

One of the principal words the Holy Spirit used in reference to elders is *bishop*, used in Acts 20:28 as an interchangeable term for *elders* (v. 17). The Greek word for *bishop* is *episkopos*, a compound of the preposition *epi* (“over”) and *skopos* (“watcher,” “watchman”). Thus a bishop is one who watches over or oversees, per Thayer: “an overseer, a man charged with seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, superintendent” (p. 243). Elders are to “tend the flock of God, exercising the oversight [*episkopeo*]” (1 Pet. 5:2). Has an overseer, guardian, or superintendent no authority concerning his charge?

Bishops are also called God’s “stewards,” and in this responsibility they must be blameless (Tit. 1:7). The Greek word rendered “steward” is *oikonomos*, a compound of *oikos* (“house”) and *nemo* (“to dispense, manage”). Thus Thayer says: “the manager of a household or of household affairs; esp. a steward, manager, superintendent” (p. 440). Authority is inherent in these terms. If elders have no authority to manage or superintend that which is placed in their charge, these terms are meaningless, and elders are mere figure-heads – exactly that to which the liberal, anti-authority gang wants to reduce them.

Shepherding, Feeding, Tending, Teaching

Elders have the responsibility toward their respective congregations that literal shepherds have toward their respective flocks of sheep – that of feeding and tending them. The Greek word for “feeding” (Acts 20:28) and “tending” (1 Pet. 5:2) is *poimaino*, of which Thayer

says that literally it means “to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep,” but metaphorically, “to rule, govern...of the overseers (pastors) of the church” (p. 527). Another form of this word is translated “pastors” (Eph. 4:11). Have shepherds no authority over their sheep? The connotation of authority inherent in this word is readily seen in the Lord’s words to Thyatira: “I will give him [who overcomes] authority over the nations: and he shall rule [*poimanei*] them with a rod of iron” (Rev. 2:26–27).

This “feeding/tending” elders are to do refers to the spiritual food and attention they provide the flock, either by themselves or by others of their appointment. Each elder must be “apt to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) and able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers” (Tit. 1:9). Some first-century elders were fully supported, enabling them to “labor in word and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Elders must be aware of what is being taught by those to whom they delegate this responsibility. Good elders will not allow the flock to be fed religious locoweed. They must protect the flock from “ravens wolves” dressed up as sheep, whom the Lord calls “false prophets” (Mat. 7:15). Therefore, they must be on the lookout for “grievous wolves” who seek to prey on the flock—including such who may arise within the eldership—drawing away disciples after themselves (Acts 20:29–31). How can elders even begin to carry out these responsibilities with no “authority” but their own examples? The figure of a shepherd implies eldership authority.

Ruling, Leading

The authority to rule and lead is also seen in several other words that relate to elders. One of these is *proistemi*, a compound of *pro* (“before”) and *histemi* (“to stand”). After giving the literal meaning (“to set or place before; to set over”), Thayer says it means “to be over, to superintend, to preside over, [A.V. rule]” and correctly cites 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 3:4–5, 12, and 5:17 as illustrations of its use, all of which refer to elders (p. 539). *Proistemi* is rendered “over you” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and “rule” in all of the passages just cited in 1 Timothy. This word clearly connotes authority, and it tells us what elders are to do—they are to rule.

Hebrews 13:17 is such a key passage on this issue that liberals work hard to convince us that it does not even refer to elders. However, none others in the congregations are ever said to “watch in behalf of [our] souls” (cf. Acts 20:28–31; Tit. 1:9–11). This passage contains three significant words indicating the authority of elders.

We are commanded to “**obey**” the elders. *Obey* is from *peitho*, which, in the middle voice (as here) means “to listen to, obey, yield to, comply with” (Thayer, p. 497). Thayer not only lists Hebrews 13:17, but also James 3:3, as illustrations of its use. James 3:3 speaks of our putting a bridle in a horse’s mouth that it may “**obey**” us. One may as well argue that the rider has no authority over the horse as to argue that elders have no authority over the congregation.

We are commanded to obey those who have the “**rule over**” us. *Rule* is from *hegeomai*, meaning “to go before; to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over” (Thayer, p. 276). In the same citation Thayer illustrates the use of this word in reference to one who is a “prince, of regal power” (Mat. 2:6) and of a royal governor or viceroy (Acts 7:10) in the political realm. Another form of this word is rendered “governor” in relation to Pilate (Mat. 27:2) and to Joseph (Acts 7:10), both of whom had great authority over others. Thayer then references the application of *hegeomai* to elders: “so of the overseers or leaders of Christian churches,” and cites Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24. Obviously, this term **includes** the “influence” and “example” of one in authority, but it goes much further than mere moral persuasion.

The saints are to “**submit**” to those who “rule over” them and who “watch in behalf” of their souls. *Submit* is from *hupеixo*, a compound term composed of the preposition *upo* (“under”) and *eiko* (“to yield”), occurring only this one time in the New Testament. The prepositional prefix intensifies *eiko*, making it mean “to yield to authority and admonition, to submit” (Thayer, p. 638). The reason we must submit is because we are under their rule.

Initiating, Executing Discipline

Elders have a very specific duty to protect the church and to keep it pure from both doctrinal and moral corruption. They are to “take heed” to their respective flocks, feed, and be on the lookout for grievous wolves (Acts 20:28–31). They are to rule their own houses well, demonstrating their ability to “take care of the church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5). They must be “able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers... [described as] unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers...whose mouths must be stopped...” lest they overthrow entire families (Tit 1:9–11).

Congregations without elders can also carry out church discipline, as the case in Corinth illustrates (1 Cor. 5:1–13). However, where there are elders, as the watchmen, leaders, rulers, shepherds, overseers, superintendents, and stewards, it is their duty to **lead the church** in this grave and necessary responsibility. How can they claim to be “taking care of” the church if they let impenitent, immoral, doctrinally corrupt members continue among the flock? Paul strongly

rebuked the Corinthian church for failure to act and commanded the entire church to meet immediately and deliver the fornicator to Satan. Had there been elders at Corinth, no doubt Paul would have rebuked them for their unseemly delay and ordered **them** to **lead** the church in the necessary action.

While watching for all moral and doctrinal threats to the congregation is not **all** the work of elders, it is most definitely a **significant part** of it. If such cannot be corrected by convicting them of their errors, then they must be purged out (1 Cor. 5:7), marked and avoided (Rom. 16:17-18), withdrawn from (2 The. 3:6, 14), and refused (Tit. 3:10), as plainly included in “taking care of the church of God.”

Conclusion

Elders sometimes abuse their authority just as political rulers do. Peter warns against all such abuses (1 Pet. 5:3). However, we must not understand Peter’s caution to be a cancellation of eldership authority. And yes, sometimes people have been withdrawn from who were not deserving of it. However, a fundamental rule of hermeneutics is that the abuse of a Scriptural principle can never be used rightly as an argument against the principle itself. Elders certainly have no authority to write or implement any new doctrine. Their task is to keep the church within the boundaries of the “the faith...once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3), and they have the God-given authority to fulfill this task. Let us respect the Word of God in regard to elders and their authority and thank God for good men who approach this task seriously.

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the December 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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