

Elders and Roots of Apostasy – Acts 20:28–30

Dub McClish

Introduction

As all readers surely know, there have been many waves or cycles of apostasy since the establishment of the church, and each of these has placed more and more distance between man and the God of Heaven. Even since the church of our Lord has been restored, various apostates have continued to arise. Hence, the need to study the causes of apostasy and the history of the efforts to restore the New Testament Church.

The topic discussed here is based on Acts 20:28–30. This famous charge of Paul to the Ephesian elders reads as follows:

Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.¹

This passage links purity in doctrine with purity in church organization by making doctrinal purity the responsibility of bishops in the local congregation.

The church cannot be restored and remain true to Christ without restoring the New Testament pattern of church organization or “government.” The way the church is organized/governed may be thought of as the skeleton of the spiritual body of Christ. If the skeleton is not properly formed and maintained the body will be crippled and deformed so far as glorifying God is concerned. There is no point of Truth where apostasy can or will be tolerated by true lovers of Christ. However, one of the most crucial, pivotal, and fundamental matters that must be guarded is the Scriptural organization of the church. The effects and implications of changing the very structure of the church’s government are staggering and far-reaching, indeed. If the church apostatizes at the point of her organization this will sooner or later inevitably affect every other aspect of the church. How correct, therefore, is the implication that the roots of apostasy relate to elders and church organization.

Apostasy Predicted and Described in the New Testament

Apostasy is predicted in general terms with considerable frequency in the New Testament. The Lord Himself began such warnings. As He began drawing the Sermon on the Mount to a close, he said: “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but

inwardly are ravening wolves. By their fruits ye shall know them..." (Mat. 7:15-16; cf. Mark 13:22). Practically every New Testament writer issues such warnings – Paul leading the way.

Besides the warning to the Ephesian elders, Paul boldly wrote in numerous passages of the apostates and the apostasy that would come. None of these is plainer than his words to Timothy: "But the Spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies..." (1 Tim. 4: 1-2; see also 2 The. 2:3; 2 Tim. 3:1, 8; 4:1-4). Likewise, James, Peter, and Jude echoed Paul's warnings (Jam. 5:19; 2 Pet. 2:1-2; Jude 17-18).

The inspired writers also describe apostasy as already at work in the first century church, although it was seemingly composed of diverse and scattered elements. The first major attempt to change the doctrine and practice of the church came from certain baptized Jews who sought to bind circumcision on Gentile converts as a condition of salvation (Acts 15:1ff). It was against the background of this heresy that Paul described the move of the Galatians away from the Gospel (Gal. 1:6-7).

Paul described numerous and varied apostates and their evil work, sometimes preserving their names for all time. At times he told us how to deal with such evil men and sometimes how he dealt with them (Rom. 16:17-18; Eph. 4:14; Phi. 3:2, 18-19; Col. 2:4, 8; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; Tit. 1:10-11). Peter, John, and Jude added their descriptions to those given by Paul (2 Pet. 3:16-17; 1 John 2:1.8-19; 4:1; 2 John 7, 9-10; Jude 4). Signs of apostasy at work are seen in almost all of the seven churches of Asia by the close of the first century (Rev. 2-3). Even these many passages do not begin to exhaust the New Testament's warnings and descriptions of the reality, prevalence, and danger of apostasy.

Perhaps the most specific New Testament prediction and warning of departures from the faith is found in Acts 20:30, quoted above. After the general prediction that some false teachers would work their way into the church in Ephesus, Paul then issued the dire warning that "...from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." This passage informs us of a **specific place** of apostasy – among the elders or within the eldership ("from among your own selves"). It informs us of the **specific procedure** of the apostate elders – they will teach twisted, false, deceitful doctrines ("speaking perverse things"). Finally, Paul's words warn us of the **specific purpose** of these ungodly bishops – they would seek converts to their damnable doctrines ("to draw away the disciples after them"). With such plain and particular warnings to and about elders who become

apostate, it is little short of amazing that brethren have been so slow to identify this source of so many grave problems in the church through the centuries, reaching even to the present. I now turn your attention to some of these problems.

Roots of Apostasy Relating to the Eldership

It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when and at what point of doctrine and practice apostasy began to affect the church universally. However, there seems to be general agreement among church historians that it was in the area of church organization. In order to study the apostasy in this regard even briefly, we must understand the Lord's pattern for the organization of his church.

Although we do not have the record of their appointment, we first read of the existence of elders in the Judean churches (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22). The Scriptures consistently reveal that there was a plurality of elders in every church that had elders and that the ideal was for every church to have elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phi. 1:1; Tit. 1:5). These men had responsibility only over the respective congregations of which they were members (Acts 20:28). No New Testament church ever had one elder ruling over it, nor was it ever part of a plurality of churches ruled over by one elder or by a body of elders. Each congregation was autonomous and independent of all others, under its own eldership and bound in fellowship to other congregations only through their common obedience to the Gospel and submission to Christ.

Elders in the churches were also referred to as "bishops" (Acts 20:17, 28; Phi. 1:1; Tit. 1:5, 7) and "pastors" (Eph. 4:11; see also any standard Greek-English lexicon on *poimainein* in Acts 20:28 and on *poimonein* in 1 Pet. 5:2). While these terms. (e.g., *elder*, *bishop*, *pastor*) are not synonymous, the inspired writers use them interchangeably with no distinction as to "rank" of these men in each congregation. Although the Judaizers led many astray and caused great damage, as long as some of the apostles lived, the church was spared an apostasy that would affect the church generally. However, not far into the second century history shows departures beginning that would be far-reaching in their implications and consequences. Paramount among these was a change relating to elders in the local churches, beginning with a distinction between "elders" and "bishops."

Williston Walker dates the development of this distinction at least as early as the uninspired epistles of Ignatius, written between A.D 110 and 117.² In his epistle to Smyrna, Ignatius exhorted, "Do ye all follow your bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father, and the

presbytery [i.e., “eldership,” DM] as the Apostles, and to the deacons pay respect.”³ Notice that *bishop* is singular while *presbytery* is plural, reflecting the elevation of one elder above the others. This “monarchical bishop” concept obviously developed between the time of Paul’s and Peter’s epistles and those of Ignatius.

It was but a brief step from the concept of a single ruling bishop over one church to the extension of his rule over a plurality of churches, first in a city, then in ever-widening territories. This effect resulted in the confederation of more and more churches under the rule of one man whose authority thereby increased exponentially. This departure destroyed the Lord’s wise system of “checks and balances” for keeping the church pure. The congregations under one bishop lost their independence and autonomy as ordained by Christ through the apostles’ doctrine, which independence effectively prevents any simultaneous universal apostasy.

Likewise, the safeguard of having more than one man overseeing the individual congregations was lost. When one of these monarchical bishops further apostatized (as some inevitably did), there were no fellow-overseers to halt his apostasy, as under the inspired arrangement for congregational government. Further, all of the churches under his authority followed him in his departures, thus creating the opportunity for apostasy on a grand scale which, in fact, is what occurred.

Another corruption of vast influence relating to elders began even before the monarchical bishop concept. As early as Clement of Rome’s first epistle to Corinth (A.D. 93–97), also uninspired, some were advocating the doctrine of the apostolic succession of elders and bishops. On the coupling of these two perversions of church government and their effect, Walker comments as follows:

It was the union of these two principles, a monarchical bishop in apostolical succession, which occurred before the middle of the second century, that immensely enhanced the dignity and power of the bishopric. By the sixth decade of the second century monarchical bishops had become well-nigh universal.⁴

Grasping bishops continued to enlarge the borders of their dioceses until finally, Boniface III had gained sufficient power to proclaim himself “universal bishop” – pope – in A.D. 606. From this single fountain – namely, the incremental corruption of the eldership and church organization – the major part of apostasy in doctrine and practice has flowed. Let me

emphasize the point that any tampering with the Scriptural order of church government or the eldership arrangement has the most far-reaching destructive effect on the church.

It is a never-ending struggle to maintain the Scriptural concept of the eldership and church government. Currently, various factors are at work that would drastically alter the role of elders and the Scriptural pattern of government for the local church. We will consider these under four topics:

The Qualifications of Elders

Some view the qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and in Titus 1 as mere “guidelines” for the kind of men who should be appointed. While granting that no man will be found who perfectly possesses every qualification specified, nonetheless both principal passages on this subject state that **each** bishop “**must**” possess every qualification to some degree (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7). To treat these qualifications as merely general “guidelines” will fill elderships with unqualified men, causing the church grievous harm.

Others have taken the position that as long as the eldership as a whole possesses all of the qualifications, this will satisfy the demands of the passages. This view would allow one man to serve who has only one or two of the qualifications, as long as, scattered among the other elders, the missing traits were found. Practically speaking, this would mean that in an eldership of six men, only one need be married and five could be drunkards! This concept violates the obvious intent of the qualifications as well as the statement of the qualifications passages. To Timothy, Paul wrote: “**The bishop** therefore must be without reproach...” (1 Tim. 3:2, emph. DM), indicating that each individual bishop must possess each of the qualifications (cf. Tit. 1:6-7).

The Work of Elders

Some view the work of bishops as a “board of directors” charged primarily with making decisions relating to spending the church’s money. While bishops will need to meet frequently and must make many decisions, if they never do more than this, they will fail their God-given purpose. The role of elders must be understood as **functional** rather than merely **official**.

As the overseers and shepherds of God’s people they must be doers, taking the lead in every good work They must be teachers and caretakers of the church (1 Tim. 3:2, 5). By qualification, they must practice hospitality, exhort in sound doctrine, convict gainsayers, and reprove false teachers (Tit. 1:8-9, 11, 13). They must watch themselves and watch over and feed the church (Acts 20:28-31). These responsibilities will require countless hours in study (of the

Word of God and of the “issues” circulating among brethren), in visiting, in planning, in counseling, and similar activities.

The Authority of Elders

A generous amount of teaching denying the Scriptural authority of elders has been disseminated in the past few years, spearheaded by a brother by the name of Reuel Lemmons. He (along with a few other outspoken brethren) denies that elders have any decision-making power and contends that their only “authority” is that which they exercise by their good example.⁵ This heretical teaching has played right into the hands of those who despise being under any authority in the church. Where followed, this doctrine leaves the church at the utter mercy of any sort of spiritual wolf that wants to prey on the flock. It is a sad commentary on the IQ of the brotherhood that brethren would even listen to such obviously anti-Scriptural rubbish.

When a rebellion against the elders of the church with which I was working, occurred in 1979 (Pearl St. Church of Christ, Denton, TX), the leaders of the rebellion used some of brother Lemmons’ articles to bolster their contention. Likely many other such problems were caused and are being caused by this false doctrine.

Of course, elders have no right to make new spiritual laws, for Lord has provided all legislation needed for His Kingdom (Eph. 1:22-23; et al.). However, these men are charged with seeing that the church under their oversight remains faithful to the Law of Christ (Tit. 1:9-13). Since these men have oversight and are charged with doing the work of shepherds toward the church (Acts. 20:28), and since the Lord has given them the “rule” over the souls under their care and those under their care are commanded to obey them (Heb. 13:17), it must follow that they have authority to make decisions for the church in matters of expediency and judgment. Such is involved in “taking care of the church” (1 Tim. 3:5). When the church at Antioch sent help to the brethren in Judea, it was taken to the elders for their distribution in the wisest way (Acts 11:29- 30).

Have you ever noticed that those who deny the right of elders even to meet apart from the church assembly – much less to make decisions regarding the congregation – have no scruples against preaching in Gospel meetings for, sending the papers they edit to, and/or accepting pay from churches in which elders have met and made such decisions? Such brethren should either refuse the result of such decisions and meetings of elderships or stop inveighing against such meetings and decisions as unscriptural. If the heretics are allowed to destroy the God-given authority of elders in the local church, they are reduced to nothing but honorary pious figureheads. Every congregation is then left to the mercy of the loudest mouth of the most

self-willed personality and whatever errors he might wish to propagate. I submit that this is already the case in many churches because elders have refused and/or neglected to exercise the Scriptural authority the Lord delegated to them. I can conceive of few threats more sinister regarding the purity of doctrine and practice than the attack against the authority of the eldership.

Another extreme concerning the authority of elders relates to the abuse of authority on the part of some elderships (which has perhaps prompted some brethren to adopt the radical *no-authority* position). Peter warned his fellow-elders: "...neither as lording it over the charge allotted you but making yourselves ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). Any Gospel preacher who works under several different elderships over a number of years will likely encounter some elders who have a dictatorial spirit, reminiscent of Diotrephes (3 John 9-11). However, **the abuse** of a Scriptural doctrine, principle, or practice can never rightly be used against the **proper** use of same.

That elders have Scriptural authority in their respective congregations does not in any way mitigate their responsibility to be great servants and influential leaders by means of their exemplary lives. Wise elders will certainly counsel with members of the church so as to weigh their thinking in making decisions about expedients. They will also delegate much of the practical, detailed decision-making to deacons and to others. However, the final responsibility for making decisions in the local church and for moving the church forward will always reside in the God-given authority of elders.

The Jurisdiction of Elders

Some hold that by being an elder one thereby has authority to make decisions and issue pronouncements concerning the church, apart from his fellow-elders. This idea is very near the concept of the "monarchical bishop" discussed earlier. The Scriptures speak of "**elders**," not "an elder" as having oversight and ruling (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). An elder by himself has no more authority than any other member of the church. Brethren may have more respect for him than for other brethren because of his good life or Bible knowledge, but Scriptural authority is vested in the **eldership**, not in any individual elder.

If the elders decide on a matter and ask one of the elders to announce it or write a letter about it **on behalf of the eldership**, that is a different matter. Many years ago, an elder told me that I must limit my sermons to 20 minutes. I asked him if that was a decision of the elders or his individual judgment. He told me that it was his own decree and in talking with the other

two elders I learned that they disagreed with him about this matter. I felt no obligation whatever to limit my sermons to 20 minutes. Had I done so I would actually have failed to be in submission to a majority of the elders.

Another abuse of the jurisdiction of elders occurs when elders and deacons and/or other members of the church meet together, and all present are allowed to “vote” on the matters being considered. When deacons outnumber elders (as is often the case) it is obvious that they can control the decisions that are reached. This circumstance not only will happen, it has happened and is still happening. If elders have Scriptural authority in the local church (and they do), then their meetings with deacons and others to discuss “church business” should be understood as just that – mere discussion meetings rather than decision-making meetings.

The latest perversion relating to the jurisdiction of elders is the concept I will call the “metropolitan eldership.” Actually, this is an old corruption that has its roots in the perversions of Scriptural church government in the second century. Instead of having a single “metropolitan **bishop**” over all of the churches in a city, this view advocates a “metropolitan **eldership**” over all the churches in a city or an area.

Alvin Jennings has been the principal advocate of this heresy among our brethren in recent years, setting forth this concept in 1981 in a little book, titled, *3Rs of Urban Church Growth*. He suggested that a single eldership should oversee all of the congregations (be they 1 or 100) in a metropolitan area, including the administration of all affairs and money involved. Under this eldership there would be lesser “congregational elders” in local congregations and a single “house elder” over smaller neighborhood “house churches.”⁶ Brother Jennings wrote and published a book (March 1985), titled, *How Christianity Grows in the City*, which he calls “an expanded edition” of the aforementioned book. He dedicated the latter volume to the Crossroads-oriented church in Boston, Massachusetts, the members of which, he said, “...above all others of my acquaintance...have effectively implemented ...” the plan he has set forth.⁷

As previously noticed, the New Testament pattern of church government requires a plurality of elders (assuming qualified men are available) to serve in each local church, whether it is a “house church” with five members or a congregation with five hundred members. Paul and Barnabas “appointed for them elders in every church” in Asia Minor (Acts 14:23). Since Paul taught the same thing “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17) and since the other apostles were inspired by the same Holy Spirit, we can but conclude that this was the universal and perpetual plan. When we read of the elders in Judea, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Philippi, or “in

every city of Crete” (Acts 11:30; 15:2; 20:17; Phi. 1:1; Tit. 1:5) we correctly understand these references to be in harmony with the pattern.

This concept of a “metropolitan eldership” over dozens or scores of congregations in an area is just as unscriptural and as dangerous as the monarchical bishop arrangement. If a majority of an eldership in a single congregation apostatizes (as many have), they will take only that one congregation into apostasy. However, if a majority of the “elders” of a “metropolitan eldership” departs from the faith, it will immediately affect all of the churches under its control. This perverted plan for the eldership is so far from the Lord’s plan that one might think none of our brethren would give it any favorable attention. Wrong! Many brethren are just like the Areopagites of Athens who “spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (Acts 17:21). Alvin Jennings has told this “new thing” (at least for our times), and according to him, many brethren are hearing it. His first book completely sold out and he has published an appendix in his enlarged edition containing many “testimonials.” I earlier mentioned the implementation of his plan in Boston, and his book tells of other places that are trying it. The Boston Church is exporting their hybrid Crossroads metro-eldership perversion all over the world by means of the churches they have established. Such a movement is underway in the area where I live (Dallas-Fort Worth, TX).

Those who love the Lord, the Truth, and the church must be aware of the many assaults that are being made on the Lord’s plan for government of His church through qualified elders. We must resist them tirelessly lest they capture the minds of more undiscerning and spiritually weak brethren.

The Work of Elders and Apostasy

The primary work of elders is to oversee or superintend the congregation, which is actually the meaning of the word, *bishop* (*overseers*, KJV; Acts 20:28). Their work involves being pastors or shepherds, which not only means to keep sheep, but to rule (*poimanei*, Rev. 2:26–27) or govern as a shepherd would his sheep. Their work is compared to that of stewards who are managers or superintendents of the property of another (Tit. 1:7). By means of two distinct Greek words (i.e., *proistemi*, *hegeomi*) the New Testament teaches that these men are to go before, rule, or be over others (i.e., *proistemi* in 1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:17; 1 The. 5:12 and *hegeomi* in Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). Christians are instructed to “obey” these men (Heb. 13:11). To balance this God-given authority these men are warned not to behave as tyrants (1 Pet. 5:3; cf. 3 John 9–11).

The principal functions of elders in their respective local congregation are summed up in Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders as follows (Acts 20:28, 31):

1. Take heed to the flock
2. Oversee the flock
3. Feed the flock
4. Guard the flock from wolves, whether within or without

It is obvious from these facts that theirs is the function of nourishing the church they oversee and keeping it free of all impurities, as measured by the New Testament.

The Lord intended for elders in each local church to be the primary line of defense against every threat to the faith. This is why Paul charged the Ephesian elders to take heed to themselves first (Acts 20:28). Elders in the Lord's church must be diligent students of God's Word. There is no way they can hold to the faithful Word (Tit. 1: 9) if they don't know what it teaches. Neither can they feed, exhort, or teach others in that which they themselves do not know (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:9).

None (including elders) can recognize and refute error and its proponents (Tit. 1:9-13) unless they know the Truth well. Not only must elders study the Word of God diligently, but they should also subscribe to and read Scripturally sound brotherhood periodicals, listen to recorded sermons by faithful preachers, and when possible, attend true-to-the-Bible lectureships. Such materials will keep them current on trends, issues, and identity of false teachers against which they must protect the church.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the responsibility elders have in feeding the flock (Acts 20:28). This includes what is taught by every teacher in every classroom, what is published in the church bulletin, what is preached from the pulpit regularly, what is preached from the pulpit in Gospel meetings and lectureships, and even what sort of "seminars," "workshops," and other programs in nearby congregations are announced and endorsed.

Woe unto those shepherds who invite a wolf to prey on their flock! In most cases lack of available information cannot be used as an excuse for so doing. Several men have been parading around the brotherhood for 20 or 25 years with their false doctrines and some elders are still pleading ignorance about them. Some elders (as well as preachers and school administrators) claim that they are too interested in "spiritual things" and the souls of men to "keep up with the issues." I can't see much interest in "spiritual things" when men willfully

remain ignorant of damnable heresies and their purveyors. Nor do I see a great love for souls demonstrated when those charged with their care choose to remain unprepared to protect them.

The apostasy now so rampant among us could have been largely stifled several years ago. Had elders kept themselves informed on the growing liberalism and then steadfastly refused to let those who teach error or who would not teach all of the Truth occupy the pulpits and classrooms of their respective congregations, many congregations could have been kept in the faith. The churches today that will demand and support nothing more or less than all the Gospel, are those in which elders have kept up and stood up!

Elders who have neither the time nor the inclination to study diligently and to stand staunchly for the Truth and against error ought to resign or repent and in some cases, perhaps both. It is not enough to pat your preacher on the back privately when he preaches a sermon that worldly or liberal brethren can't stand. As an elder, mount the pulpit following your preacher and let the whole church know that the elders support such preaching completely. Even if your preacher knows you support him, the whole church also needs to know it.

Elders, if your preacher is preaching the Truth, he is doing his job. Encourage, commend, and defend him or you will answer to God for not doing so. If he is not preaching the Truth, talk to him and insist that he do so. If he will not do so, send him on his way and tell him why. Then get someone who will preach the "whole counsel of God." (Incidentally, it is unvarnished deception and hypocrisy for elders to give a glowing recommendation to a compromising preacher they have just fired, thus encouraging some unsuspecting church to hire him and his errors. It is no less dishonorable for elders to highly recommend a faithful preacher they have fired because he dared preach the Truth, so as to help hasten his departure!)

As important as preachers are in strengthening the church through sound teaching and in exposing false teaching, their work and influence will always be insufficient by itself. An eldership that will not uphold Truth when it is preached will largely undo the faithful preaching that might be done. Likewise, an eldership that will not oppose false doctrine when it is taught to its congregation is in the camp of the enemy. Truly, the fate and future of the local congregation depends upon its bishops for weal or woe, for truth or error, for faithfulness or apostasy.

Conclusion

The importance of appointing only qualified men as elders is underscored in Paul's charge to the Ephesian bishops. There is no way an eldership can be equal to its responsibilities

if any one of them falls short of the Spirit's requirements. Indeed, if the qualifications are not strictly followed, then the men appointed have been made pastors by men, rather than by the Holy Spirit. If the church is to remain faithful to Christ it will be through the careful work of dedicated elders. No wonder Paul wrote, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). With this sentiment all lovers of the Truth are in hearty agreement!

Endnotes

1. All Scripture Quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.
2. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 47.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 48.
5. Reuel Lemmons, "Who Calls the Shots?" *Firm Foundation* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Pub. House). Aug. 2, 1977, p. 2 [482]; see also my response, *ibid.*, Nov. 15, 1977, pp. 6 [726], 11 [731].
6. Alvin Jennings, *3 Rs of Urban Church Growth* (Ft. Worth, TX: Star Bible Pub, Inc., 1981). pp. 103-104.
7. Alvin Jennings, *How Christianity Grows in the City* (Ft. Worth, TX: Star Bible Pub., Inc., 1985), p. 2.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Fifth Annual Southwest Lectures, hosted by the Southwest Church of Christ, Austin, TX, April 13-16, 1986. It was published in the book of the lectures, *The Church and the Restoration Movement*, ed. Bill Jackson.

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