

The Authority of Elders

Dub McClish

Introduction

The problem of authority is always with us. Most of the world does not even recognize the existence of God anymore, much less His authority. There have been those in the church through the years who have sought to destroy the delegated authority God has given to bishops in the local churches, but generally, such influences were rather isolated. However, parallel to “anti-authority,” “anti-establishment” philosophy of the 1960s among many worldlings, there has been an even louder cry from within the church against the authority of elders. The following quotations from one well-known brother are indicative of this assault:

What authority do elders have over their flocks which that flock does not willingly give them? None!... Did any of us ever consider where we get New Testament authority for elders making decisions?... We are of the opinion that questions are safer in the hands of the “church” than in the hands of any ship.... None of the qualities mentioned in either Timothy or Titus have to do with decision-making (see **Endnote** for the source of the foregoing quotes, DM).

While some opine that the church is suffering from a growing “authority syndrome,” it is my judgment that the more dire threat is a growing “anti-authority syndrome.” I submit that God places a plurality of elders/bishops/pastors over each local church in which men of Scriptural qualifications are found. I further submit that these men are charged with keeping their respective churches free from doctrinal error and moral pollution and with making decisions relative to the expedient exercise of the work of the church. Let us consider the Scriptural evidence.

Elders and Elders’ Meetings

Some have hinted, while others have openly affirmed, that there is no Scriptural basis for elders even to meet separately from the church in order to make decisions affecting the church. The first time elders of a congregation are mentioned is in Acts 11:30. Luke writes that the contribution of the church in Antioch for the brethren in Judea was sent “to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.” It was sent **for** any who had need but sent **to** the elders. Why? I conclude that they were to properly administer it, which required some decision-making. Some like to use the “Jerusalem Conference” (Acts 15:1–29) as an example of a decision reached by the “whole church,” but careful reading proves otherwise. The church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas primarily to the “apostles and elders” to settle the question of circumcision (Acts 15:2).

They first reported on their work to the whole church (v. 4), but when the legalists raised the issue of circumcision, Luke states that the “apostles and elders were gathered together to consider of this matter” (vv. 5–6). This was a separate meeting from that of verse 4. Paul’s record supports this conclusion (Gal. 2:2, 9). Later, “the multitude” again listened to Paul and Barnabas as well as to James (Acts 15:12–13) and expressed their agreement with the letter that was to be circulated to Gentile brethren (v. 22). Luke describes the letter as “ordained of the apostles and elders” (16:4). Clearly, there was a separate, private meeting involving both elders and apostles in which this matter was decided, rather than leaving it to a congregational vote.

As Paul returned from his third preaching trip he stopped at Miletus, where he called to him the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17). Upon reaching Jerusalem, he met with the elders there (21:18). Obviously, it was not an uncommon practice for elders in the early church to meet separately from the church to discuss church business.

Words Describing Elders and Their Work

The words chosen by the Holy Spirit to describe elders and their responsibilities are words that indicate the authority God has given them. Consider the following listings of these terms, with their respective definitions, all from famed lexicographer, Joseph Henry Thayer:

1. *Episkopos* (and kindred forms), translated “bishop,” “overseer,” “oversight” (Acts 20:28; Phi. 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1–2; Tit. 1:7; 1 Pet. 5:2): “An overseer, a man charged with...seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent; ...specifically the superintendent, head or overseer of any Christian church” (p. 243). Clearly, *overseer* and *superintendent* are authority-laden terms.
2. *Oikonomos*, translated “steward” (Tit. 1:7): “the manager of a household or of household affairs; especially a steward, manager, superintendent...to whom the head of the house or proprietor has entrusted the management of his affairs, the care of receipts and expenditures,... a bishop (or overseer) is called *oikonomos theou*, of God as the head and master of the Christian theocracy” (pp. 440–441). If elders cannot make decisions or set policy, how can they be overseers, superintendents, managers, or stewards?
3. *Poimaino* (and the related noun, *poimen*), translated “feed,” “pastor” (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2): “to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep; ...to rule, govern: of rulers, ...of the overseers (pastors) of the church, ...to furnish pasturage or food; to nourish” (p. 527). When shepherds see one of the flock straying towards a precipice, have they no authority to prevent a fatal fall? When they see a wolf devouring the lambs, must they call all of the flock together before they can decide that he must be stopped and the best way to stop him (John 10:12)? Notice the use of *poimaino* in Rev. 2:26–27: “...to him will I give **authority** (*exousian*) **over** the nations: and he **shall rule** (*poimaino*) them with a rod of iron...” (emph. DM). Admittedly, the word **includes** the element of feeding and tending, but also of that of **ruling with authority**.

4. *Proistemi*, translated “over,” “rule”: “to set or place before; to set over; to be over, to superintend, preside over, rule: 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 The. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4” (p. 539).
5. *Peithesthe*, translated “obey” (Heb. 13:17). The form in this passage is in the middle voice, meaning: “to listen to, obey, yield to; comply with...Heb. 13:17; Jam. 3:3” (p. 497). James 3:3 describes the response of the horse to the bridle, clearly a response to authority. Congregations are to **obey** their elders, but why so if they have no authority?
6. *Hegeomi*, translated “rule over” (Heb. 13:17): “to lead, to go before; to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over: a prince, of regal power; a governor, viceroy, chief; leading as respects influence, controlling in counsel; ...the overseers or leaders of Christian churches” (p. 276). Admittedly, this word **includes** the persuasion of one’s influence, but it is also translated “governor” (Mat. 27:2; Acts 7:10). It is a word connoting authority.
7. *Hupeiko*, translated “submit to” (Heb. 13:17): “to resist no longer, but to give way, yield; to yield to authority and admonition, to submit” (p. 638). Thus saints are to do in relation to their elders instead of trying to overthrow their authority. Each of the foregoing terms is either laden with authority or shows the proper response to the authority that God has given to elders.

Elders and “Church Discipline”

Three key passages of scripture place the responsibility of leadership in discipline in the local church upon elders. Paul warns the Ephesian elders: “...grievous wolves, ...speaking perverse things, will draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore, watch ye...” (Acts 20:29–31). A qualification of every elder requires that he know how to rule his own house so that he may “take care of the church” (1 Tim. 3:5). Also, in the setting of the qualifications of elders, Paul wrote that elders are to convict the gainsayers (unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers who must be silenced) (Tit. 1:9–11). Elders who realize their Scriptural mandate will not allow the church to be fed doctrinal poison while they timidly refuse to stop its dispensers. Those who would deny the authority of elders deny them the right to protect the flock from such dangers. If these words do not enjoin elders to lead the church in matters of discipline, giving them the authority to carry out the duty, what words would? Further, how can such great responsibilities be fulfilled without some sober, prayerful, decision-making meetings?

In my judgment it is most likely that the ones opposing the authority of elders with such zeal are ultimately aiming at their disciplinary leadership. If the authority of elders can be so undermined that they are too timid to exercise discipline where needed, or, if when they attempt it, the church has been so conditioned by false teaching that it will not follow the elders in said discipline, then the church is at the mercy of any doctrine or practice that any one might wish to establish. A great famine of Scriptural discipline among the churches already exists. It is

difficult to imagine what sort of worldliness one would have to practice or what false doctrine one would have to promote in order to draw even the mildest reproof in most churches. I suggest that a major contributing factor to this sad condition has been the gradual rising tide of teaching against the authority of elders. This has both caused some elders to be uncertain of their own God-given authority and some members of the church to reject the authority God has given these men.

Practical Considerations

Churches can admittedly function without the leadership of elders, but they are almost always handicapped. It is the general, long-standing, and, I believe, correct view of the matter, that churches without qualified elders exist in an immature state. The ideal projected in the New Testament is to have scripturally qualified elders who function as true spiritual leaders in every church (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5). This leadership **innately** includes decision-making. Those who presently are blaspheming this role of elders are very inconsistent when it comes to practicalities. Some of these men are preachers who were employed to preach by elders who met by themselves and made the decision to hire them. The last raise in pay such preachers got (and accepted) was a result of a decision of the elders. The Gospel meeting invitations they receive are a result of the decisions of elders. One very well-known preacher who has spoken out so forcefully against the decision-making role and the authority of elders in general, nonetheless urges elders to **make the decision** to subscribe to the paper he edits for the entire church they oversee. He sends it to them without hesitation when they **so decide**.

It is neither practical nor Scriptural to leave the fate of a church in the hands of a “majority vote” arrangement where spiritual neophytes, doctrinal extremists, 12-year-old boys, and others have as much voice as a loyal, seasoned saint, in spite of the fact that the church has elders. To prevent this very situation must surely be one reason why the Lord placed the local church under men who meet strict qualifications, thereby proving their loyalty to the Lord and His word. However, it is the stated intent of some to allow elders no more authority in a church than that of the newest, weakest, most radical, or youngest member thereof. Should they succeed in their plans it is very doubtful that any of them would long be content to live with the unscriptural situation they helped create because of its manifest impracticality.

Abuses of Authority

Those who reject all authority of elders except that exercised by “influence” or “example” often remind us of Peter’s warning: “Neither as lording it over the charge allotted

you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:3). The application usually made of this statement is to the effect that since elders are not to "lord it over" the flock, this precludes any exercise of authority. If this verse forbids the very authority that several other passages enjoin, then we have a serious contradiction in the Scripture. Contrariwise, there is no conflict at all between this verse and the authority-charged verses previously considered. The truth taught by Peter concerns the **proper exercise** of authority by elders, to keep them aware of the possible temptation to abuse it. Anyone who works under several elderships over a period of years will likely encounter an elder or two who has a tyrannical spirit. I certainly have done so in more than one instance. In spite of the warning against the abuse of authority, it will likely continue, because elders are human beings like the rest of us. However, an **abuse** of authority can never be rightly used to offset the **Scriptural use** of authority. Elders must certainly exercise the powerful leadership to be found in being an "ensample" (*tupos*, i.e., type, pattern). They are to represent to both the world and the church just what a genuine Christian is, and there is great power in such leadership. However, this power of example does not at all diminish the authority God has given them.

Conclusion

I have produced Scriptural evidence that elders possess authority over the local church. I have shown that there is both implicit and explicit teaching in the New Testament demonstrating that elders are to meet and make decisions concerning the work of the church they oversee. Rebellion against the Word of the Lord is rebellion against the Lord himself (John 12:48). Likewise, rebellion against God's appointed leaders is rebellion against God (Num. 16:1-35). With these truths before us, it is not difficult to see why the qualifications of elders are so strict and varied and why the saints are commanded to obey and submit to such men. To rebel against them or to incite others to rebel against them out of selfishness, stubbornness, pride, jealousy or any other sinful motive is to rebel against the authority of God.

Wise elders will counsel their brethren and weigh their wishes in making decisions about major matters of expediency. 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 in matters of expediting the work and keeping the church true to The Book will always rest upon the church's elders/bishops/pastors.

Work Cited

Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. New York, NY: American Book Co., 1889.

Endnote

The statements quoted in the "Introduction" above are excerpted from the August 2, 1977, editorial in the *Firm Foundation*, a brotherhood periodical (founded 1884, ceased publication 2008). This MS is based on an article I wrote in 1977, which article was prompted by the following circumstance: The *Firm Foundation* editor, Reuel Lemmons, titled his editorial, "Who Calls the Shots?" It was a bold attack on the Scriptural authority of elderships in local churches. I deemed it to be filled with such egregious and dangerous error that it required a response, which I composed. I enclosed my reply in a letter to brother Lemmons on August 31, 1977, asking him to print it in a subsequent issue of the paper. He replied, "I am not adverse [*sic*] to running it if you can cut it down to 5 pages" (it was 10 pages long). He also said, "You make some good points," but added, "I, of course, will reply to it." I condensed my original submission and resubmitted it, which, to his credit, he ran as promised. It was widely reproduced and circulated among concerned brethren at the time.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS by request for and it was published in the October-November 1981 edition of *The Restorer*, ed. Gary Workman.]

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