

Churches with No Elders

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The question is sometimes asked, “Can a church Scripturally exist if it has no elders/bishops?” This very practical question deserves a Scriptural answer. I have no doubt that the Lord desires every congregation to have its own elders. Titus was left in Crete to “appoint elders in every city” (i.e., every church) (Tit. 1:5). Timothy apparently was to do the same in Ephesus (1 Tim. 3:1-7). The Philippian church had bishops (Phi. 1:1), as did the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2). On their first preaching trip, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” they established (Acts 14:23). These examples are more than sufficient to establish the pattern.

However, this does not mean that a church is necessarily unscriptural if it has no elders. In every case cited above, it is evident that none of these first century churches had elders at their beginning, but such were appointed sometime after each church was established. Surely, none are prepared to argue that the Philippian church (whose first members were apparently all women [Acts 16:13-15]) was unacceptable to God until such a time as some men were converted and sufficiently qualified to become elders. So also, with the churches of Asia Minor, Crete, and all the others.

This is not to say that God is pleased with every church which has no elders. It has sometimes happened that men in a congregation are qualified to serve as elders, but due to some ungodly circumstance (i.e., a wealthy brother who controls the church and does not want any interference with his control), they are not appointed. However, if a congregation does not have men who meet the Lord’s qualifications for elders, He certainly does not want **unqualified** men appointed. Each man thus considered/appointed **must possess all the qualifications** to serve as an elder who is acceptable to God (1 Tim. 3:2).

The old saying, “It is better to be Scripturally ‘unorganized’ than to be unscripturally ‘organized’ as a congregation,” has much truth in it. Few factors (if any) have been the source of more congregational problems than the appointment of men to serve as elders who were unqualified for the office. Yet, some seem to continue to falsely reason that it is better to have men lacking in one or more of the Holy Spirit’s qualifications as elders than to have no elders at all. If this is so, then there is no point in even having the qualifications of these men specified in Scripture. They are not only listed once, but twice – further emphasizing their absolute

necessity. A congregation ought to appoint elders as soon as it has at least two men who qualify, but **not one moment sooner**. In the meantime, it can certainly conduct its work in a manner acceptable to the Lord.

[**Note:** I wrote this article for, and it was published in *The Edifier*, weekly bulletin of Pearl Street Church of Christ, Denton, TX, February 2, 1984, of which I was editor.

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