

THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

David Long

About the author...

David has labored with the church in Higginsville, Missouri since 1997. He graduated in 1992 from the Memphis School of Preaching. David labors with others in the area in the International Bible Studies work and the Mid-West School of Biblical Studies. He and his wife have three children.

Jesus said that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18). In Acts 2 we find that He did exactly that. Jesus is the Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). Jesus is the chief Shepherd of the church (1 Peter 5:4). But under the chief Shepherd are shepherds of each local congregation. The Bible teaches that each local congregation of the Lord's church is to be overseen by qualified men called elders, bishops, pastors, shepherds, or presbyters. Where there were qualified men, elders were appointed. The Bible says, "*And when they had ordained them elders in every church...*" (Acts 14:23). Paul told Titus, "*For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee*" (Titus 1:5). The subject for this study is the authority of the elders. Do they possess authority? The answer is yes. But let it be understood that the authority of the elders rests in the eldership as a whole, not in one individual. There is no one-man rule in a local congregation and each elder is subject to the eldership. Let it also be understood that the authority of the elders is limited to one congregation. While there are to be elders in every congregation, they have the oversight of the "*flock which is among you*" (1 Peter 5:3). The elders of congregation "A" do not oversee congregation "B" or any other congregation but congregation "A" only. The Bible teaches that there is no larger organization of the church than the local church, and elders have the oversight of the local church, and their authority is limited to it only. Now let's look at New Testament terms which show elders do possess authority. The Greek word *EPISCOPOS* is used in Acts 20:28. It is the word "bishop" or "overseer." It means "an overseer, a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian or superintendent" (Thayer 243). Also in Acts 20:28 the word *POIMAINO* is used. It is the phrase "to feed." Peter used this word in 1 Peter 5:2 when he told his fellow elders of the various congregations in the five provinces of Asia Minor to "*Feed the flock of God which is among you.*" It means "to feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep, to rule, govern" (Thayer 527). It comes from the word *POIMEN* which means, "a herdsman, esp. a shepherd; metaph. the presiding officer, manager, director, of any assembly" (Thayer 527). Brother Robert R. Taylor, Jr. in his book *The Elder and His Work* says concerning this word,

Quite literally the word means to shepherd the flock. Does anyone think the Palestinian shepherd was void of all authority in the daily shepherding of his sheep? Was he minus authority in seeking out grass and water for their daily sustenance? Was he void of authority in protecting them from preying animals and from robbers? (175).

PROISTEMI is used in 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17; Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12. It means "to be over, to superintend, preside over" (Thayer, 539). *HEGEOMAI* is used in Hebrews 13:7, 17. It is

the word “rule” and it means “to lead, to go before, to be a leader, to rule, command, to have authority over” (Thayer 276). Also in Hebrews 13:17 the word *PEITHO* is used. It is the word “obey” and it means “to listen to, obey, yield to, comply with” (Thayer 497). Also in Hebrews 13:17 the word *HUPEIKO* is used. It is the word “submit” and it means “to resist no longer, but to give way, yield; metaph. to yield to authority and admonition, to submit” (Thayer 638). There are other terms but these should be sufficient to prove that elders do have authority. But what is the nature of their authority? Elders do not have authority to change God’s laws. They cannot add to or take away (Revelation 22:18-19). They are to see that God’s law is carried out. Brother Robert Taylor Jr. put it best when he wrote,

It is not legislative authority in the realm of doctrine, but it is authority to see to it that the legislation of the Lord as set forth in the Sacred Scriptures is respected. It is surely in the manifestation of authority in the realm of human judgment or expediency, in the area of the generics of the gospel and their decent and orderly execution. (175-76).

Brother Roy Deaver wrote,

Every obligation involves an element of expediency, human judgment. Relative to the expediency involved in a congregation’s obligations, elders have the authority. God established the obligation. The obligation has an element of expediency. Within this area of expediency, in carrying out God’s will as it relates to the congregation, elders have the authority. (255)

But what about 1 Peter 5:3 where the Bible says concerning elders, “*Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock*”? Doesn’t this verse teach against elders having authority? No, it teaches against the abuse of authority. Brother Guy N. Woods wrote,

The words, “lording it over” (ASV) translate a Greek word which means to rule highhandedly and autocratically and from an arrogant and domineering spirit. Men in positions of power are often tempted to do this, an example of which will be seen in 3 John 3. (155)

There are those who teach from 1 Peter 5:3 that elders have authority but it is by example only. Of course to teach such an idea is to ignore all the terms that we have talked about in this article. If their authority is in their example only then I don’t see how they have any authority. That doesn’t make any sense in light of all the terms that refer to their authority. There are those within the body of Christ who are rebels when it comes to the authority of the elders. The Bible teaches that “*rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity*” (1 Samuel 15:23). God does not take rebellion lightly. Rebellion is disrespect and disregard of authority. To rebel against those whom God has delegated authority is to rebel against God. In Numbers sixteen we have some people who challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron. That challenge was considered a challenge against the authority of God because God had appointed them as leaders. It is no less true today concerning the elders. Elders have the delegated authority from the word of God to “*Feed the flock of God which is among*

you, taking the oversight...” (1 Peter 5:2). To rebel against them as long as they are doing God’s will is to rebel against God. I have heard of members who leave and go some where’s else because they did not like a decision the elders made regarding something that was not a matter of faith. Isn’t there something wrong with that? Do we think that the church is to be governed democratically? When members of the local congregation properly submit themselves to Christ, they will realize that the church is not a democracy, and they will support the eldership in all that they scripturally do, realizing that these men have been given a serious charge. The Bible says, “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you*” (Hebrews 13:17).

Works Cited

Deaver, Roy. *Are we Moving Away From The Cross of Christ*. Bellview, FL: Bellview Church of Christ (1988).

Taylor, Robert R. Jr. *The Elder and His Work*. Ripley, TN: Taylor Publications (1989).

Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House (1977).

Woods, Guy N. *Questions and Answers, Volume II*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate (1982).