

The Responsibility of Elders In Facing Issues

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It is very evident that there is a widespread misconception of the work of elders. To be an elder in the biblical sense of the term, is much more than wearing a title. It is a function, a work to be done. When one ceases to function then one has ceased to be an elder and should no longer claim to be. In Acts 20:28-30, Paul notes some of the primary duties of elders. As "overseers," they were to "take heed" unto themselves. This would involve serious attention to their responsibilities in this great work, making certain that they were conforming to God's will in the matter. They were also told to "feed the flock." Just as a literal flock will weaken and die without food, so will the spiritual flock; a congregation of God's people. One of the qualifications of an elder is to be "*apt to teach*" (1 Timothy 3:2). As applied to an elder, it means to be "skilled in teaching" (*Vines 619*). This involves the knowledge necessary to teach. One can hardly teach that which he doesn't know. Closely related to this qualification is Paul's statement to Titus, "*Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers*" (Titus 1:9). This is highly important.

To serve as "overseers" effectively it is essential that elders be knowledgeable and able to teach. Not only is this necessary in order to "feed the flock," but to be able to withstand the "gainsayers" and so protect the flock against this danger. Peter points out that the elders are to "*Feed the flock of God . . . taking the oversight thereof.*" He also says that it is not to be done by "*constraint, but willingly...*" Rather than being "*lords over God's heritage*" they are to be "*ensamples to the flock*" (1 Peter 5:2-3). It cannot be expected that the flock will rise above the example set forth by the elders.

As rulers of the congregation, the elders "*watch for your souls as they that must give account...*" (Hebrews 13:17). It goes without saying that if elders are to "watch" for the souls of the flock, they must know those who make up the flock. It is also true that there must be a deep concern for everyone. If signs of spiritual sickness occur, attention should be given as quickly as possible, in order to bring about a cure and prevent a worsening of the condition, which could result in spiritual death.

If elders are to accomplish their highly important and God-given task, it is necessary for the flock to "obey" and "submit" to their oversight (Hebrews 13:17). When we examine the various words and terms used with regard to elders, it is clear there are high standards that they must reach, and their work can be readily seen.

If we will be honest with God and with ourselves, we must admit that there is a most serious problem within the church today due to the lack of qualified elders. The nature of the problem is such that it can be rightfully called...

THE ELDERSHIP CRISIS

The lack of qualified elders is not something new, but the failure to carry out God's plan for elders in the church has become much more serious in the past two or three decades. The statement that "Elders are the greatest problem within the church today," is being heard much more often now. I agree with this statement and will point out some of the reasons why I do so. Those churches, which have true, God-approved elders who are doing the work which God intended, are fortunate and blessed with one of the greatest of blessings. On the other hand, congregations which are not so blessed, and do not have competent leadership among the men, are in a very precarious state. It would be most interesting to know just how many scriptural elderships would be found if a hundred congregations were surveyed. I would not attempt a guess as to the exact number, but I fear it would be a frightening few. Many of our brethren would agree with this assessment. We are seeing the tragic results of this condition, in that congregations are leaving "the old paths" as never before in our lives. It is so sad that many have become denominational in so many ways and yet claim to be Christ's church. Elders, if they function as God intended, will take their work seriously, always striving to the utmost to fulfill their duties. When this occurs, congregations will prosper in spiritual growth and maturity, and numerical growth will result. When this is lacking; when the elders do not function properly, the devil will be successful in bringing great hurt and lack of progress within the congregation. We shall note a few things, which are happening today due to the eldership crisis. This is not to say that all these things are true in every congregation, but some are in many. In some instances a number of problems are evident in a single congregation.

Lack of proper teaching: A primary duty of elders is to see that the flock is properly fed, but in general we are no longer "People of the Book," as we once were. Had the elders in Ephesus heeded Paul's warning and admonitions to them, the church would no doubt still be meeting there today! They were told to "feed the church of God" (Acts 20:28). They were warned of grievous wolves that would enter. They were cautioned of departures from the faith that would creep into the eldership. They were told to watch. But did they? They apparently either ignored such warnings or later forgot them. It is evident that people are not studying as they should and much of what is being learned is not in harmony with God's Word. Not only is proper feeding not being provided, in some instances elders (?) are actually bringing in false teachers. This is happening right here in the Kansas City area with sister congregations, as well as the rest of our country. In

some cases elders do not know what is being taught in classes. Teaching material is not examined closely. Unreliable versions of the Bible are being used more widely. Meetings with teachers, by the elders, in some cases never take place. Sometimes elders are not capable themselves of teaching.

Church discipline is not practiced: We are in a crisis when elders do not lead the church in the discipline of disorderly members. Most of our leadership even seems hesitant to publicly combat moral wickedness. (James 4:7.) Sin is vaguely referred to in abstract terms. Sinners are knowingly tolerated in numerous congregations (I Corinthians 5:2.) Discipline is sadly neglected in many congregations. This situation has led to much confusion in the public mind toward the church. They do not see the uniqueness of the Lord's church. This is such a common problem that when discipline is exercised, it is certainly the exception and not the rule. Members can be involved in all sorts of sinful practices and elders often never do a thing about it. Elders should take the lead in discipline, and see that the members participate.

Lost sheep are not sought: It is not uncommon for members to drift away and elders put forth no effort to find them and bring them back to a state of faithfulness (Acts 20:28). All members have a responsibility in this area, but elders are to take the lead; to set an example.

Fellowship with error is allowed: If the New Testament teaches anything (and it certainly does), it teaches that faithful Christians cannot fellowship error (Ephesians 5:11). Yet members may have fellowship with very liberal congregations and have no rebuke from their elders who are supposed to "watch" for their souls. Announcements of activities of liberal congregations are sometimes made by those claiming to be sound. If the elders allow this to happen and do not warn those of their flock, they are guilty of neglect.

False teaching is allowed: Some elders will not take issue with false teachers, seemingly thinking that if nothing is said, the false teaching will simply go away. In the last 30 years, preachers, elders and congregations decided it was not best to debate false teachers, to deal specifically with false religions, or even to deal openly with false doctrines. To them, false doctrine just does not seem to be bad (II Timothy 2:16-17). The teaching of error by preachers, teachers, or any member should not be tolerated (Titus 1:10-11) "*not for an hour*" (Galatians 2:5).

Input from the congregation is not desired: The church is not a democracy, but people cannot be led effectively when they do not express their thoughts, concerns and goals. In close relation to this is the failure to keep members informed. In some instances there is never an opportunity given for members to be informed about the work of the church and various things related to it. The work of elders is to lead, not to drive. There is a big difference.

Elders standing for error: Not only is error sometimes tolerated, the number of elders who blatantly uphold and teach error is increasing. Some of our most vocal false teachers are allowed

access to congregations because the elders themselves are false teachers (Acts 20:29). The members who allow this to be are not guiltless.

Untaught elders: Some elders do not "hold *fast the faithful Word*" because they have never been taught. They are not able to "convince" anyone by "sound doctrine." The ability to recognize truth from error is sometimes lacking. In my estimation, this has contributed greatly to the spread of error.

Uninformed elders: With all the error that is floating around in our brotherhood today, elders who are not informed as to what is going on are running a great risk. A false doctrine can be brought into a congregation and take root without it being known by the elders until it is too late to deal with it effectively. Elders who are too busy to keep informed, are just too busy!

"Lord's over God's heritage:" God has given elders authority to "rule" over the flock (Acts 20:28). About this there should be no doubt. But this authority is not as a dictator. Most members of the church resent being "bossed" in their congregational relationship. Whereas it is not difficult to "submit" to elders who serve as exemplary leaders, submitting to those who rule with an "iron hand" is a different matter. If the awesomeness of the responsibilities in serving as an elder was given serious thought, the desire for assuming unauthorized power might be curbed.

Failure to support preachers: If a preacher is preaching and teaching the truth with the right motive, it is for the good of the congregation that the elders let it be known that they stand behind the preacher. A preacher should never be left out on a limb when the truth he presents is not accepted by some members. The elders should stand by him. I've known this to happen. If the preacher is not preaching the "*whole counsel of God*" (Acts 20:27), he should be stopped immediately. Error is never deserving of any more time!

Special interest influence: In some cases the elders may listen to certain individuals or groups while closing their ears to others. Perhaps a very liberal contributor may carry more weight than one who is not able to give as much. Sometimes just one or two members have enough influence that they can make a big difference in the decisions made by elders. "Kin folks" can often influence decisions. This should never be the case.

Lack of trustworthiness: Every member of the church should be trustworthy, but with those serving as elders it is a **must**. It is a sad day when elders do not keep promises or even state things, which are not true. This should never happen, but unfortunately, sometimes it does.

The Solution To Problems With The Eldership

We have noted a great many problems and others could be mentioned. But these problems could be solved by submitting completely to God's Word in the matter. If men were selected to serve as elders in accordance with God's qualifications, problems, for the most part, would be solved. It is

that simple. Problems arise when men take the matter into their own hands and select, or allow men to assume the position of an elder when they are clearly not what God has demanded to serve in that all-important capacity.

If ever there was a time when those who love the Lord and His church should do everything within their power to improve the elderships within the church, it is **NOW!** It is already too late for many eternity-bound souls who have been led away from the way of righteousness. No doubt there are many men who could become qualified elders if only their love for God was strong enough that they would be willing to make that their goal. True spiritual growth and maturity is desperately needed.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The foregoing has not been written to discourage men from serving as qualified elders, but rather to encourage such, and to call attention to the great need for more elders. I am convinced that godly elders constitute one of the greatest things which can be done to contribute to the well-being of the church. Men who are qualified to serve, or who could qualify themselves, should think seriously of their duty.

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