

Scriptural Role Of The Elders

'Go, gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, "The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob appeared to me"' (Exodus 3:16).

Back in the days of Moses, elders were the mature teachers and tribal leaders. They were first mentioned soon after Jacob died (Genesis 50:7), and were a Senate of the people in Moses time and that continued throughout Hebrew history. The Hebrew word 'ath-zqni' meaning 'old ones' is the same word used to describe the elders in the New Testament. In the New Testament Christian church, the eldership continued as ministers and overseers (Acts 20:17). The elders ran the early churches but it was the missionaries (apostles) who were the 'heads' after Jesus. The missionaries like Paul were the ones who taught, rebuked and went from church to church. In fact, the early church relied heavily on letters written by the apostles; some those letters becoming the New Testament. The early churches did not have one head pastor like the churches do today. Appointing elders in the modern church is usually done by the one self-appointed pastor who is often the founder of a particular church, but that is not scriptural. The scriptures make it very clear that Jesus is the Head of the church (Ephesians 5:23), and the elders had the responsibility of overseeing the churches, then called assemblies.

The elders had to be exemplary men with one wife and obedient children. The practice of polygamy was still legal 2,000 years ago, but the church, through the apostles were disallowing Christians to continue having polygamous marriages. There are people who believe 'one wife' means the elder is not to be a divorced man who has remarried, but this verse does not mention divorce. It is more likely to be referring to the practice of polygamy, which is still practiced in some countries in the Middle East today, but is illegal in Christian nations. There is a scriptural list of responsibilities and duties the elders were committed to. An elder or overseer, also called a bishop, had to be sensible and wise, temperate; not having a bad temper, he had to be modestly dressed, he had to show hospitality to fellow believers, he had to be above reproach, he had to be a good teacher of the Word of God, he had to be a good leader, he had to be humble, not domineering, and the only way a person could become an elder was by the laying on of hands and prayer.

'An overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, modest, hospitable, and a good teacher (of the Word)' (1 Timothy 3:2). 'Let the elders who lead well, be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching the Word and teaching' (1 Timothy 5:17).

'For this reason I left you in Crete, so that you might set right what was lacking, and that you might appoint elders and set them over the churches in every city as I directed you. The elders should be men who are irreproachable, the husband of one wife, having children who are believers, not open to accusations of being loose in morals or unruly. The bishop is God's steward and must be blameless, not self-willed, he must not be given to anger, he must not drink wine, he must not be violent, he must not be greedy for dishonest financial gain, he must be hospitable, he must be a lover of goodness, sober-minded, fair, holy and have self-control. He must hold fast to the Word of God as he was taught, so that he may be able to give sound doctrine and convict those who contradict it' (Titus 1:5 to 9).

'Is anyone among you sick? He should call in the church elders. They should pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord's name' (James 5:14).

"I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and as an eyewitness of the sufferings of Jesus, as well as a sharer in the glory that will be revealed; shepherd (pastor) the flock of God among you, showing leadership, not by coercion but willingly; not for dishonest gain but willingly; not dominating those in your flock, but being examples to the flock. When the Chief Shepherd is revealed, you will win the crown of glory. Likewise, you younger ones, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves all of you, with humility toward one another. For God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble' (1 Peter 5:1 to 5)

'Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was imparted to you by prophecy when the elders laid their hands upon you' (1 Timothy 4:14).

'When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they told them all that God had accomplished through them' (Acts 15:4).

We can see by reading these verses, the role of elders have changed considerably and in the present church, elders are usually assistants to the one head pastor. In the New Testament, the elders were also the

overseers, and there was no distinction between them. No church had one head pastor with others taking on roles much like deputies. They were not separate ministries. The men who sat at the gates of the city (Proverbs 31:23), sat in a place of authority but they were answerable to the other elders. The city was ruled by a council as they are today, but the councillors, or elders, were answerable to each other, unlike the civil councillors today, who never answer to church elders. The elders are frequently mentioned in the New Testament as acting in co-ordination with the (1) chief priests (Matthew 21:23); (2) the chief priests and scribes (Matthew 16:21) and (3) with the whole Sanhedrin council (Matthew 26:57 & 59). The elders had great authority in the synagogues in Jesus day.

In the New Testament, the elders were always plural. They were never singular. All churches had several elders running the church with equal authority. In today's churches, the elder must be in submission to the one head pastor. The early church had a council of elders, not just one head pastor. 'When they had appointed elders for them in every assembly, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they had believed' (Acts 14:23). The apostles appointed elders (plural) in each new church, not just one leader. Having just one head pastor in a modern church is accepted as the norm. It would be hard for the modern church to actually allow Jesus to be the Head because they don't really know how. We can't imagine having roving missionaries (apostles) doing the teaching, a council of elders running the church, deacons as their assistants, and never having one single head pastor making all the important decisions. That would be alien to modern Christians.

Here is something to ponder; can the pastors of every city, who are truly called of God as shepherds, sit at the gates of their own cities and take authority as they once did? Can they come together in unity to pray over their city and push back the evil forces, and rule their city through prayer on behalf of God? We do not have to form just one congregation or agree on every point of doctrine, but the elders need to be genuinely concerned for the area in which they live. That authority and responsibility has, according to the scriptures, never been given to anybody else. It rests on the elders of that particular city. The only time any other elder is given that authority is when God calls another elder to preach the Gospel there, then he has the God-given authority to pray over that city, but once he leaves, he no longer has that authority and it returns to the elders who live there. No elder has the right to build on another's foundation. 'Thus my ambition has been to preach the Gospel, not where Jesus' name has already been preached, lest I build on another man's foundation' (Romans 15:20). The authority is vested in the local elders. It is only when we operate in the principles of authority that we can successfully challenge the powers of darkness. To have authority we have to be under authority. Christians cannot exercise spiritual authority outside their God-given area. There are no examples in the Bible when an elder or apostle shepherded somebody from another area. The pastoral ministry is specifically local. In the New Testament, if an elder was a leader in one city and he moved to another city, he had to be reappointed. That is not true of a prophet, an evangelist, apostle or a teacher. They carry God's Word with them wherever they go. Only elders have a designated area. Within their locality, their permanent, ongoing spiritual authority in their area is vested in the elder. That is why, for the Kingdom of God to be established in any area, the God-called elders have to work together, and they must be God-called; not people who have set themselves up as pastors. In the early church, elders were always appointed by other elders with the laying on of hands and prayer. That process stopped the self-appointed cult leaders who claim to be Christian but by their fruit, can be seen to be evil. If modern day Christians want to follow the example of the early church, then a strong, stable church would need to send out missionaries (plural) to start a new church, and by prayer and fasting, the 'mother' church would need to appoint the leadership of the new church. That is what the early church did.

The Lord's concern, however, is not the fine details of how the early church conducted its church management, but rather, that the Gospel is preached to all nations. 'Whosoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on Him in Whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him Whom they have not heard? How will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? As it is written; "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of peace, who bring good news of good things!" ... Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God ... Their sound went out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world' (Romans 10:13 to 18).

Amen and God bless you.

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