

Appointing Elders And Deacons And Their Role In The Church

'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).

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

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

'For this reason I left you in Crete, so you might correct what was lacking and appoint elders 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 having loose 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 he may be able to give sound doctrine and convict those who contradict it' (Titus 1:5 to 9).

In the early church, elders and deacons were appointed by apostles. 'When they had appointed elders for them in every assembly, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on Whom they believed' (Acts 14:23). What about the second generation of elders? What about the modern-day elders? The Bible says little about them, so who appoints them? There are major differences between the way the early church did things, compared to the way the modern church does. The modern way is not necessarily wrong; just different.

Starting with ancient elders ... 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), they were a Senate of the people in Moses time (Exodus 3:16) 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. 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 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 Christian church, the eldership continued as ministers and overseers. Sometimes the elders were called bishops or superintendents. In reality, bishops are no holier than any other Christian, even though in some main-stream churches they wear pretty robes and look very pious. They are merely acting out a religious role, but they are no more special to God than anyone else, nor do they have any higher authority in the Kingdom of God.

The Lord gives us specific directions as to how elders should conduct themselves. Scripturally, an elder or overseer has to be above reproach, have only one wife, show self-control, he has to be modest, hospitable, sensible, wise, dignified, humble, disciplined, temperate, not having a bad temper, must be a capable teacher of the Word, must not drink alcohol, must be gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy, must have well behaved children who show respect, must not be a new convert, must have a good reputation, be a good leader, not domineering, and the only way a person can become an elder is by the laying on of hands and prayer (1 Timothy 3:1 to 7). '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). The elders in the early church had to be exemplary men with one wife and obedient children. The practice of polygamy was still legal 2,000 years ago, but the apostles disallowed Christians to continue with 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.

As we can read in the above passages of scripture, the elders had enormous responsibilities within their own particular churches. There is a scriptural list of responsibilities and duties the elders were committed to. 'I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder and as an eyewitness of the sufferings of Jesus, who will share in the glory that will be revealed; shepherd the flock of God among you, showing leadership, not under obligation but voluntarily, 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). 'Is anyone among you sick? He

should call the church elders and they will pray over him, anointing him with oil in the Lord's name. The prayer of faith will save him who is sick, and the Lord will restore him, and if he has sinned he will be forgiven' (James 5:14 & 15).

In the Bible, the elders were always plural. They were never singular. The early church had a council of elders running the church with equal authority. The elders were also the overseers and there was no distinction between them. 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 and some of those letters became the New Testament. The Bible makes it clear, Jesus is the Head of the church (Ephesians 5:23), and the elders had the responsibility of overseeing the running of the assemblies and shepherding the flock.

The role of elders has changed considerably and in today's churches, the elders must be in submission to the one head pastor and are usually his assistants. No church had one head pastor with others taking on roles much like deputies. They were not separate ministries. Having 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 do not know how. We cannot 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. Appointing elders and deacons in the modern church, is usually done by the self-appointed pastor.

What about the deacons? The word deacon means a servant of the Lord or an assistant to the elders. As we have just read, an elder was once the overseer of a church in co-operation with a council of elders, so the deacon was an assistant, second in charge after the elders in the same role an assistant pastor has in our day. Nobody in the early churches set off and started a new church, appointed and registered themselves as pastors, then appointed elders and deacons like they do today. The missionaries (apostles) started the churches then they appointed the church leadership with prayer and fasting. The scriptures list a clear order of leadership for the early church which the modern church has done away with. The modern list is usually the head pastor, his wife, elders and their wives, office staff, administration, ministerial staff and somewhere down the list are the deacons. Instead of deacons being second in charge leaders as they used to be, they have been demoted down to fifth in line as casual 'helpers'. 'God has appointed some in the church for His own use: first, apostles, second, prophets, third, teachers, then miracle workers, then those with the gift of healing the sick, helpers and servers then administrators, tongues and interpretation of tongues' (1 Corinthians 12:28).

Deacons were once high up in leadership and had to live exemplary lives. The scriptures tell us how the deacons were to conduct themselves. 'They must be reverent, sincere, not given to drinking alcohol, not greedy, must be honest, must possess faith with a pure conscience, must be above reproach, ... must have one wife and be able to manage their households well. Those who serve well as deacons acquire a good standing for themselves and also gain great confidence in the faith which is in Jesus' (1 Timothy 3:8 to 13). We can see both the elders and the deacons had specific roles to play within the early church. They each had to have one wife – so all of the elders and deacons were men. Their wives were not called deacons but they had to be, 'reverent, not slanderers (or gossipers), temperate (not moody) and faithful in all things'.

The early missionaries were called apostles but they no longer exist in the scriptural sense. They had great authority in the early church. Very few people today would accept the mantle of 'Apostle' yet they were active in the early church. The word apostle means, 'One appointed to act for and on the authority of the sender'. Jesus was called an Apostle. 'See how faithful He (Jesus) was to Him (God the Father) Who appointed Him an Apostle and High Priest of our confession' (Hebrews 3:1 & 2). Jesus prayed all night before selecting His twelve disciples. 'Jesus went to the mountain to pray and He continued all night in prayer to God. When it was day, He called His disciples and from them He chose twelve, whom He also named Apostles' (Luke 6:12 & 13). The twelve apostles were chosen by divine appointment by Jesus (Matthew 10:2 to 4). Matthias, Judas Iscariot's replacement was chosen by 'lots' (Acts 1:25 & 26). A 'lot' was a piece of wood with numbers on it, placed into a receptacle and shaken. The person who drew the highest number won the 'lot' which is exactly what we do with our dice. That is where we get our word 'lottery'. Can we imagine choosing a church leader by throwing dice? That is what happened when they chose Matthias. The apostles Andronicus and Junias were held in high esteem, but the Bible does not tell us how they were appointed (Romans 16:7). Paul was appointed to be an apostle, a preacher and a teacher (2 Timothy 1:11; Acts 9:3 to 20).

If we wanted to follow the example of the early church, then a strong, stable church would need to send out missionaries 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, but what about the second generation leadership, when the church has been grounded for many years? The originally appointed leadership may

have needed to retire. The remaining church leadership would then need to look at men who fit the description laid out in the Bible, then by prayer and fasting, carefully select the new elders, deacons, administrators and anyone else the church needs.

The early churches assembled in houses, but we need to remember the history. Some of their houses were very big; more than capable of holding many people at once, so they usually did not need to have a hall to meet together. Some modern homes are tiny in comparison, according to some archaeological finds. There are many changes that would need to be made in our modern churches, if we were to genuinely emulate the New Testament church. In the church as a whole, there are two areas of leadership; one is the 'head' directly answerable to Jesus. He goes from area to area, country to country, founding new churches, gathering new converts and appointing the leadership. He is called an apostle or missionary. The second is the leaders of the local church and their role is primarily government. They govern God's people to preserve that which has been gathered in. The elders (plural) build on a foundation that has already been laid and they add to it. We will not find any reference to church leadership in the singular. That does not mean every single church must have many pastors, it means church leaders as a body, lead in partnership with other churches. They submit one to another and pray for one another. The local churches need to fellowship with each other because we are all individual parts of the whole body of Jesus our Messiah. We have to be servants of the Gospel before we are servants of the church. Paul said he became a minister (or a servant) of the Gospel, then for the sake of the church, he became a minister in accordance with the divine stewardship entrusted to him, to make the Word of God fully known to them (Colossians 1:23 to 25). It is important we keep those in the correct order. If we are firstly servants of the church, we will do only what the church wants us to do. We need to be free to be servants of the Gospel first, then we can serve the church.

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 did in the Old Testament? 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, we can successfully challenge the powers of darkness. To have authority we need to be under authority. Christians cannot exercise spiritual authority outside their God-given area. There are no examples in the Bible when an elder 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.

In the meantime, the Lord is amazingly flexible about issues like appointing church leadership, and He can work in our lives just as He did back in the ancient days. What does it matter how the work is being done, as long as His work is being done? As long as the Gospel is being preached and people are being saved, then the modern church is succeeding. The Lord's concern 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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