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Elders

The Bible lists two different offices found in the local church. That of “Bishop” or “Elder” and that of “Deacon”.

In this chapter, I want to take a specific look at the elders. Looking at the Bible’s requirements for the men to fill the office, how they’re chosen, their duties and to what extent the authority extends.

The office of elder is to be filled by several men in a local church, with none in a senior position of control over the others. From passages such as Acts 20:17-32, we see the plurality of the eldership as comprising the spiritual government of the local church. I’ve seen those who use this very passage to support the authority of the single pastor by ignoring the fact the term “elders” is in the plural. I suppose desperation gets careless about things like that.

As we look at the relevant scriptures, we’ll see the term “Bishop”. “Bishop” means “overseer” or “superintendent”. It’s used in five different places: Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1,2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 2:25; and Acts 20:28 (where it’s translated as “overseers”). It simply denotes the role that elders fulfill in watching out for the brethren. We see that “Bishop” is another term for “Elder” in Acts 20:17 with Acts 20:28, and in Titus 1:5 and 1:7.

We'll start our journey with a look at the qualifications for the men to be appointed as elders.

Qualifications For Elders

There are two passages describing the kind of man an elder's to be. The first is found in 1 Timothy.

1 TIMOTHY

1 This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; 3 Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; 4 One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; 5 (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?) 6 Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

1 Timothy 3:1-7

- In verse 1, we find the candidates for eldership are to be those who desire to occupy such a position. “Draftee’s”, or those who join because of the weight of “obligation”, won’t tend to have their heart in faithfully executing their duties. That’s one of the last things we want to see happen. It discredits the office, bringing shame on the church.

- In verse 2, the first “qualification” is “blameless”. Does this mean the man’s to be “perfect”? He has no room left for growth and improvement! No man living would qualify. Especially considering they were to find numbers in every city! Being realistic, we can see the blameless are those whose character shows consistent striving to live for and please God. Paul, who wrote this verse, wasn’t “blameless” by community standards as seen in Acts 13:50;14:19 or in relationships in Acts 15:36-41.

The second “qualification” regards “one wife”. Many are disqualified because of having been divorced and remarried. Once having become a Christian, I would say that’s a proper application, for it would show an unsteadiness since starting the walk of faith. To impose such a restriction on those who were divorced and remarried before coming to the Lord, would be like requiring the Pagans to have lived upstanding lives before being converted. Such is obviously not sound reasoning. Paul commented to the Corinthians, in 1 Corinthians 6:11, that before being converted, they were totally different and not to be compared with their pre-Christian history. The “one wife” man, is a man who’s committed to one woman, regardless of weight gain, misfortune or whatever.

The remaining virtues of verse 2, “*vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach*” show a definitely diligent individual. These qualities need to be present or he will fail in the responsibilities of such an office. “Vigilance” tells us he’s one who will powerfully pursue threats of the household of faith. He won’t only pursue, he will be on sharp guard checking what influences enter and are taught. Taking care the flock stays on the straight and narrow. An elder who is unaware because he didn’t take the time to find out, is not the kind of man for such an office.

“Sober, good behaviour, hospitality and apt to teach” are the characteristics of a man who is attentive to his responsibility for the brethren. He’s one who is interested in his brothers and sisters, and cares enough to invest time in them.

“Teaching” shows he is one who notices needed direction and endeavors to instruct in the right spirit.

“Sober” reflects on drinking, but a further thought is that the potential elder is one who is serious about his responsibilities. The charge of the loose might be to, “Lighten up, you’re so serious and are too critical!” The “sober” potential elder is one who is on guard against things that pull us away from Christ, weakening our resolution to live TOTALLY for Him. The sober individual recognizes risks and cares enough that he grieves

when he sees these risks get closely intertwined with the brethren.

- In verse 3, the details clearly eliminate the worldly individual. I've seen Christians who look little different from the barhoppers, who feel they are fine examples. I know of one who was appointed as an elder. The characteristics the church looked at were the successes in the business world. Woe to the church! How low it has fallen!

- In verses 4 and 5, we see a home life where the principle of authority is understood and respected. "Rulership" is the quality to be looked for here. Poor "rulership" here warns of danger for the church. If the wife is a gossip and he doesn't bring it into reign, he's not "ruling" his own house well. If he can't bring his wife to bear in something like this, it's sure he won't be able to manage the problem on the larger scale of the church!

Here I want to pose an important reverse question on these verses. This bears on failing to properly execute the office.

We see a man who has a good set of kids and the wife seems fine. We appoint him to eldership and the office is neglected. These verses carry an important implication of requirement that tends to be skipped over.

The Question: If the elder spent as much time overseeing his family as he spends overseeing the church, would his family have failed?

This casts a definite light on a prime necessity of an elder. He must be actively involved in helping the brethren grow in their walk with the Lord. Just as his family requires his contribution to help them grow up godly, so does the church require his diligent efforts to care for the individual brethren.

Hopefully you begin to see why the "desire" of verse 1 is truly important.

- In verse 6, we have the inherent danger of the office being that insidious danger of pride. The danger is always there for old believers and new. We'll come back to this shortly.

• In verse 7 we see that *“he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.”* At face value, that looks clear enough, but taken simplistically, that can be used to disqualify the most precious of brethren. We need to take extra care here that we don't give our hand to the devil in holding down choice vessels. The devil will purposely seek to take out the choicest, so weakening the whole body. Besides this, taking out only a few of the best is a lot easier than discrediting the whole.

Consider these important passages and their impact here:

16 Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ. *1 Peter 3:16*

12 Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. *2 Timothy 3:12*

11 Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. *Matthew 5:11*

These passages should wake us to the point 1 Timothy 3:7 is referring to. These tell us the godly will suffer false reports of evil. Jesus Himself suffered such charges *“. . . a man gluttonous, a winebiber, a friend of publicans and sinners . . .”* *Matthew 11:19*. Jesus also said, in *Matthew 5:11*, such are blessed. Are we to turn around and demote those blessed of God? To place the simplistic all-encompassing implications of the words in 1 Timothy 3:7 beyond the obvious New Testament context of persecution is unfair and wrong! It will easily rob us of our best and would rob us of Jesus Himself!

The contextually clear meaning of this verse is that the reputation based on truth must be weighed. If the unbelievers in the community know the man to honestly be a churl of some sort, we can know the prospective elder isn't living a Christian witness. If it's known the man has truly cheated his customers in business, such a man appointed to eldership would become a target bringing reproach on the church. Such just contempt is the devil's playground for further mischief.

TITUS

Taking a look at the other passage describing the kind of man to be appointed as an elder, we go to Titus:

5 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: 6 If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; 8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; 9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.

Titus 1:5-9

From this passage, the qualifications duplicate those found in 1 Timothy with a little more weight, in verse 9, on skill with the Word. They need to be proficient with the Word.

Choosing The Elders

Another important consideration is how elders are chosen. Are they voted on by all the members, as the margin in one of my Bibles claimed Acts 14:21-23 showed? Both these verses in Acts and Titus 1:5 tell us it's done differently.

Titus, as an apostolic assistant, was to look out for the qualified men in the new churches of Crete, and appoint them, or more precisely, "ordain" them, which word means "to appoint". Now an enlightening question can be posed in view of the verse in 1 Timothy 3:6 of not appointing a "novice" or "new convert", when we consider:

21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch, 22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fast-

ing, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

Acts 14:21-23

In this passage, we see an informative account. The apostolic band went back in a relatively short time and appointed elders. None in the churches could have believed for long. How could they choose any elders who weren't "new converts"? My Bible margin estimated the span of time to be within a year, which seems reasonable, reading the context of Acts 14:1-23. Even if we were to be extra-generous and give them three years, we would consider a three-year-old Christian relatively new to the faith. Considering this, what would 1 Timothy 3:6 mean? Unfortunately, this word for "novice" is never used elsewhere. Scripturally considering Acts 14:21-23 and looking further down the list in 1 Timothy to 3:10 where we see church offices are to be filled by those who have been "proved" first. We can surmise that "years" don't play as great a weight in "elder" choices as does a consistent, demonstrated godly strength of character founded in faith in Christ.

The choice of the elders by voting isn't substantiated in the scriptures! It's always shown to be done by those who are mature in the Lord, such as the books of Timothy, Titus and Acts attest. This appointment isn't done lightly. From the passage in Acts, we've been viewing, we see they were appointed in a mode of PRAYER AND FASTING! They didn't choose only of their own discretion, they diligently sought the Lord's face. Such appointment is weighty, not to be undertaken lightly.

The Elder's Meeting

An Elder's Meeting is a tangible demonstration of the responsibility and authority of the elders.

This meeting would, in essence, be a disease prevention for the local assembly. Its importance would hold a top priority for the elders. It would actively steer the spiritual ministry, conduct and life of the church.

What would take place that would make this meeting so important? This meeting would contain two parts to deal with two different needs the local church has.

FIRST PART

The first part would consist of the elder's bringing up important issues facing the church. Seeking direction, as a whole, in God's word and through prayer. The decisions of the elders should not be a matter of voting, but of jointly seeking God's leading in His Spirit. Such responsibility, that would call for unity, could obviously not be done with less than mature spiritual brothers.

Such a meeting would advisedly be conducted on a weekly basis at a consistent time. I've described the action, but realize many won't begin to comprehend how extensive this truly is.

Many may wonder if such a meeting would need to be conducted weekly in a small church. A few small scenarios will help carry the impact of the need, illustrating how the authority should be spread over all the elders:

CHURCH A has a Pastor with a board of elders that assist him in his work. This Pastor is full-time and most of the responsibilities are left to his discretion. He's a godly man that can generally be trusted. In the course of his duties, we will take a look at four typical scenarios he ends up dealing with.

1. The first is a request that someone makes to use the building for a weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. He feels there's no harm, so gives permission for the use.

2. The second is the set up of a youth ministry that will require the involvement of many adults. The problem is, there aren't many adults willing or able to assist. He sees the option of receiving the assistance of those whose conversion is doubtful. With their assistance, there will be enough to run the classes. He figures he may be able to minister to those leaders as well, through their following the program's outline. He sees it as fine, and proceeds with that course of decision.

3. A revivalist team comes to the church with a week-long series of revival meetings and public outreach evangelism. As the week goes by, questionable behavioral traits keep popping up with this team. Their actions reflect on the ministry of the gospel. The

Pastor sees some of it, and feels uncomfortable, but doesn't feel there's anything he can or really should do about it. He figures it should be tolerated. That's his decision, since he's "the Pastor". The revival week concludes, and they leave.

4. Someone in the church is reported to be having an affair. The rest of the members are offended by this and murmur among themselves. For some reason, the Pastor fails to deal with this and lets it pass until the offender just ends up leaving his wife and the church.

CHURCH B has a full-time elder, to be available to attend upon church matters on a continual basis. The rest of the elders have as much authority, and the decisions for affairs of the church are continually over-viewed by the council of elders at the weekly meeting. This church faces the same four scenarios. Take a look at what we end up seeing take place through this biblical wall of guidance.

1. With the request for the use of the building for the alcoholics anonymous meeting, such is presented before the board of elders. They examine what spiritual activity is taking place. What it's impression will be as it reflects on the local body of Christ. Out of five elders, one raises the concern of the proof that the meeting is documentably centered in Christ. The board decides to have two elders research the issue to see what the documentable evidence shows. The following meeting, the research results are presented. This extra research rooted out clear statements that Jesus cannot be mandated in the spiritual journey of the members spiritual experiences. This is presented to the elders. With this extra information, they see that the church could not afford to allow the use of its facility for compromised spiritual activity.

2. With the second view of starting a youth ministry, the consideration of there not being enough volunteers to conduct the ministry as desired is considered. The options of downsizing, not doing it at all, or appointing leaders whose faith remains doubtful are considered. That man who considered the going ahead with doubtful leaders is in this group. He requests for that course of

action. Another elder raises the issue of representation. In other words, these youth and their parents are looking at these leaders in the church and community. If they notice one of the teachers using foul language in public, the testimony's disastrous. They don't know, and wouldn't expect the unsaved would be given spiritual charge over their children. If they're a member of the church, they realize the ministry that teacher is conducting with their child can't possibly be conducted by the Holy Spirit. A ministry of flesh is then being utilized to promote the Spirit. The board of elders must consider the concerns in the light of God's Word and mutual accountability. They can't all conscientiously condone this arrangement, so decide it's better to do smaller with a fully clear group conscientiousness than more elaborately with moral doubts. They commit the ministry to the Lord, seeking for Him to provide godly leaders, and if they sense the need, they agree to fast and seek diligently in a war of prayer for a greater provision.

3. The concerns of the revivalist team are brought up at this meeting. (If necessary, a special meeting can be called in the middle of the week for emergency issues.) The elders discuss the testimony first. They grant that the team may be ignorant of the right and wrong of certain conduct. The question is not one initially of deliberate misconduct, but the issue of what are the people in the community going to say, when they see this conduct. They might conclude it's right for Christians to behave that way, bringing a shameful testimony of the conduct God calls for. They might have their view of what it really means to repent, and separate from the impurities of the world, discolored. They might conclude that becoming a Christian won't mean a change in conduct in these areas. They feel they won't have to repent and change there, so they're willing to say they'll become Christians. A true conversion will never really take place, based on such a reasoned response.

The other concern, is the responsibility of the local church to help this ministry team to come to a clear knowledge of the standards God calls for. They consider:

1 Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, be-

cause there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. 6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to me: seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I will also forget thy children. *Hosea 3:1,6*

They realize their responsibility to help these brethren know truth and the knowledge of God. They also realize that God's people are being judged and destroyed because those who do know, keep silent. The fear and responsibility of God is raised as a group responsibility. They call upon God to grant His Spirit of boldness and grace to deal with the problem to His glory. They seek God's face as to how and who should lead in helping these brethren, and simultaneously protecting the testimony of the Gospel in the community.

4. The news of the reported affair reaches the church leadership. The elders face the issue squarely, seeking how God would have this problem dealt with. What about the offender? What about the wife? What about the brethren who are murmuring amongst themselves? They can't easily just sweep it under the carpet ignoring it, without the whole group of elders simultaneously selling out their conscience. The result: The elders face the obligation of approaching the offender and biblically following through, one way or another. The wife is supported, and visibly sees the love of Christ manifest in the body for her. She is bonded even closer to the brethren instead of driven from the church. The brethren get to hear a direct message on the biblical way such is to be dealt with, along with their holding a solid respect for the leadership who actively seek God's way. When they see the example, they will also have a clear conscience themselves over not murmuring about such a crime. You see, the majority know how evil the crime is, but are unsure how to deal with it. They sense that an attitude of ignoring it is tantamount to toleration, which it is. They are generally waiting for the leadership to act and are burning with concern until something is done that sounds like the right thing. The murmuring problem lies on the back of the leadership, when the problem has become widely known.

SECOND PART

Having considered the first part of the elder's meeting, I would like to take a brief look at the function of the second part.

The second part would overlap with the first in many ways, for it's the consideration of problems and concerns that would arise in the body. The meeting must actively consider lacks the body is facing, the teaching that needs to be conducted, how to improve the life and health of the church.

All these considerations undertaken in a spirit of humility and seeking God's face, realizing the gravity of the position in administering the affairs of the house of God. As soon as the elders begin seeing the church as their personal house, which they to decorate to their fancy, we're in danger. The elders aren't the owners, they're stewards responsible to God for a faithful stewardship!

For the second part, we must attend to the affairs that potentially spell trouble. We must seek godly direction for brethren who are seeking His direction.

We see in the Acts an instance of such brethren/government interaction taking place:

34 Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, 35 And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. 36 And Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, (which is, being interpreted, The son of consolation,) a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus, 37 Having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostle's feet. Acts 4:34-37

We see a voluntary communal sharing that was taking place. What was actually happening, was the brethren were helping each other, and the apostles were acting in a management capacity only. They weren't growing rich here! This is a demonstration of bringing financial matters before a council for oversight on a voluntary basis.

We find a similar reference for such a need in 1 Corinthians:

1 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law

before the unjust, and not before the saints? 2 Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? 4 If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. 5 I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren? 6 But brother goeth to law with brother, and that before the unbelievers. 7 Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded? 8 Nay, ye do wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren.

1 Corinthians 6:1-8

When Paul wrote this, he was mad! He was upset at the Corinthian believers basically suing each other in court, instead of bringing their disputes before the church for settlement. He tried to jibe them in verse 4, suggesting they appoint the lowest of brethren to settle such an insipid task. Paul was disgusted when brethren were so “mean” to each other, they couldn’t settle problems between themselves, hence his comment in verses 7 and 8. The need for such arbitrators showed a sick state existed amongst brethren, (instead of love prevailing) with such disputes getting out of hand. Nevertheless, such a committee to help settle disputes out of a worldly court is necessary and is another function of an elder’s meeting.

There’s the need for brethren to be able to bring issues of church concern up for consideration by the elders. In some instances, it may be to present a particular doctrinal view for the elders to consider. We find a similar case in Acts chapter 15, where a major doctrinal concern was brought before a council to be determined. In such an instance, it’s good to have opposing sides present their positions. The elders need to approach such in a non-biased fashion. Any such matter is a grave concern and demands the utmost in heart searching of the elders, fervently seeking God’s direction.

Another particular area the scriptures detail as part of the ministry of the board of elders is found in James:

14 Is any sick, among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: 15 And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. *James 5:14,15*

In this case, the elders need to go to the person in need, since the sickness obviously is incapacitating. The spiritual leaders are to be men of faith and faithfulness with God so their prayers are prayers of power with Him. We usually see the “Pastor” called to go pray with a sick member of the church, but this passage “shouts out” that God’s plan is for this to be done by multiple elders. This forcefully shows God’s ministry in a body isn’t an individual “Priest” concept.

This passage also shows such time of calling for prayer carries the serious facing of possible sin needing to be repented of. The elders need to bring this up when they pray for the sick. They’re to go to offer help in seeking the right position with God to be able to receive healing.

These are only some examples of the cares to be brought before an assembly of elders. The potential ability of such an assembly to help keep the local church healthy is great. After such a view, hopefully you begin to comprehend the importance an equally balanced and equally accountable body of leadership carries.

The Withdrawal of an Elder

Considering that the establishment of an eldership board would be something new to many assemblies, I felt the issue of withdrawing from the position of an elder, should be briefly considered.

Sometimes elders are appointed in a hasty manner and there’s regret later. When a church decides to pursue an active, biblically based body life, what is it to do? Everyone’s first hope should be that the elder in question, will “catch the fire” to bring honor to the office. In that event, there’s no problem. In the event the man

doesn't feel qualified for the responsibilities of the office, he's now seen he should fulfill, it would be best if he withdrew from the office for the sake of the body.

To remove a man from such an office is a grave matter. When a spiritually young man is lifted to an office beyond his capacity, the humiliation of being lowered "in rank" as it were, is too serious. He hasn't done anything wrong, and the lowering would cast that impression. The fault would honestly not be his. Under such circumstances, it would be wise to leave him in his position, unless it became a cause of open shame or if pride set in. The best all around solution is for the man who honestly comes to the conclusion he isn't set out for the position, to quietly withdraw from the office. No appearance of dishonor in any manner should follow such an action.

Such as this chapter can by no means be exhaustive, but may it serve as a help in the fulfilling of this godly office, and in a vision for the church.