

Church Government

by J.W. McGarvey

The sermon discusses the principles of church government, including the qualifications for elders and the role of the evangelist in the church.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 21:1, Acts 2:17, Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:1, Revelation 2:14

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Elder Qualifications"

Description

J.W. McGarvey preaches about the importance of Church Government, focusing on the qualifications and roles of elders within congregations. He addresses the need for elders to possess specific qualifications, such as age, family experience, and teaching ability, in order to effectively lead, protect, and teach the church. McGarvey also discusses the significance of having a plurality of elders in each congregation, emphasizing the importance of faithful discipline and ruling. Furthermore, he explores the role of evangelists within the church, highlighting their distinct duties and the necessity of their work in conjunction with the eldership. Lastly, he stresses the urgency of addressing worldliness and sin within the churches, calling for the removal of unworthy elders, the restoration of active eldership, and the collective effort of the pulpit and press to bring about necessary reforms.

Transcript

The subject assigned me is too large to be set forth in all its bearings in a single lecture; and the controversies in regard to it which have existed for many centuries, have raised so many questions, that to dispose of them all even briefly, would require a volume instead of a lecture. I am not expected to undertake so great a task. The discussion called for is one adapted, not to the world at large, but to the members of the Lectureship, and to the churches which they represent. To their minds many of these mooted questions have been settled; so I address myself to the discussion of those only on which they entertain some differences of opinion. I am glad to have an opportunity to take part in this discussion; for I am aware, as you all are, that the only way to settle disputed points among thoughtful men, is to discuss them until that which is true is made to appear. Sometimes we become impatient with this process, and think that because we have ourselves settled certain questions, they are settled forever; forgetting, as we should never do, that every question must be settled by each succeeding generation for itself. Thus the church is ever learning, and always coming to the knowledge of the truth.

I. The chief points in regard to Church [188] Government, on which I suppose there is agreement among my hearers, and between all of them and myself, are these: (1) That the eldership (presbuterion) is the

only permanent office of government in the individual congregations of the Lord. (2) That, the titles, presbuteeros, elder, episkopos, overseer or bishop, and poimeen pastor or shepherd, belong alike to all the incumbents of this office. (3) That men are to be chosen for the office by the members of the church, and set apart to it by prayer and the imposition of hands with fasting. (4) That only those who possess the qualifications prescribed in the New Testament are eligible to the office. (5) That these officers are the authorized rulers, protectors and teachers of the church, not excluding teaching by other competent persons. Perhaps other points of agreement might be named, but these five are enough, I think, for our present purpose. With the bare mention of these, I shall proceed to speak of some on which there is more or less difference of opinion among us, and afterward of some things that are wanting in the work of the eldership at the present time.

II. Among the things concerning which there is want of agreement, I will first mention three of the qualifications for the office laid down by Paul; viz., the age of the candidate, his family experience, and his ability to teach.

In reference to the first, considered apart from the second, we have no guide except the title elder and its correlatives. This term is an exact equivalent of the original presbuteros, being an adjective in the comparative degree, and meaning an older man. It came [189] into use as an official term from the selection of older men among the Hebrews as the city rulers under the law of Moses. In the New Testament its primary meaning clings to it so closely that it is not in every instance easy to determine whether it has this sense alone, or its official sense also. The Greek word is the correlative of neaniskos, young man, and is so used in Acts 2:17, "Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams:" and in 1 Tim. 5:1, "Rebuke not in elder, but exhort him as a father; the young men as brothers." The lowest limit of age at which one could be called an elder can be best determined, I think, by ascertaining the limit within which a Jew was still called a young man. Now neaniskos is the diminutive of neanios, the term applied to Paul when he is called a "young" man at the time of stoning Stephen. But it is well ascertained that Paul was very nearly of the same age with Jesus, and that he must have been at the time over thirty years old. Again, Timothy was yet in his youth (neotees) when he was residing at Ephesus; for Paul writes to him, "Let no man despise thy youth." But this was written not earlier than the year 64, and Timothy commenced traveling with Paul early in the second tour of the latter, which began in the year 50. Timothy then had been a young preacher about fourteen years, and he must have been over thirty while still called a youth. Here then, by two examples, one in the life of the man who prescribed the qualifications in question, and the other in that of him to whom they were written, we ascertain that a man could not be regarded as an elder until he had passed into the neighborhood of forty years of age. No man, therefore, under this [190] age, was eligible to the office of elder, bishop or pastor.

As to the family experience of an elder, the expression "husband of one wife" has been construed in three different ways: (1) as excluding a man with a second wife, the first being dead; (2) as excluding only a man with two or more wives, (3) as excluding the latter and one with no wife. The numeral one attached to wife, certainly cuts off more than one; and about this there is no difference of opinion. That it excludes a man with a second wife, I cannot believe, because as he is no longer the husband of the deceased wife, he is the husband of only one. Does it exclude the man with no wife? It seems to me quite certain that it does. A man with one eye, one hand, one foot, is not a man who has no eye, no hand, no foot. If he is a man of one friend, one house, one farm, he is certainly not without a friend, a house, a farm. So, if he is the husband of one wife, he is not the husband of no wife. Further proof of this is found in the assumption which Paul makes that the candidate for the eldership has a family. He describes him as "one that ruleth

well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity;" and he adds: "If a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the house of God?" Again, in prescribing the qualifications, he says: "If any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having children that believe, who are not accused of riot, or unruly." To be an elder, bishop, pastor, then, a man must be married, and the father of believing children. If you call any one a pastor [191] who has not all these qualifications, you miscall him--you employ a scriptural term unscripturally.

It has been very often objected to these obvious conclusions, that they cannot be correct, because they cut off Paul and Timothy both from the eldership. It cannot be denied that they do; and doubtless Paul and Timothy saw this as plainly as you and I can see it. But what of it? Were they elders? If so, we would be compelled to think there is something wrong in our readings, or in our conclusions. No; their offices were quite distinct from that of the elder; and it follows that the elder may have had duties to perform requiring him to be a man of family, which Paul and Timothy had not. And this is true. In exercising the oversight of a congregation composed largely of women, young and old, there are duties, too often most woefully neglected in modern times to the shame and confusion of the church, which only married men can discharge, and which require the greatest delicacy even on their part. I have had such duties to discharge in my own experience quite a number of times, and I could not have touched them had I been an unmarried man.

As to the third qualification of which I am to speak, the expression, "apt to teach," is the rendering of the single Greek word *didaktikos*. This word is difficult to render for want of an English equivalent. If we had a correlative of the word teachable, to represent the disposition of the teacher, as this word does that of the person willing to be taught, it would render *didaktikos* with precision. In the absence of it, our translators have done the best they could by using the old adjective apt with the infinitive, to teach. It does [192] not mean skillful in teaching, as some seem to understand it; but readiness, promptness, willingness to teach. This is made clear by the context in the only other occurrence of the word in the New Testament, 2 Tim 2:24, 25: "The Lord's servant must not strive, but be gentle towards all, apt to teach, forbearing, in meekness correcting them that oppose themselves." Here it expresses a disposition which is to be maintained toward opponents; and it requires Timothy, in contradistinction from strife, to be ready to teach. It would, of course, be vain to require a man to be ready to teach, if he were not able to teach. Consequently, while the idea of capability is not expressed in the word, it is implied. The elder, then, must be capable of teaching, and must be ready and prompt to give instruction to those in his flock who need it.

What teaching is this? It is not preaching; for preaching was addressed to the world, not to the church, and the elder's work as an elder was confined to the church. It is evidently the teaching prescribed in the second part of the apostolic commission: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you." To this extent, then, the work of elders was co-ordinate with that of the apostles, and the way in which it was done we may in part gather from the way in which the apostles did the same work.

Paul describes his own method when he says to the elders of Ephesus concerning his labors in that city, "I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house." This he places before them as an example; and thus we learn that they were directed to teach from house to house as well as in public. [193] Both of these methods are indispensable in taking care of a congregation; the one, for reaching the greatest number at one time; and the other, for the greatest personal effect on individuals, and especially for reaching those who neglect the public assembly.

We can not doubt that teaching in both methods was observed by the eldership of every apostolic church; and we would infer that ability to do both was a necessary qualification for every elder, but for one passage which clearly shows that this was not the case. It is the well known passage (1 Tim. 5:17), "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching." In the direction that those who rule well shall be counted worthy of double honor, it is implied that there were some who did not rule well, and that the latter should have less honor.

But besides these there were some who, in addition to ruling well, "labored in the word and in teaching." This latter expression is by common consent understood to mean laboring in public addresses to the church, and perhaps also to the world. These especially are to be counted worthy of double honor, and evidently because they fill to the fullest measure the qualifications and duties of the elder's office. But, in as much as those who teach privately, do teach, and if they teach promptly and willingly, they comply with the requirement, "apt to teach," it can not be denied that, although this class of elders were not regarded as worthy of the honor bestowed on the third class, there was such a class, and those of them who ruled well were counted worthy of double honor as compared with those who did not.

I think, then, that however desirable it is to have elders [194] who can discharge in the most efficient manner every function of the office, it is unscriptural and wrong to decry elders who are not efficient public speakers, provided they do the ruling and the private teaching which belong to their office. And if a church has one or two elders who can teach in public, and one or two others who can teach only in private, while all are faithful in discharging the other duties of the office, such a church is well-equipped for the work of the Lord.

Next after the three qualifications which I have discussed, I may mention as a subject of some dispute, the number of elders which each congregation should have. The universal fact of a plurality in the apostolic churches has naturally led to the almost universal conviction that the will of the Lord requires a plurality now. Undoubtedly the work then required a plurality or we should have found at least some intimation of the contrary. It is probable that the public teaching could in most instances have been done as well, if not better, by a single elder, the most effective one of the number; but faithful and sufficient private teaching required a plurality, and still more did the demands of faithful discipline. Where questions of right and wrong between men are to be decided, and the law enforced upon the wrong-doer, it has always been found best to have a plurality of rulers. In these facts and considerations there is sufficient ground for adhering to the well-established conviction of the past, that every church shall have, if possible, a plurality of elders. Consequently, no one person is the elder, the bishop, the pastor of the church, and [195] such phraseology ought to be banished from our vocabulary.

At this point we must consider the objection, that the plurality of elders everywhere apparent in the apostolic churches is due to the fact that in every city the number of disciples was too great for all to meet in one place--that a number of different congregations, therefore, met at different places, and that this necessitated the appointment of as many elders as congregations, so that each should enjoy the oversight of one elder. These congregations, it is claimed, constituted the one church of the city, and these elders the eldership of that one church. Thus the theory of one elder to a congregation is made to harmonize with the fact of a plurality of elders to every church. I do not see that this supposed state of facts would alter the case at all, unless you advance to the further supposition, that these elders ruled their several congregations independently of one another, as did those in different cities; and that in case such a church afterward obtained a house large enough for all, they dismissed all the elders but one. With these additional suppositions you would have the rule of one elder to the church, but not otherwise. But the main

supposition is itself untenable. In the first place, there is not the slightest intimation in the Scriptures that this is the reason for appointing a plurality of elders in every church. Secondly, it is highly improbable that in the hundreds of small towns and villages throughout Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Syria, Asia Minor and Greece, the number of disciples was so great as this theory requires us to believe. Thirdly, we have evidence from Scripture statements that it was not true [196] of Jerusalem, of Corinth, of Ephesus and of Troas, all large cities except the last. In Jerusalem the disciples did meet together in one place, the temple court, as we read in many passages of Acts. In Corinth, after Paul left the synagogue, he held his meetings in the house of Titus Justus; and when he wrote to the church several years later he ordered them to assemble together and deliver the incestuous man over to Satan; and he speaks of the whole church being assembled together, *epi to auto*, in their ordinary meetings for edification (1 Cor. 5:4; 14:23). In Ephesus he preached two whole years after leaving the synagogue, in the schoolhouse of Tyrannus, and when he was about to leave the city after the mob of the silversmiths, he called the disciples together and exhorted them (Acts 19:9, 10; 20:1). In Troas the disciples came together in one upper room to break bread (Acts 20:7). Thus we see that the theory in question is based upon a false assumption as to the facts in the case, and we are thrown back upon the view which lies on the surface of the history, that every separately organized congregation was supplied with a plurality of elders.

I next take up the much-mystified question of the relation of the evangelist to the church and its eldership. Who the evangelist is can be determined by the titles applied to him, and the terms used to distinguish his work. Take Timothy as a typical example. He is called an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5), and a minister (1 Tim. 4:6; 1 Thes. 3:2). He is told to preach and to teach (2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Tim. 4:11), which shows that he was a preacher and a teacher. The term "evangelist" means one who publishes the good [197] tidings of salvation, and the term "minister" means a servant, or one who serves in some capacity. These two terms are applied to Jesus and to the apostles as well as to persons like Timothy, and the last is the distinctive title of those whom we call deacons; but neither of them is ever applied to an elder; neither is an elder once in the New Testament said to evangelize, to preach, or to serve. We may not infer from this that because a man was an elder he had not the right to evangelize or preach, or that he rendered no service. It is to be accounted for rather on the ground that his distinctive work was ruling, not serving; and teaching, not preaching. Still, this circumstance is worthy of note as exhibiting quite a contrast between scriptural usage and that which has sprung up among us. While the terms "preacher" and "pastor" are never in the New Testament applied to the same person, they are constantly so applied by some of us.

Did the evangelist have a place as such in the congregation which was fully supplied with elders? This question is now answered in the negative by two classes among us, who are antipodes on most questions, and even on this in which they seem to be agreed. They are those who, on the one hand, would keep the evangelist constantly on the move holding protracted meetings; and those, on the other, who would settle him down permanently in the congregation as its pastor, or at least as its principal pastor, and not allow him when thus settled to be called any longer an evangelist.

Both go on the assumption that a New Testament evangelist was of necessity a traveling preacher. Now, I think there can be no doubt that when an evangelist has the qualifications for the [198] eldership, and when it appears wise for him to settle in one place for a protracted period, he may with propriety be set apart as one of the elders. We have no instance of this on record, but we must infer it from the freedom which the church enjoyed in selecting her rulers. But did the evangelist, as an evangelist, have a place and a work within the congregation, not limited by the demands of a "protracted meeting?"

It is plainly taught that he did. Here again the example of Timothy serves our chief purpose, for the reason, I think, that we happen to know more about him than any other evangelist. He was left in Ephesus, a church fully supplied with elders, just previous to the date of the first epistle to Timothy, which was written, according to the received chronology, in the year 64; and he remained there until Paul, in 68, the year of his death, sent Tychicus to take his place and requested him to come to Rome (1 Tim. 1:3; 2 Tim. 4:9, 12).

His residence there covered at least four years, nearly an average stay for a preacher in our own day. He was not there as a pastor, or an elder, but as an evangelist; for Paul exhorts him in reference to the work in which he was engaged, "Do the work of an evangelist, fulfil thy ministry" (2 Tim. 4:5). In the same connection, and with reference to the same work, he says: "I charge thee in the sight of God, and of Christ Jesus, who shall judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and kingdom; preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long suffering and teaching."

In short, every duty is laid on Timothy that was laid on the elders, with the single exception of that of ruling. With this exception his work was co-ordinate [199] with theirs. This, then, is the New Testament idea of the work of an evangelist when laboring in connection with an eldership within the bounds of a congregation. Timothy is not the only evangelist, as we have reason to believe, who thus labored. Luke was left at Philippi, as we judge by the absence of "we" from his narrative, from the time of the first establishment of the church there, in the year 51, till Paul started on his last journey to Jerusalem, in 58, a period of nearly seven years (Acts 16:16, 19, 40; 20:6); and when Paul reached Cæsarea on that journey, he found Philip "the evangelist" residing in that city. We can reasonably infer that the labors of these two evangelists in these two cities were much of the same character as those of Timothy in Ephesus.

On a moment's reflection it is easy to see that such an arrangement as this is wise at times, if not even a necessity. Any church, with even a good and efficient eldership, is liable to have enemies in its vicinity too strong for its elders; it is liable in the vicissitudes of its career to have less efficient elders at one time than at another; it is likely to have in reach of its ministrations a large number of the ungodly who can be won to Christ more easily by powerful preaching than by the teaching of its elders; and for any or all of these reasons, it may scripturally have in addition to the work of its elders, that of an evangelist. Even a young evangelist, with neither the experience nor the age required for the eldership, may do an excellent work under such circumstances; but let it be borne in mind that he does not, by such labor, become a pastor, or shepherd of the flock. He is still an evangelist; he is one of the flock, and the pastors have rule over [200] him. Such was the case of Timothy at Ephesus.

Here I have touched another mooted question, to which it may be well to devote a little space. From a misinterpreted remark of Paul to Timothy, it has been inferred by some that an evangelist had authority to call the elders to account, and to rebuke them for their sins. It is the remark, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses. Them that sin reprove in the sight of all, that the rest also may be in fear." (1 Tim. 5:19, 20). This is supposed to mean that Timothy was to hear accusations against elders, for the purpose of bringing them before himself for trial; and that if he found any of them guilty of sin, he was to reprove them in the presence of the whole congregation. But that this cannot be Paul's meaning is proved by the fact that at the beginning of the chapter, he says to Timothy, "Rebuke not an elder, but exhort him as a father." In this latter instance, the word elder probably means merely an elderly man; but if Timothy was forbidden to rebuke an older in years, he would certainly not be required to reprove one who was an elder in years and also in office. Furthermore, the term "them" in the passage in question does not find its antecedent in the word elder, as this interpretation requires, for the very obvious reason that the two words differ in number. If this meaning had been intended, then after the

words, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses," we should have had, "Him that sins reprove," and not them that sin. The facts are that there is no pronoun expressed in the Greek; and that Paul, after saying what he does of charges [201] against an elder, in the next sentence introduces a new topic, that of reproof in the presence of the whole church such members in general as are guilty of sin; from which rebuke, however, elders are expressly excepted in a preceding verse. It may be asked, Why receive accusations against elders at all, unless he was to try them? The obvious answer is, that in as much as he was doing a work in co-operation with the elders, and to a great extent co-ordinate with theirs, it would be very natural for persons disaffected toward any one of the elders to pour their accusations into his ears, in order that he might bring them before the other elders for trial. I presume that there are few evangelists of much experience among us now who have not been compelled often to listen to such accusations.

Not only is subordination of the elders to the evangelist not taught in the passage just considered, but the reverse is taught in other places. One reason given to Titus why elders ought to be able to convict the gainsayers, is, that "there are many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped; men who overthrow whole houses, teaching things which they ought not for filthy lucre's sake." These were unruly evangelists, and the only way to stop their wide mouths was to convict them as gainsayers--not convince them; for such fellows can never be convinced; but to convict them, which means to convince the brethren as to who they are, and thus stop their mouths by depriving them of hearers. This, by the by, is the only way to stop the mouth of any man in our free country, and we ought not to want any other. [202] Again, the elders of the church at Ephesus were put on the watch of all evangelists who might visit their flock, and required to stand guard against any who were unworthy. Paul said to them: "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Wherefore watch ye, remembering that by the space of three years I ceased not to admonish every one night and day with tears." (Acts 20:29-31.) We learn from the supplementary account of this church contained in the brief epistle addressed to it nearly thirty years afterward, that these elders and their successors were faithful to this solemn charge: for the Lord says, "I know thy works, and thy toil and patience, and that thou canst not bear evil men, and didst try them who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and didst find them false." (Rev. 2:2.) Men who dared to call themselves apostles must have been venerable men with no mean appearance of piety and wisdom. This was a part of the work of elders as shepherds of the flock; for the hireling, when he seeth the wolf coming, leaveth the sheep and fleeth, and the wolf catcheth them and scattereth them; but the good shepherd layeth down his life for the sheep. Jno. 10:11, 12.

The first innovation on this apostolic order of church government, which is traceable in history, consisted not in the displacement of the eldership, or in a change of its character and functions, but in subordinating it to the resident evangelist, making him the chief ruler, and ascribing to him alone the title *sepikopos*, "bishop," which had hitherto belonged [203] to every elder. The certain existence of this order is first found in the writings of Irenæus, who wrote in the last quarter of the second century; unless we admit the genuineness of the Ignatian epistles, which were written, if genuine, in the first or second decade of that century. If three of the fourteen of these epistles are genuine, as is supposed by many eminent Protestant scholars, Ignatius may be regarded as the first advocate of this innovation, if not the originator of it. He presses the subject of obedience to the bishop with vehemence, often dragging it in without regard to the connection of thought, and thus he betrays the untempered zeal of a convert to an innovation. Doubtless the eleven epistles, ascribed to him, which are undoubtedly spurious, and which abound still more in

allusions to this subject, were written in great part for the purpose of emphasizing an order of government which, at the time of their date, had become common, but which still seemed to need the support of authoritative names. As such names were not found among the apostles, or among men like Clement of Rome, Polycarp and Justin Martyr, all of whose writings indicate the continuance of the apostolic order, Ignatius was seized upon as the single man of the first half of the second century whose authority could be plausibly claimed for separating the bishopric from the eldership.

III. In the third and last division of this address, I propose to speak of things that are wanting in the present work of the eldership, and of the steps which appear to me necessary to set these things in order. It is my conviction, as a result of wide-spread and long-continued observation, that the heaviest burden [204] under which the cause of Christ groans to-day is the worldliness and wickedness that abound everywhere in the churches. The assaults of infidelity and rationalism, serious as they are, are as nothing in comparison. This state of things, not in the congregations of the disciples alone, but in all the so-called churches, is a silent but an almost universal rebellion against the Head of the church; for there are no commands more explicit or more emphatic than such as these: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which they received of us." (2 Thes. 3:6.) "Now I write unto you not to keep company, if any man that is named a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one no, not to eat. . . . Put away the wicked man from among yourselves." (1 Cor. 5:11-13.) This state of things will work inevitable ruin by bringing the curse of God upon us unless it be corrected. Paul warned the Corinthians of the consequences of it by demanding of them, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" (1 Cor. 5:6) and our Lord in dictating his epistle to the church at Pergamos, said: "I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there some that hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumbling block before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also some that hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans in like manner. Repent therefore; or else I come to thee quickly, and I will make war against them with the sword of my mouth." [205] (Rev. 2:14-16.) In view of such warnings and threatenings as these, we have reason to tremble for the future of our churches; and I envy not the man, be he preacher, elder, or what not, who can look on and not be deeply concerned for our condition in this respect. What can be done, to remedy the evil before it shall be remedied by the fierce judgments of God? I suggest a few steps which appear to me to be imperative.

(1) Secure the removal from office of all unworthy (morally unworthy) elders. Some such have been thoughtlessly chosen by the congregations; and some have become unworthy by bad habits acquired after their appointment. All such are Achans in the camp, paralyzing the power of God's army. They are as if Joshua himself, or Eleazar, had been the Achan; for it is, treason in the very head of the government. With all prudence, but at all hazard, they must be removed from the holy office which they have desecrated.

(2) After purging the office, let us restore to activity the ruling power of the eldership, which has gone almost entirely into disuse. The elders must be called back from the deception imposed on them through a mistranslation of the word expressive of their duties as shepherds, and must learn that instead of "feeding" the flock with the homeopathic soup of a wearisome speech on the Lord's day, and thinking that their chief work is done, they must be real shepherds of the flock, teaching from house to house, warning the disobedient, securing the exclusion of the incorrigible, and walking before all in godly sincerity. Let them learn that they watch for souls as those who must give account; and that when one sheep strays from the

[206] flock, they are to leave the ninety and nine, and go into the mountains for the one that is lost until they find it.

(3) As a means of bringing about this change, let the pulpit and the press make a specialty of crying aloud on the subject until it is accomplished. There is scarcely anything, good or bad, that cannot be brought about in this country by the united and persevering efforts of the pulpit and the press. They have done enough that is bad; let them go now to work and do this most needed good. We hear it said sometimes, in quarters from which it is not welcome, that the Reformation needs reforming; but in the particular of which we now speak, I think that every godly man among us must agree that the saying is true. Who will be our Moses to lead its through this wilderness? The Lord grant him to us very soon.

I would not be doing justice to my brethren of the eldership if I were to close this essay without saying to them and to those who are under them in the Lord some words more encouraging than most that I have read to you. I know of no class of men who, while living, are more worthy of profound respect than faithful elders of the church; and none more worthy of remembrance when they are gone to their reward. Their work is tenfold more trying to the patience than that of the preacher; and it requires a loftier moral courage to execute it with fidelity. There is joy and exhilaration in standing before a listening crowd to tell the story of redemption; and the true preacher finds no greater delight on earth than it affords. He finds too, social enjoyment of the purest kind, in going from house to house, that he may teach, encourage [207] and gently admonish both the young and the old; while in ministering to the sick and the dying he experiences the truth of his Lord's remark, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

But to start out in search of the sinning, determined to deal with them faithfully, not knowing how coldly you may be received, or how contemptuously you may be repulsed; this is a burden whose weight is only known to the faithful shepherd; and he can expect no diminution of its weight until he drops it when his life-work is done. No wonder that Paul exhorts the brethren concerning those elders who had gone to their reward, saying: "Remember them that had the rule over you, who spoke to you the word of the God, and, considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith." (Heb. 13:7).

It is worth all the burdens of a faithful stewardship to think of being thus remembered. No wonder, that in reference to the elders yet living, the same blessed apostle says to his brethren, "Obey them that have rule over you, and submit to them; for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account." (Heb. 13:17). Give account of souls--of souls put under your care, to keep them for the Lord who bought them, as a shepherd keeps his sheep! How solemn, how fearful the responsibility!

Under the law of Moses, if a man was found dead near a city, and the murderer not known, the elders of the city whose business it was to prevent and to suppress crime, were required to come out to a rough valley, slay a heifer, wash their hands over it, and swear in the presence of officiating Levites, "Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it. Forgive, O [209] Lord, thy people Israel, whom thou hast redeemed, and suffer not innocent blood to remain in the midst of thy people Israel." (Deut. 21:1-9).

But when a soul has been lost through neglect; when it is found cold in death outside or inside the church of God, and the elders shall be called to give account of it, what ceremony shall cleanse away the blood? How happy will the elders be who can say before the Lord, We are free from the blood of this man! For such elders there is a great reward. Peter has such in his mind when he says, "The elders which are, among you I exhort, who am a fellow elder. . . . be shepherds to the flock of God which is among you, . . .

and when the chief shepherd shall be manifested, Ye shall receive an unfading (amaranthine) crown of glory." (1 Pet. 5:1-4).

I love the music of the word amaranthine, which Peter with exquisite taste here uses, referring as it does to that fabled flower whose tints never grow dim, and whose foliage never ceases to be fresh and green. Nothing in heaven shall be more beautiful than this badge of honor on the brow of the faithful elder. And when I look away to the visions of glory vouchsafed to John the beloved, I see in a circle close about the throne of God, with none nearer except the mysterious cherubim, four and twenty smaller thrones; and on them, not apostles and prophets, not martyrs and reformers, but four and twenty elders, arrayed in white garments, and crowns of gold upon their heads.

As a preacher I grudge them not. Let them wear the crowns; let them sit on the thrones; and let me stand afar off, and bow my head, and praise my God for the just reward which he has given to them. [209]

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