

Eldership

by Keith Malcomson

Eldership is a vital part of the church, providing leadership, guidance, and care for the flock.

Scripture: Acts 20:28, Ephesians 4:12, 1 Timothy 5:17, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Church Government", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

Keith Malcomson preaches on the structure and function of the Church as described by Paul in Ephesians and Corinthians. Paul emphasizes the Church as a Body, a Building, and a Bride, highlighting the importance of unity, order, and balance within the body. He explains how God appoints each member in the body according to His will, with diverse functions and limited roles. Paul also discusses the necessity of governments within the Church, using the analogy of a ship needing a captain to steer through storms, emphasizing the need for God-given leaders to guide the Church to victory.

Transcript

When Paul teaches the Church at Ephesus concerning their structure and function as a Church he speaks of them as a Body (1:22-23; 2:16; 3:16; 4:4, 12, 16), a Building (2:20-22) and a Bride (5:23-33). Again when Paul is writing his first letter to the Church at Corinth he speaks of them as a Body. In ch.12 from v12-27, the word "body" is mentioned 17 times. He is emphasizing that the church must function like a body. It must be in unity, order and balance.

In v18, he says the God has "...set the members every one them in the body..." This word "set" means to appoint or to put in place. So we see that God Himself has put every single member of the body in a certain specific place according to His own will. Everybody has a function in the body as a "member" and there is great diversity in this.

But in v28, he says "...God hath set some in the Church..." This is now a limited function. He is telling us now that there are other functions of the body which he has restricted to some or a few. Everybody in the body cannot function in these, only those God has put in place to do them. These limited functions begin with "first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers..." etc

GOVERNMENTS

He goes on to say "And God hath set some in the church...governments," The whole body cannot be governments, it is some out of the whole body who are chosen and separated by God to be governments.

There must be governments in the body, this was God's plan, and these governments carry specific tasks which the rest of the body does not.

This word "Governments" means steering; piloting; directing. This is a nautical term used by sailors down over the ages. A similar Greek word is used in Acts 27:11 for a master of a ship and again in Rev.18:17 for shipmaster.

We read of some making shipwreck by putting away faith (I Tim.1:19). Paul was literally shipwrecked three times during his travels so realized that governments in the church was just as vital as having a good captain in a ship when out at sea, especially in a storm.

In James 3:4 we are told "Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth."

If we take this as a parallel to our present lesson we can learn that a church, though very large with many people will be driven of many fierce winds; winds of heresy, winds of devilish doctrines, winds of confusion, temptations, troubles and persecutions. There are many winds which can blow across a church and lead to disaster just like a shipwreck. So what is God's answer? If a whole church full of people is vulnerable to such storms then how has God provided for such?

It says in this verse that a captain (governor) with his hand on the small rudder (helm) can steer through such storms. This is God's answer. The word used here for Governor or the captain of the ship literally means to straighten (level); technically to steer: - governor, make straight. This same word is used of John the Baptist's ministry in making the way of the Lord straight (Jn.1:23). Twice in Paul's travels we read of the boat he travelled on making a "straight course" (Acts 16:11; 21:1).

So we see first that a Governor is one who steers

Secondly he is one who steers a straight course

In Genesis 42:6 Joseph was made "Governor" over all of Egypt to direct all affairs in guiding the nation through the seven years of famine. God had specially gifted and enabled him for this task; none other could have done it. This is a perfect example of a man's gift making room for him. A man's gift can lift him out of utter obscurity in a forgotten prison cell to guide and lead a nation to safety.

We badly need God-given governments in the church at this present time which will be able to lead the church forward on a straight God-given course. And as we pray and believe God is well able to raise up gifted men out of obscurity, in this crisis hour, to guide the church through to victory.

ELDERSHIP

We shall quickly see as we study scripture that the local government or local leadership of God in the Old Testament was that of Eldership. Again in the New Testament Church it was also Eldership.

Elders were placed over villages, towns, cities and the nation in the Old Testament (Ex.3:16, 18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5-6; 18v12; 19:7; 24:1, 9, 14). Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon and Ezra upheld this form of leadership. Prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel directed their message to the Elders of Israel.

All of this shows its vital place amongst God's people in the OT. The Patriarchs passed away and Judges were raised up in their place after which Kings were set up. But during all these diverse era's local elders

functioned amongst God's people. A cooperate group of mature elders sitting in council together was God's basic ordained means of leadership and government.

When Moses led Israel out of Egyptian captivity as their God-ordained leader and saviour we are told that he "sat to judge the people: and the people stood by Moses from the morning unto the evening." (Ex.18:13). After hearing their cause he made "them know the statutes of God, and his laws." When Jethro, his father-in-law, saw this he wisely pointed out that this was not good as he would wear himself and the people out. He said "this thing is too heavy for thee; thou art not able to perform it thyself alone."

And so he gave Moses wise council "Moreover thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens:" Ex.18:21

Before this there were mature men amongst the people of Israel called elders but now Moses set's apart eldership for the leadership in which they were to "be over" the people as "rulers." This was the wisdom of God.

He was to teach these men the Word of God and teach them how to live their personal life according to it as well as what their responsibilities in the work of God were. This was the priority in training leadership. Although as said Israel always had elders to lead them all through there captivity this was a renewal and defining of the call, task and responsibility of the elders in the nation of Israel.

Again we see a little later, 70 elders were specifically separated out and anointed to be God's government in the nation and to carry the burden of the people alongside Moses. It is amazing that these very necessary leaders remain nameless and faceless to us throughout long ages. One thing is sure they were known personally very well by the people and were very necessary in the life of the nation.

And so, local plural eldership was carried on until the days of Christ's ministry. At this time the Jewish synagogues were still ruled by elders.

The 1st mention of Elders in the NT Church

Elders are mentioned about 200 times in the Bible and 19 of these in the NT relate to the Church. It becomes very clear that the term "elders" defined the local static leadership of the New Testament Church.

At the beginning of Acts 11 we read of "apostles" and "brethren" in Judea but no elders. "And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea..." (v1). But by the end of the chapter we have the first mention of elders amongst the early church, "...determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul." (v29-30). They appear suddenly without explanation fully functioning in a leadership role under the governance of the first apostles.

What is the significance of this fact in this particular chapter? This whole chapter is concerning the beginning of the opening up of the door of the Gospel to the Gentiles by Peter. When this news first reaches the Apostles in Jerusalem there are no elders in place but in the light of all this beginning to happen elders were no doubt set apart for the task of local leadership.

If the apostles were to fulfil their calling to evangelize the nations in the days ahead then there must be a static eldership in place to function as the government of God. This chapter marks the beginning of the spread of the gospel to the nations. Over the following years the leadership of the elders was raised up in the Church at Jerusalem to govern (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23, 16:4).

In these early chapters we see that the responsibility first carried by the Jerusalem elders was the handling of the finance received from Antioch (11:30). By chapter 15 we see them involved in doctrinal disputes. At the Jerusalem council we see that the local government rested with the "apostles and elders" (15:2, 4, 6, 22-23, 16:4).

Much later in 21:18 we read that when Paul visited Jerusalem that "James; and all the elders were present." It seems that the other apostles were not present in Jerusalem at this time, and were probably out itinerating in other regions.

Paul and Eldership

After the initial appearance of Eldership in the Church at Jerusalem and during they're being established as the government of that church we see Paul stepping out into the Gentile world in apostolic ministry. After pioneering churches in various towns Barnabas and Paul did not stop and settle into local ministry but continued pressing forward in apostolic ministry into new areas.

Then "...they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch...And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed." (Act 14:21). First, churches were pioneered, then "elders" ordained. This was the first government ordained and set in place in these first gentile churches.

Again many years later we see Paul giving Titus the same instructions, "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:" (Tit.1:5).

On a local level we see no other higher government than the eldership within each church in each town or city. It was certainly a priority to the apostles that local elders be raised up.

Terminology

Elders, Bishops and Overseers are Biblical terms used for the very same office of Eldership and are used interchangeably in the Bible.

Elders [G4245] = presbuteros; elderly; older; a seniority; - this simply spoke of maturity; primarily physical age but also of being spiritually mature or a leader over a local church (not a novice). In Greek culture this term was given to new commissioners of newly acquired colonies.

Bishops, or Overseers [G1985] = episkopos; a superintendent; overseer; to watch over; inspection; investigation; [G1984=episkopos] Paul used this term when pioneering new Churches into Gentile areas.

First we see that Elders were the same as Overseers, "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church." Act 20v28 "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers..." (Act 20:17)

Then we see that Elders were the same as Bishops, "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...For a bishop must be blameless," (Tit 1:5, 7).

Again we see that it was the Elders who were the oversight of the Church, "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof,..." (I Pet.5:1-2)

Please take good note that it was a plurality of elders who were the oversight of the local church. "Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:" He does not mention Elders here, but note the term 'bishops' is plural and over one church in one city which is exactly the same as elders. (Php.1:1)

THE TASK OF ELDERSHIP

Why are they needed?

The Prophet Ezekiel deals with the terrible state of God's people in the OT when there are no Elders or Shepherds, the result is that they are scattered. "And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them." (Eze.34:5-6). We see clearly that without good godly elders God's people will be scattered. This is the one major result of a breakdown in local leadership.

Again we see the same when Christ came ministering amongst God's people. "But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." (Mat 9:36). As a result "he began to teach them many things" (Mk.6:34).

As a result of this terrible situation he said "unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest." (v37-38). Then after a night of prayer He called unto Him His twelve disciples and sent them forth as apostles in order to deal with the multitudes scattered without a shepherd (Mt.10:1).

In all of this we see the absolute necessity for God-ordained leadership if God's people are to be preserved from being like scattered sheep on the hillsides. Again we see the result of Christ having been smitten and removed, "...for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad." (Mt.26:31).

It is no wonder then that the apostles were so eager to ordain elders in each local church.

Their Task

1. Leading the Flock.

A term constantly applied to New Testament Eldership is that of "rule" (proistēmi) which means to stand before, to preside, maintain rule, be over, and attend to. Another Greek word translated rule is hēgeomai which means to lead or to take command. Both of these words show the primary importance of Eldership taking up a responsibility as leaders of the flock.

The sheep are not to lead, the Elders are. The Church is not a democracy; it is led by elders appointed by the Holy Spirit. We see no voting in the New Testament but we do see the Church being led by godly men who are being led by the Spirit of God according to the Word of God.

It is taken for granted that all elders rule, "...the elders that rule well..." (I Tim.5v17), "...them which have the rule over you..." (Heb.13v7). Scripture teaches that these elders are to rule by persuasion, not by force. To rule by example, not just command. To rule well and to rule with diligence (I Thess.5:12; I Tim.3:5; 5:17; Heb.13:7, 17, 24; Rom.12:8).

This kind of leadership of the flock is likened unto the Eastern Shepherds who went in front of the sheep and who were known by their voice and so the sheep followed them. Whereas the Western Shepherds drive the flock in making them go a certain direction. "...taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away." (I Pet.5:2-3)

The realm of their leadership is the Church, not the home. Just as believers must respect the leadership in the church so also an elder will respect the headship of the husband in the home. The sphere of their leadership is laid out in Scripture and by no means are they to go beyond Scripture. Much abuse has come when leadership represents an unquestionable position of rule.

Paul delighted in the Berean's who took the time and diligence to check out with Scripture all that he said (Acts 17:10). Leadership is never above Scripture; it is always accountable to Scripture and will, if they are walking uprightly, adhere to Scripture.

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." (Heb 13:7). Then a few verses later we read "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." (Heb 13:17).

This last Scripture has been abused in various ways. First, the sheep have not obeyed the leadership and have caused great grief to godly leaders who spoke the Word of God and who lived uprightly. This is utterly condemned in this Scripture. Secondly, leadership have wrongly demanded unquestioning obedience from unsure sheep. This also is condemned here. The word "obey" is *peitho* which is also used in 6:9 "beloved, we are persuaded better things of you" and in 11:3 in reference to the promises of God that they were "persuaded of them."

When it says, "Obey them that have the rule over you" it means to be persuaded by them. This means that the eldership use the Word of God to persuade believers of what they ought to do. In turn the sheep ought to have a heart that can be won over by the clear truth of scripture. This is true obedience to leadership.

2. Feeding the Flock

All New Testament elders were required to be able to teach ("apt to teach" I Tim. 3:2; II Tim.2:4). "...the elders...who labour in the word and doctrine." (I Tim.5:17). But this does not mean that they were gifted as teachers. That is all together something different. Timothy was an Apostle but he was instructed by Paul to "do the work of an evangelist." But that did not make him an evangelist.

Each elder must have the basic ability to teach God's people the Word of God. If a man has no ability to do this or the ability to grasp basic doctrine then he is not qualified to be an elder no matter what his Christian character is.

This basic ability to teach is the ability to feed the flock, "Feed the flock of God which is among you..." (I Pet.5:2) "...the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God..." (Acts 20:28) "He saith unto him, Feed my lambs...Feed my sheep." Jn.21:15-17. The Greek word used here is poimain meaning to tend as a shepherd. All elders are to feed the flock as shepherds would but that does not mean that they all have the gifted ministry of shepherd. All elders must shepherd but not all elders are gifted as shepherds.

One of the tasks of the feeding of the flock is admonishing, "...them which ...are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;" (I Thess.5:12). This means to put in mind, call attention to, caution, warn or gently reprove. An Elders ministry is diverse and he must deal with each sheep specifically not just generally. "Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men." (v14).

3. Protecting the Flock.

For three years Paul warned the church at Ephesus with tears rolling down his cheeks concerning future dangers because he knew the things that would face any local church. This is the heart of a genuine local leader. A leader who acts as if nothing can go wrong and who does not watch over the flock carefully is both foolish and negligent.

When Paul gathered the Ephesian Elders he said "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. (Act 20:28-31). What a warning!

Christ also warned of the same, "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." (Mat.7:15) and that the object of these wolves is to scatter the flock (Jn.10:12). When Christ Himself sent forth His first leaders He instructed "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." (Mt.10:16).

Such wolves would come, even disguised as sheep, as true believers or as ministers of the Gospel. They may even come disguised in the garb of the gifted ministry of Prophet. It is the responsibility of the local Elders to be very watchful for such wolves and to protect the church from them. Paul never hesitated to name and warn against someone who was hindering the gospel and who was going to endanger the Church. "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works: Of whom be thou ware also; for he hath greatly withstood our words." (II Tim.4v14-15).

If a man is unwilling to face conflict in the process of protecting the flock he is not fit for the ministry. A faithful Shepherd will never leave the flock to the mercy of a wolf. God uses the eldership to deal with wolves.

GIFTED MINISTRY & ELDERSHIP

The office of eldership in the local church speaks of the function of the leader. But Scripture also speaks of five distinct gifted ministries which Christ gives as ministry gifts for the good and edification of the Church.

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;" (Eph 4:11)

Each Elder must function in the above responsibilities of ruling, feeding and protecting but nowhere in the Word does it say a man must have one of these gifted ministries before becoming an elder. However it would seem impossible to function in the local church in one of these ministries if you were not in leadership or eldership, unless it was as a traveling ministry.

It seems most likely that in the early church some of these men were gifted with such ministries and so ordained as elders while others in their capacities as elders were then gifted by Christ. One thing is sure, "A man's gift maketh room for him..." (Pro.18:16). If a man is truly gifted by God it will soon become very obvious in the local body of believers and to other gifted ministers and God-ordained elders.

However one vital point to be mindful of is that an elder is never seen as qualified to be so because of a gifted ministry. No never. Elders are always qualified and approved by their character and godliness.

A) An Elder can be gifted as an Apostle. Peter the Apostle of the circumcision when writing to the scattered Hebrews in Asia Minor said "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder" (1Pet.5:1). Who can doubt the greatness of the gifted ministry of apostle which Peter functioned in yet here in his latter days he says that he is also functioning as an elder just like the elders who labored amongst these scattered groups of believers.

B) An Elder can be gifted as a Prophet or Teacher. Act 13:1, "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers;" We would expect like the pattern elsewhere in Scripture to find a plurality of elders over the Church at Antioch but instead we see five men gifted with the ministries of either the prophet or the teacher. Two of these men were Barnabas and Paul.

I believe it is clear that Barnabas was a prophet and that Paul was a teacher. Unless Antioch broke with New Testament practice we must assume that these five were the Eldership at Antioch. We are getting an inside view here of eldership which is unique in the New Testament. We are given their number, their names and their ministries.

C) An Elder can be gifted as a Shepherd. 1 Pet.2:25, "For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls." Here Christ is shown to have the gifted ministry of the Shepherd while functioning as Bishop or Elder over the souls of the sheep. All elders or church leaders are not gifted as shepherds, but it is most certainly one of the ministries that God gifts to elders.

Whole churches have been built on the belief that each leader over a church must be gifted as a Pastor or Shepherd, but this is not so. It is but one of the gifted ministries given to local church leaders. There was no gifted pastor/shepherd at Antioch!

Again some have counted the gifted ministry of pastor-shepherd to be synonymous with the office of elder/presbyter/bishop but again this cannot be so in the light of scripture.

I would however say that the gifted ministry of the Shepherd is most fitting, necessary and needy for local church leadership. I believe this gifted ministry will be more numerous than the other four because of how well fitted it is to the daily good of the church.

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