

Biblical Eldership

Whether in a family or a company, whether in the secular world or in things divine, leadership does matter, and it matters a lot. Our particular interest in this paper is that of church leadership, specifically that pertaining to leadership in a truly biblical church assembly. In this setting, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a church to rise higher or walk further than the leadership and the vision of that leadership that represents it. If this be true, the existence, the purpose and the function of the elders as the primary leaders in a church is a great matter.

Biblical precedent of eldership

The Word of God clearly illustrates the pattern of leadership development in the New Testament: (Acts 6:2, 4, 6; 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 13, 22, 23; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; I Pet. 5:1). The establishment and continuation of the service of eldership is evident in at least two points:

1. In the beginning of the church's birth, the apostles who could minister widely were also called elders in their locality of Jerusalem. As an indicator that church leadership should not be a matter of hierarchy, Peter was clearly replaced in his leadership in Jerusalem by James, even though Peter remained an apostle and James was the half-brother of Jesus. Peter faithfully continued as an elder, however, even after being publicly rebuked in Antioch by Paul for his hypocrisy (Acts 15:13-14; 21:18; I Corinthians 15:5, 7; Peter 5:1; Galatians 2:11).

2. In Antioch, there was a new start, a second center of church life and source of ministry. Beginning with Paul, the traveling apostles "appointed elders in every city" (Acts 14:23, 21:18; Titus 1:5). "Apostles" (Greek) and "missionary" (Latin) mean exactly the same thing. Regardless of which they are called, their calling, their life, their ministry and their result must match the biblical pattern to qualify for a biblical result. Anything other than the apostolic way of appointing elders in a proper church is less than the biblical pattern. If the term "missionary" is substituted for the biblical term "apostle, the missionary must be in the pattern of the biblical apostle, in function and ministry to and for the churches.

Qualifications of an elder

The Bible is clear not only of the need for elders, but also of qualifications for them. (Titus 1:5-9; I Timothy 3:1-7). Other supportive verses are throughout the N.T. Of the numerous standards addressed by Paul, it seems that all of them regard human living. While eldership is a spiritual service, its validation comes especially through the daily life of one considered for eldership. It is, therefore, imperative that an untested young man be not hastily chosen or approved for this service (I Tim 5:21-22). Spiritual vibrancy tested in the experience of human living must never be substituted for, or confused with, natural talent. It seems that the personal life and home life of a brother considered for eldership is like a laboratory for the standard of excellence in a pure, holy and glorious church life. The evident standards in a brother include:

1. Being without reproach, for the sake of the Lord's testimony among unbelievers
2. Having but one wife and a home life where children are in proper order
3. Being moderate, hospitable and able to instruct others well
4. Not drinking excessively; no lover of money, impatient, or covetous
5. Neither a novice, contentious or a covetous person; persuasive in healthy teaching
6. A lover of good men, holy, sober, just, holding fast the faithful Word

The calling of an elder

The elders are by definition ones among the church who demonstrate the most advanced relative spiritual and human maturity, and who meet the biblical qualifications for this function. While they are spiritual servants and leaders, the qualifications listed above indicate they have experienced and validated their spirituality in the practicality of godly human living. Their appointments are always in plurality and their functions are various: (Matthew 20:25-28; Acts 6:2, 4; Acts 14:23; 20:28; Titus 1:5-9; Ephesians 4:11-16).

1. By constitution, they are elders, mature ones in the faith, examples in the Lord.
2. As bishops (Gr., episkopos, overseers), they exercise care, guarding the flock.
3. As shepherds (or pastors) and teachers, they feed, nourish and teach the flock.

The lifestyle of an elder

There is no hint in the Bible that an elder may consider himself superior to others, either because of zeal, natural abilities, ambition, or an engaging personality. On the contrary, he is a voluntary servant called by the Lord, clearly in pursuit of God and the eternal purpose of God in the church. To wit:

1. The biblical elder knew nothing of monetary security, or of considering his service a worldly career choice, or of other self-protective vices at the expense of the church. The biblical elder knew he would be among the first ones exposed to any polemic or physical attack by the pagan religious or political world. He knew his love for Christ, for the church and for the Word of God might cost him his family, his security, his respect and life itself. He served in a higher calling, out of inward conviction, out of a gentle love for man and a driving passion for God.

2. The biblical elder endeavored to be first only in dying to himself and serving the Lord. For him, therefore, to die in any other way was nothing new or for which he was unprepared. He loved his Jesus and had already counted the cost of living for Him because he already knew the cost of dying with Him. The conflicts of his heart had been settled once for all and he was free to stand his ground in faith and walk forward in hope and in love. Natural thoughts of pocket book and worldly status could neither impress him nor hold him back. He was one caught up in the love of His heavenly Redeemer with such care that he wished to expend his days on earth rescuing men. His was a heart to serve the Lord, build up the church and defeat the enemy.

3. The biblical elder had a goal, with his fellow elders, to bring all the saints into full function and experience of Christ, so he might appear less even as others became more. He lived for the glory of Christ the Head, not for his own need of fulfillment or for honor among men. He did not use the church for his own covering or satisfaction because he knew the Christ who is all in all. His life was therefore about others, not about himself. His goal was to build up each of the saints in love, bring them into fellowship, function and maturity with all the saints.

4. The biblical elder lived as a validation of the reality of Christ by his love among the brothers. With other elders, he was in need always that the love he experienced be an expression of divine unity in redeemed humanity. Nothing less than this would accomplish the Lord's calling and vision for brothers dwelling together in unity as a collective portrait locally of the love of Christ universally. He was given to the study of the Word and a life of prayer for enriching ministry to the church (Acts 6:4; John 13:34-35; 17:21-23; Eph 4:15-16). He was not a lonely, spiritual giant but a humble servant, dispensing high things to a stained humanity. He was not a worldly boss with a committee around him. Rather, he with other elders was a unit of spirituality living out a collective fellowship of uplifted humanity.

5. A biblical elder who served and led well was deemed “worthy of double honor”, especially if he labored well in the Word and in doctrine. Such elders were “worthy of...reward” as are laboring oxen in the field. By this word, the apostle admonished the saints in the churches to care for material needs of such faithful and given ones.

6. The biblical elder was a pattern of the highest humanity, yet always capable of himself being weak in the flesh. On the one hand, he was a guide in the ways of faith, being redeemed, being transformed, and being sanctified progressively in his walk with the Lord. On the other hand, he might be accused of something awry, and that accusation needed to be supported by other witnesses. He, too, was subject to sins of the flesh and, if need be, subject to public discipline “that others also may fear”.

7. The biblical elder was characterized always as an approachable brother. His godly humanity allowed him to be ever in need of, and capable of receiving, the love and response of the saints for whom he lived and yielded himself. He paid the price for a lifestyle of accountability to the Lord for the church, together with the other elders. He, like all of the saints, needed encouragement and their obedience to the Lord with him, so their walk together might be of joy and not of regret (I Tim. 5:17-20; Heb 13:7, 17).

Substitutes for biblical eldership

Biblical eldership is a spiritual administration, an administration of the divine through an experienced and selfless, redeemed humanity. As with anything truly spiritual, substitutions quickly come. By natural understanding, by humanistic pragmatism, by passivity and deviate doctrine, obedience to this administrative pattern of Christ was gradually infringed upon in the history of the church. It was increasingly substituted with human wisdom by human effort, perhaps sincerely endeavoring to lead the church well, but apart from the pure faith of Christ.

As a result, biblical eldership was essentially lost, except for occasional rediscovery through the centuries by an occasional band of believers. In those precious times, refreshing testimonies depict pure hearts and selfless lives longing for the pure Word of God. Obedience to the Lord of such ones carries in their lives the mark of His divine approval. Apart from such ones in the faith, the biblical pattern has been replaced universally by various forms of “church government”, invented by worldly accommodation of human reason and natural endeavors, attempting to satisfy spiritual needs and longings their own way.

The resulting history of this degraded practice of biblical truth brought forth The “Roman Catholic Church” with its bombastic, evil papal system. From State churches such as those in Denmark and England developed a perverted system of subjected bishops, whereby the queen or king of the country is the head of the church. The Protestant churches have a denominational, hierarchial, pastoral system based on the clergy-laity they unwittingly continued, even as they were endeavoring to leave Romanization of the church behind them. And unassociated Free groups and Independent churches may answer to no one except themselves, which tends to limit both their strengths and accentuate their weaknesses. All of the above practices are contrary to the pattern of life, truth and fellowship among the proper, biblical churches in the New Testament way.

The great significance of pragmatism, convenience and worldly ways replacing biblical eldership

It is a most significant matter that biblical church eldership has been decimated through the years and centuries following the glory that was initiated by the Lord in the early years.

There are only a few things in the entire Bible of which it is said that God hates. One of these is twice-stated as something the Lord hates, making it seem doubly damaging to His purpose in the proper leadership of a church.

Firstly, the deeds of the Nicolaitanes (Revelation 2:6); and then the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes (Revelation 2:15) are the objects of His hatred. As there is no group in history that was clearly called “Nicolaitanes”, we do well to consider the composition of this word in Greek. It is composed of two words: the first one meaning “to conquer”, and the second referring to “the laity”, or “the common man”.

It must be concluded that the clergy/laity system is of the utmost damage to the Lord’s Body, for it makes impotent most of His members. Ephesians makes it clear that the Head and the Body, as the biblical New Man, includes all of His believers as members attached directly to Him in life, in growth and function unto full, corporate maturity. The mature corporate man is God’s answer to Satan’s destruction of the first universal man, Adam. The biblical church is the container of the express wisdom of God, but the tendency of clergy is to over-function or function on behalf of the members of the Body. This system is convenient, but absolutely perverts the intention of God and the reason for the death of Christ on the cross in purchasing the church. It obstructs terribly the Spirit of Christ in accomplishing His passion and purpose in the saints for the eternal purpose of God (Acts 20:28; Eph 1:22-23; 2:1-22; 3:9-11; Galatians 3:1-3).

It is therefore of utmost seriousness to accommodate the clergy/laity system of fallen Christendom for any reason. The epistle to Ephesus was written “to the saints” because the elders were not the focus of the church. The elders apparently were learning to bring all into maturity (Eph 4:11-24). Yet, Ephesus became the first church in Revelation identified as the beginning of degradation among the churches, as it slid towards a momentous escalation of corruption in subsequent history of the church.

If a group of believers passively accepts this deviated, degraded church today, it is of great significance they accept an unbiblical way, even while numbly declaring the Bible truth that “every word is inspired by God”. If we fear God, let us humble ourselves, being exposed by His light, and casting ourselves upon his mercy to obtain grace for obedience in faith to the marvelous standard and pattern of the biblical standard. He initiated the church, and we would do well to prevail upon Him to bring us back to Himself and to His way. Only when the church takes the biblical way can there be a biblical result. May His mercy be upon us that we might receive such light and respond with absolute obedience.