

“Ready to Give a Defense”

Answering Our Friends’ Religious Questions

Lesson Eleven - The Eldership of the Church

Introduction. The Bible mandates appointed leaders over local churches called (among other names) “elders.” These leaders are to be chosen based upon specific qualifications and are to lead within the limits of the role outlined for them in Scripture. The religious world has seen many departures, alterations and man-made innovations to this role which are not taught in Scripture.

I Biblical Teachings on the Eldership.

A. Names given to the work.

1. *Presbuteros* (πρεσβύτερος) - meaning “older.” Presbyter = Elder. A form of this word is used in I Timothy 4:14 used of the body of elders (i.e. “the presbytry” = eldership). This name describes the role of the elder in relation to their age. They are not young and inexperienced, but they are those elder in the faith.
2. *Episcopos* (ἐπίσκοπος) - meaning “overseer.” Bishop = Overseer. This is used in Acts 20:28 & I Timothy 3:1. This name refers to the same role as that of elder (see Acts 20:17), yet it describes the nature of their work - that of oversight.
3. *Poimen* (ποιμήν) - meaning “shepherd.” Pastor = Shepherd. This is used in Acts 20:28, I Peter 5:1,2 & Ephesians 4:11 of the same role as that of a bishop or elder. This name also describes the nature of their work. As spiritual shepherds they are involved in feeding and protecting the flock.

B. Qualifications for service (Acts 14:23; 20:28).

1. Paul’s instructions to Timothy (I Timothy 3:1-7).
2. Paul’s instructions to Titus (Titus 1:5-9).

C. Responsibilities of the eldership.

1. Peter’s teachings (I Peter 5:1-5).
2. The Hebrew writers teachings (Hebrews 13:17).

II. Departures From the Biblical Pattern for the Authority of Eldership.

A. The expansion of authority.

- 1 Absolute submission. Some churches have taught that a bishop has authority to direct whether God’s word has directed or not. The “pope,” the Roman Catholic bishop of Rome is said to have “papal infallibility.” In many controversies, some take essentially the same view when they suggest that the members of a congregation must follow the elders (even without Scriptural authority). The Bible gives the eldership limited authority within the bounds of Gods word (Acts 5:29)..
- 2 Expanded oversight. Some churches have presumed to give a bishop authority over more than one church. Others, who reject this, allow practices when it comes to foreign evangelism in which elders in one country control the affairs of churches in other countries. The Bible teaches that the authority of the eldership is limited to the local congregation (Acts 14:23; Acts 11:27-30).
- 3 The “Mother Church” concept. Some teach that the elders of larger churches can direct the affairs of smaller churches. The Bible grants no greater authority to any church over another.

Lesson Eleven - The Eldership of the Church

4 “The Pastor” concept. Some apply the Scriptural name “pastor” to a preacher, and give to this individual leadership over the congregation. In some cases this “pastor” is hired and fired by a board of deacons. The Bible always teaches a plurality of elders (Philippians 1:1). Although a preacher may serve as an elder (I Timothy 5:17), a preacher possesses no authority in and of themselves. Deacons, while appointed servants within a church, serve under the eldership (I Timothy 3:8-13).

B. The denial of authority.

- 1 “Elders have no authority.” In reaction to some of the abuses regarding the authority of the eldership, some have suggested that the elders have no authority. While the authority of the elders is limited to the word of God, the fact that the members are to be submissive and obedient to them makes it clear that they do possess authority (Hebrews 13:7, 17).
- 2 “There is no such things as an appointed eldership.” Another reaction to abuse is the claim that the role of elders was limited to the New Testament and their direct appointment by the Apostles. While it is clear that the Apostles appointed elders (Acts 14:23), they also instructed others to follow their example (Titus 1:5; Philippians 4:9).

Conclusion. The Bible has set elders (bishops or shepherds) over local congregations to lead them in accordance with the dictates of God’s word. Although their authority is limited, they do possess the right to lead God’s people. In matters of faith it is the responsibility of every congregation to obey God in all things, even if the eldership does otherwise. In matters of judgment it is the duty of the congregation to submit to the eldership.