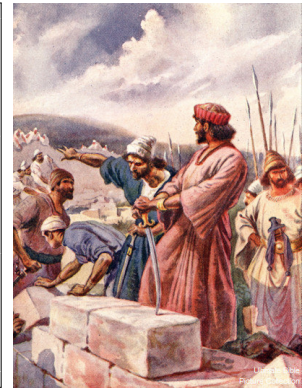


The Sword and The Trowel

They which builded on the wall, and they that bare burdens, with those that laded, every one with one of his hands wrought in the work, and with the other hand held a weapon. For the builders, every one had his sword girded by his side, and so builded (Nehemiah 4:17-18)

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Shepherds, Not Managers

I am writing this article after some recent reflections. One of my best friends had recently become an elder. Then I learned something new about “desiring the office of an elder.” Later on I had a conversation with another preacher and he related how one of the elders was failing to do the work of an elder. Next I thought of elders I have worked with and have known through association in other churches. I feel that all of these men thought that they were doing what was necessary. However, sometimes what one thinks may be necessary may not actually be what the Lord has required. There is a difference.

Twenty Eight Years of Observation

I once knew a preacher whose father was also a preacher. Both of them had some odd views about the eldership. One day I persuaded him to explain these views. By the time he was through an elder was little more than a figure-head. I do not know why we need all these qualifications for a mere figure-head. I feel sure that some preachers (and not a few brethren) do not want elders to be any more than figureheads. If they were more than mere figureheads they might get in the way of a lot of things.

Another preacher told me how satisfied he was with the elders where he preached. He said that the thing that made them such good elders was their great success in secular business. Once again I wonder what of the qualifications, given his remark. I was glad that they were successful in business. However, that is a very minor point when it comes to success as an elder of the church. We need to keep in mind that

the church is not a business and certainly ought not to be run like a secular business.

There were three churches that had elders in our area in Indiana. I preached on my rotation at two of them. I cannot recall much leadership out of them. Mostly they were concerned with guarding the treasury and making sure no one got their feelings hurt by the preacher! They made sure that things were done “decently and in order” during the assembly and that was about it.

The third church in the area had one man serving as an elder who had the spirit of Diotrephes worse than anyone I have ever encountered. The other man was an elder in name only. He served so the other man could do so. This latter man could not do anything unless the former man gave him permission. Obviously there was a view about “ruling over you” that transcended anything in the New Testament.

Then, on the other hand, I held about four meetings at a church in Ohio where two men served as elders. These men served, to the best of my knowledge, in a proper manner. You never heard any gripe from the members about them, only words of appreciation for them. Neither man had the disposition that he “always had to sit in the front of the sled.” I always admired their compatibility.

I appreciate those elders I have known who serve or have served with fear and trembling as shepherds of the flock. I wish their tribe would increase. My hope and prayer is that every church might have scripturally qualified elders serving as the leaders God would have them to be. And, let me emphasize this -- we need shepherds, not managers.

Thoughts on the Qualifications

Virtually any study or discussion of

church “elders” immediately focuses on the qualifications for this office. Does the person have “believing children,” what does that entail and must all his children be faithful? Is the person “apt or able to teach” and is he a good leader in the home? But when was the last time you heard a significant discussion of the “work” of elders?

Those ordained to be elders certainly need to meet the divine qualifications enumerated in scripture. Yet, it is not unusual to study these qualifications for years, spend months selecting and ordaining men, only to discover the new elders have little idea of what it is they are supposed to do.

It is quickly observable that only a handful of the qualifications are unique to elders. Not every Christian must be a man, husband, father or non-novice. But all the other qualifications are character traits and behaviors to which every Christian is directed to grow.

Thus, what we are looking for in an elder, generally speaking, is a “mature” Christian man with experience in leading a smaller group (his family) to lead a larger group (local congregation).

Most of the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 aren't to be found in the absolute perfection of men considered for the office. Granted, a person is either a man, father and husband--or not. But the other qualifications require congregational judgment, in light of the work to be undertaken. There are degrees of ability to teach and hospitality and success in guiding one's house. Being human, the qualifications of temperance and sober-mindedness and loving good, can't be measured in absolute perfection.

Yet, we need mature men able to do the work of elders, able to set an example of those behaviors and character traits to which every Christian seeks to attain. Thus, we can choose men who

have attained a high degree of accomplishment in these qualities.

What Is The Work Of Elders?

Elders in the church are to “rule” or lead (1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17). But they also are told not to act as “lords” over the congregation (1 Peter 5:1-3). This has led to all sorts of debate among brethren. Those who want considerable executive power exercised by elders emphasize the passages that speak of “ruling.” Those who want to limit or eliminate the exercise of elder power emphasize the “no lording” citation.

So how are we to properly understand what elders are to do? What constitutes their authority and work?

Elders are not to become “masters” of the congregation. That, essentially, is what it means to “lord” over someone. We do not owe elders service. We owe that to Christ. The Bible clearly says there is “one Lord” and that is Jesus (Eph. 4:5).

But, someone will say, if you strip away that much authority...the right to demand compliance with his directives...the elder really would have no power.

It might seem so at first, but the Bible presents another model of leadership. It is not the rule of superior position. Elders don’t have a right to rule and lead because they are superior to the rest of the congregation, but because the congregation has seen in them the maturity and character traits they need to follow.

Elder is a designation that illustrates part of their work. It is the most common term used for the leaders of a local congregation. It demonstrates a principle found in both covenants, that maturity should be reasonably respected, honored and deferred to by the less mature. In age and maturity and experience there should be wisdom and knowledge.

Church leaders also are called bishops or overseers. This implies they are to superintend, guard and oversee. But what are they to superintend, guard and oversee? The treasury? The building? Or souls? Maybe all the answers are correct. But watching for the well-being of souls is the priority as Hebrews 13:17 illustrates. The word episkopeo means “look at, take care, see to it” (1 Peter

5:2). Thus, we can conclude that for an overseer to oversee he must be deeply concerned about the flock, visit the flock in times of distress, see to it that souls are cared for, and, obviously, he must be willing to get involved in the lives of those he oversees.

Leaders also are referred to in scripture as pastors or shepherds. The terms are used figuratively to relate the physical job of shepherding to the spiritual one of being an elder. A good shepherd supplies needs and gives comfort (Psalm 23). Jesus described himself as the “good shepherd” (Jn. 10:11-16). The shepherd always makes sure the sheep are well cared for in all capacities. He will make sure they have security and have the things necessary to sustain them. Thus, he feeds and protects the flock. And now we see why God requires a shepherd to be “able to teach.”

The Church’s Relationship to Elders

No husband can “make” his wife obey his rule by physical force. If he tries, he’ll find himself involved in sin. A husband’s successful rule and leadership in the home requires the “deference” of his wife, that is, her agreement to be led by him in accordance with God’s will.

It is no different in the Lord’s church. As godly women agree to give deference to the leadership of their husbands--when they marry them--so a congregation agrees to give deference to elders--when they ordain (appoint) them.

Deference involves submitting or yielding to the judgment, will or opinion of another. Listen to scripture. “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls...” (Heb. 13:17).

When you take deference and combine it with the leader’s appeal to God’s word as the uniting, guiding force, you get the result all leadership is designed to achieve--oneness and unity of purpose and action.

Again, as we try to understand how elders lead, observe two elements that are involved:

1) Elders who know God’s word and have developed the ability within their families and through other parts of their lives to persuade others with love to do what is right.

2) A congregation willing to listen and be persuaded to do what is right by mature, godly men.

If you remove the first criteria, you won’t have a congregation of one accord. In fact, you won’t even have a congregation that knows what is going on. If you remove the second criteria, then you have a congregation with an attitude that says “you can’t make me do that” and thus you have a divided church.

Misunderstandings

Too often I fear that the idea of service gets lost on the part of the elders and/or the congregation. The congregation has determined that certain qualified men are appointed in order to serve the congregation. However, elders will be unable to do this if the congregation isn’t willing to follow their lead. It is also true that the congregation will be reluctant to follow the lead of a group of despots. This type of misunderstanding has doomed many a local church.

A church fortunate enough to have scriptural elders serving in a proper capacity does not have the luxury to sit back and let the elders do all the “heavy lifting.” Elders are not ordained to serve so the rest of the congregation can “have the day off.” There is still so much work that each member of a local church is required to perform. Having or not having elders does not make this work vanish. At the same time, wise elders should not engage in a futile attempt to seize all the work away from the members. Success comes only when all do what they are supposed to do.

Conclusion

I want to repeat my plea for there to be shepherds, not managers, over God’s heritage. Young men need to begin early in preparing themselves for some future date when they might be called upon to serve as elders in the Lord’s church. There is no better work.

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