

THE ELDERSHIP
(Some Questions About the Eldership)
Lesson 12

I. INTRODUCTION.

- A. Many Questions Have Been Asked by Brethren Concerning the Eldership. Our Attitudes About the Eldership (Reflected in These Questions) Affect Our Interpretation of the Scriptures Relating to the Eldership.
- B. We Must Always Seek Biblical Answers to Our Questions.

II. QUESTIONS.

- A. "Is it right to speak of 'the authority of elders' over the local church?"
 - 1. Argument: The two Greek words used for the "rule" of elders (*proistemi* — 1 Thess. 5:12 and 1 Tim. 5:17; and *hegeomai* — Heb. 13:7, 17, 24) do not mean "rule by authority", but "lead by example". The argument is that elders can lead by example and influence only. They do not have the right to enforce any decision of theirs. The Greek words for "authority" (*exousia, exousiazo, dunastes, epitage, huperochē, authenteo*) are never used of the elders' work. Elders who exercise authority are "lording it over" the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).
 - 2. Answers.
 - a) Yes, elders lead by example and influence, but so do all the members of the local church. Can all older members who meet the qualifications of elders function as elders?
 - b) Yes, some elders do abuse their authority and become power-hungry, dictatorial, obstinate, high-handed, over-bearing, or tyrannical elders. But, we should not rob elders of their authority because some elders abuse their function. 1 Peter 5:2-3 does not cancel out the authority of elders as some have thought.
 - c) Elders do have authority. Their authority is by virtue of:
 - (1) *Their function*. How can they make wise decisions (elder), oversee (bishop), or shepherd (pastor) the flock without some kind of authority? (Review Lesson 12 for the specific duties of elders.)
 - (2) *Their responsibility (stewardship)*. How can they manage God's house without some kind of authority?
 - d) Elders do not have unlimited authority. Their authority is limited by:
 - (1) *The right source of authority*. Their authority comes from Christ (Mt. 28:18; Eph. 1:21), not from themselves, the congregation, or the preacher. Elders do not represent "the highest authority in the church" as some have said.

- (2) *The right kind of authority.* They cannot *make* laws (Jas.4:12). They cannot bind (prohibit) where Christ has not bound and they cannot loose (allow) where Christ has not loosed (Mt. 16:19). Elders do not *make* authority; they exercise and enforce the authority of Christ. They do this by "holding fast the faithful word" (Tit. 1:9).
- (3) *The right attitude toward authority.* They cannot "lord it over" the church in matters of opinion (1 Pet. 5:3). Some elders do "lord it over" the church because of ignorance, fear, immaturity, or loving to have the pre-eminence.
- (4) *The right scope of authority.* They cannot rule over the other elders within the eldership, nor can they rule over any Christian outside the local church of which they are a member (Ac. 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). They can, however, rule over Christian members in and out of the assembly, and over spiritual and physical matters. In addition to these limitations, God put two safeguards in place to keep an elder from becoming domineering. First, a plurality of elders. Second, two negative qualifications: "not self-willed" (Tit. 1:7) and "not contentious" (1 Tim. 3:3). The details of a local church "obeying" and "submitting" (Heb. 13:17) to its elders will be discussed in another lesson.

B. "Is the eldership an 'office'?" "Are elders church 'officers'?"

1. Argument: Elders do not have authority because they do not hold an "office".
2. Answers: a) There is no Greek word for "office" in 1 Timothy 3:1 or Acts 1:20. One Greek word (*episcopoe*) is found there and it means "overseership". b) Our English word "office" can mean three things: (1) a service, function, or duty performed; (2) a position or rank; or (3) a room or building. "Office" can rightly be used of the eldership with the first meaning only.

C. "What is the length of an elder's tenure?"

1. Argument — Two Extremes: Once an elder, always an elder. Or, elders for a specific number of years and then "re-election" or "reorganization".
2. Answers: a) An elder can be an elder for as long as he is qualified and for as long as he properly performs his duties. A disqualified elder, or elder who does not perform his duties, should voluntarily resign before being asked or told to do so. b) An elder is not above sin or rebuke (1 Tim. 5:19-22; 1 Tim.3:6). An elder who refuses to repent must be disciplined as any unruly member must be disciplined. Elders are not immune to disciplinary action.

D. "Can one man serve as an elder?"

1. Argument: If two elders are serving and one dies or moves away, that does not disqualify the other one from serving.
2. Answers: a) The death or moving away of one elder does not "disqualify" the other elder in the sense of being qualified according to 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The remaining elder is still "qualified", but he is not authorized to serve alone. b) God

says that there must be a plurality of elders in a local church (there is a command, Tit. 1:5; an approved example, Acts 14:23; and a necessary inference, 1 Pet. 5:1-3).

E. "Can a preacher serve as an elder?"

1. Argument: A preacher may not serve as an elder.
2. Answers: a) This means that a man cannot serve as an elder *because* he is a preacher. The Scriptures do not teach such an idea. b) Peter was a preacher and an elder (1 Pet. 5:1).

F. "Can a local church with elders also have a paid preacher?"

1. Argument: If the local church has a paid preacher, he would be doing some of the same work that the elders were appointed to do.
2. Answers: a) How long did Paul remain with each local church after he ordained elders (Ac. 14:23)? And how long did Titus stay in Crete after he appointed elders there (Tit. 1:5)? b) Both Paul (Ac. 20:17ff, esp. v.31) and Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3) labored with the local church at Ephesus while they had elders.

G. "What about the qualifications of an elder?"

1. Arguments: "No man can qualify today"; or, "No man is perfect" (arguments that are usually made by people who don't want elders). "Appoint the best we have"; "The qualifications are flexible"; "Grow into the qualifications"; "Only one qualification — blameless"; "Elders combined together meet all the qualifications;" or, "If he does the work of an elder, he is an elder" (arguments that are usually made by people who want elders at any cost).
2. Answers: a) First, the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul wasted a lot of time and ink if no one today can qualify to be an elder. Second, let us not require more of a man (sinless perfection) than God does. b) Each man "must" (1 Tim. 3:2) meet all the qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, no more, no less. And, all these qualifications must be found in a man "first" (1 Tim. 3:10), before he is appointed as an elder.

III. CONCLUSION: All Questions About the Eldership Must Be Answered by God's Word, Not Man's Wisdom.

Lesson Twelve Discussion

1. T or F — Our questions and attitudes about the eldership may affect our interpretation of the Scriptures relating to the eldership.
2. Do elders have any authority at all? If not, why? If so, what kind?
3. What are some limits that God has placed on the rule of elders?
4. Give some examples of how an eldership might "lord it over" the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).
5. Is there any sense in which the word "office" can be used to describe the eldership?
6. The length of an elder's tenure is determined by what two factors?
7. Can one qualified man serve alone as an elder? Why? Can a preacher serve as an elder? Why?
8. The church at _____ had a paid preacher and elders together at the same time.
9. Underline the correct choice: (Each of, Some of) of the men seeking to be elders (do not have to, must) meet (all, some) of the qualifications laid down in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. These qualifications are to be found in (each of, some of) the men (after, before) they have been appointed to serve.