

**THE ELDERSHIP**  
**(Restoring A Biblical Eldership in the Local Church)**  
**Lesson 9**

**I. INTRODUCTION.**

A. Why Study the Eldership? We Study...

1. To accurately explain what the eldership is. What Biblical terms describe the eldership? What was the original purpose, function, and duties of the eldership in the NT?
2. To restore the Biblical eldership to its rightful place in the Lord's church. Can the NT eldership be restored today? Many changes in the eldership have been made over the centuries. Some want to abandon the eldership all together. What is the Biblical structure and style of the eldership?
3. To challenge false traditions. Church tradition has often obscured the true meaning and function of the eldership. What does the Bible say about the function of the eldership? What words are used to describe the eldership?
4. To revitalize present elders and to raise up new elders. Present elders need to be challenged to have greater vision and commitment in their work. Men who are not elders need to see their responsibility to lead and serve for the future protection and growth of the local church.
5. To teach the local church their obligations to their elders. What important responsibilities do we have toward our spiritual leaders? What relationship do the local church members have with the eldership?

B. A large portion of material in this lesson was adapted from information found in *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch (Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1986).

**II. THE ELDERSHIP — GOD'S GIFT TO THE LOCAL CHURCH.**

A. The Importance of the Eldership.

1. First, the eldership in the organization of the local church is important because not just any organizational structure will do.
2. Second, the eldership is important because God has provided explicit instructions concerning the Eldership. The following NT passages address the role of the eldership: Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2,4,6,22,23; 16:4; 20:17,28; 21:18; Eph. 4:11-12; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:14; 5:17,19; Tit. 1:5,7; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24; Jas. 5:14; and 1 Pet. 5:1-2.
3. Third, the eldership is important because the spiritual maturity of Christian men is at stake. Men who do not view the eldership as important will not mature as they ought, they will not take on this yoke of responsibility, and they will not enter into this spiritual battle.

B. Ten Distinctive Features of the Biblical Eldership:

1. Humble service.
2. Male leadership.
3. Terms (elder, bishop, pastor) used interchangeably.
4. Shared oversight.
5. Function (work), not just a figurehead.
6. Non-clergy-laity structure.
7. Elders with authority.
8. Scriptural qualifications.
9. Congregational submission, support, and cooperation.
10. Two or more men selected and appointed.

C. A Defense of the Eldership.

1. Many in the religious community, including some brethren, have abandoned the place of the eldership in local church organization. For example, Charles Holt in his papers *The Sentinel of Truth* (1960's) and *The Examiner* (1980's) tried to eliminate the Biblical concept of the eldership among our brethren. The following arguments made to support the no-elder theory all fall short of the truth: "Elders are just older men"; "There is no such 'office' as elders"; "There is no authority of elders over the local church"; "There is no need for elders today"; "No one can qualify for the eldership today"; "We do not know how to appoint elders today"; "We do not have anyone today to appoint elders"; "There is some work that elders cannot do today"; "The H.S. does not make elders today"; and, "Some NT churches did not have elders, so we do not need them today".
2. It is clear from apostolic practice and teaching in the NT that there is a place for the eldership in the local church. The eldership is a select group of older men appointed to oversee and shepherd the local church (see the NT passages listed above, II.A.2). The eldership is the most *appropriate* structure for governing the local church because the local church is a "family" of brothers and sisters in Christ. The eldership is the most *effective* form of oversight in the local church because God's wisdom is displayed in the eldership and we cannot improve on God's wisdom. The eldership is God's gift to the local church.

### III. THE ELDERSHIP — HUMBLE SERVANTS.

A. Elders Are Humble Servants.

1. Worldly concepts of power, rule, authority, and hierarchy will corrupt and destroy the eldership and the rest of God's people.
2. Elders are to be humble servants. Study these passages about humility carefully: Prov. 6:16-17; Mt. 5:3; 11:29; 18:4; 20:25-28; 23:1-12; Mk. 9:33-35; 10:42-44;

Lk. 22:24-27; Jn. 13:3-17; Phil. 2:3-8; and Jas. 4:6. Note especially Acts 20:19, 35, 1 Timothy 3:6, and 1 Peter 5:5 in the context of instructions to elders.

#### B. Authority and Humble Service.

1. Humble service does not imply that elders have no authority at all. Jesus is *regulating* authority in Matthew 20:25-28, not *removing* it. He is denouncing an authoritarian hierarchy, not authority per se. A certain kind of authority is excluded in this passage, not all authority.
2. Elders have authority, but they are not authoritarian (authoritarian = submission that cannot be justified by truth or morality; using power in an unprincipled way to maintain a position; controlling personal liberties; demanding agreement with self, not with the truth; unreasonable control; etc.). The authority of elders will be studied more in detail in a subsequent lesson.
3. Jesus (Mt. 7:28-29; 11:29-30) and Paul (2 Cor. 1:23-2:4; 10:8; 11:29; 12:1ff, 21; 13:8-10) are good examples of authority tempered with humble service.

### IV. THE ELDERSHIP — LESSONS FROM ISRAEL'S ELDERS.

#### A. Israel's Elders.

1. Older men appointed to be the spiritual counselors and leaders of Israel were called "the elders" (Heb. *zachen*). They are found about 110 times in OT scripture, from the exodus (Ex. 3:16), to the restoration after Babylonian captivity (Ezra 10:14).
2. Some specific duties of Israel's elders are mentioned in the following verses: Ex. 18:21-22; 19:7; 24:10; Lev. 4:13-15; Num. 11:15-17; Deut. 1:13-18; 19:12; 21:2-4,6,19-20; 22:13ff; 25:79; 29:10; 31:9-13; Josh. 20:4; 23:1ff; 24:1ff, and 2 Sam. 5:3.

#### B. What Can We Learn from Israel's Elders for a Study of New Testament Elders? Israel's Elders Were:

1. Filling an important role in spiritual leadership.
2. A distinct governing body of men with certain religious functions, not merely older men.
3. A collective body, not one individual.
4. A part of an appropriate and effective form of organization for Israel.
5. A self-governing body of men able to perpetuate itself under all conditions.
6. Honored and respected by the people for their wisdom, authority, and leadership.
7. A group of men, not women.
8. Given specific roles or duties to perform as Israel's protectors, governors, administrators, and leaders. They were not mere figureheads.
9. Judged for their failure to lead God's people properly (Ezek. 34).

**V. CONCLUSION.**

We Cannot Depart from the Biblical Eldership and Produce Anything Better. Let Us Do All That We Can to Promote the Biblical Eldership in the Local Church. It is God's Gift to the Local Church!

## Lesson Nine Discussion

1. Why study the eldership?
2. What are some reasons why the eldership is so important to the local church?
3. What are some distinctive features of the biblical eldership that are often not found in many churches today?
4. How would you defend the biblical eldership against those who say we don't have or need elders in the local church today?
5. What can destroy a good eldership in a short amount of time?
6. What two-fold attitude must an elder have while he is a member of the eldership?
7. What is Jesus teaching about in Matthew 20:25-28?
8. Can you list two duties that "the elders" of Israel had that are basically the same as the duties of NT elders?
9. What principles found in "the elders" of Israel provide a good background for a study of the NT eldership?
10. What are some ways that the local church can promote or prevent the restoration of the biblical eldership?