

Authority in the Church

*For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.
2 Corinthians 13:8*

Jesus used the word “church” (*ekklesia*) only two times in His recorded ministry. In Matthew 16:18 He told Peter He would build His church on the rock of the revelation that He was the Son of God. In Matthew 18:17 He instructs believers to bring an unrepentant sinner before the whole church. Clearly He knew there would be a special group of people who would represent His kingdom on earth. But it also appears that He left many of the details concerning how the church would function to be discovered after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

The word *ekklesia* literally means “called out.” At a basic level, the church consists of all those whom God has called to be separated from the world and who are joined together by their common union in Christ. In Paul’s words, the church is “his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:23).

Clearly, the church must never allow itself to drift into being simply another human organization. Most organizations are formed because there is a goal or purpose shared by a number of individuals which can be better accomplished if they band together in some fashion. In contrast, the church, or the “body of Christ,” is better described not as an *organization* but as an *organism*. It is a living being. It is what it is, not because there is a shared purpose, but because there is a shared relationship.

Every member of the body is directly connected to the head. We are specifically told to hold fast to the head, “from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God” (Colossians 2:19). To be sure, we are also connected to each other, but the life and substance of the church originates with the Lord Jesus.

Whenever people group together, even in a group of two, there arise questions as to how they are to behave toward each other. Is one person given responsibility for the well-being of the other? Is one person to obey the other? Who leads, who follows? How are they supposed to work together? What keeps one from hurting the other? Who makes choices for the group? Can they freely go their separate ways?

These questions can all be summed up as the *question of authority*. It incorporates all issues of relationship, including influence, control, service, liability and loyalty. No organization can long survive that does not address and resolve these questions concerning the expected behavior of its members. However, in the organism that is called Christ’s body, the question of authority takes on an entirely new meaning. A primary purpose of this paper will be to search out the biblical instruction regarding how authority is to function in the Christian church.

The English word “authority” is derived from the Latin word *auctor*, which simply means author or originator or source. The one who has authority is the one who makes the rules, who sets into motion certain actions. He’s the boss. His ideas and his goals are received and carried out by those under him. Often there is a “chain of command,” that is, authority which is passed down to others in

the group. An individual could thus be under one person and over another. But for each action taken by the group, there is ultimately one person at the top who can be held responsible for the results.

To understand authority in the church we must consult the New Testament writings. The Greek word most frequently translated “authority” is *exousia*, which is often also translated “power.” *Exousia* is a combined form of two Greek words, *ek* (which means “out of”) and *eimi* (which literally means “I exist” or “I am”). It would be consistent to define *exousia* as a power that proceeds out of the very essence of a being. It is our understanding, therefore, that from the biblical perspective the source of all true authority is the source of all being, that is, God the Father.

Our studies have also led us to believe that there are two distinct ways in which authority flows outward from God. The first we will call *civil authority*. This kind of authority operates as a chain of command. When God made Adam and Eve, He explicitly gave them dominion over His creation. “Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26).

Here we see that God intended to hold Adam and Eve at least somewhat responsible for what happened to the other creatures He had made. The only way He could properly give them such a responsibility was to also give them the power to direct in some fashion the lives of those creatures. The very act of naming the animals symbolized Adam’s rulership over them.

It is likely that before the fall Adam and Eve had full cooperation from those creatures they had been assigned to rule. Following their sin, we know that “creation was subjected to frustration” (Romans 8:20). Adam and his offspring were still required to rule, but their leadership had been corrupted, and the creatures over which they ruled no longer submitted willingly to their authority. Intense hostilities also arose among the people, and by the time of Noah there was great chaos on the earth.

Throughout the Old Testament we can observe various forms of civil authority. God raised up first judges, and then kings, and placed in their hands the words of His law, His covenant. Over and over again, He communicated to His people that if they would “do what is right and good in the Lord’s sight,” (Deuteronomy 6:18), He would give them peace and prosperity. But as the people (and frequently their leaders) disregarded the commands of God, the blessings which God would have given them were removed and judgments were meted out instead.

Civil authority takes place by God’s appointment and by His appointment only. Romans 13:1 tells us that “there is no authority except that which God has established.” It is also clear that everything these authorities do is in some way under God’s control. “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Proverbs 21:1). Moreover, we are told to submit to and to pray for “kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Timothy 2:2). Children are told to obey their parents, “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth” (Ephesians 6:3).

Perhaps the clearest description of civil authority is found in the story of the centurion. “For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it” (Luke 7:8). Quite simply, the centurion obeys the commanding officer above him, and for this reason expects those soldiers

under him to obey in similar fashion. It was his understanding of this principle (which in verse 9 Jesus calls faith) that enabled him to believe Jesus could command the sickness to leave his servant.

Let us make a few more observations about civil authority. First, it is for the most part not voluntary, either on the part of the authority or the one in submission to that authority. God will hold kings and fathers and husbands accountable for the results of their leadership, whether they exercise it willingly, well, or even consciously at all. Because all authority is derived from God, He promises a day of reckoning. “Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (Colossians 3:25, 4:1).

Second, this authority has no necessary connection to personal qualifications. Complete ineptitude or great evilness does not remove the responsibility to lead, nor the responsibility of those under that authority to submit. Peter notes, “Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. . . .To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:18,21).

From God’s perspective, civil authority exists for the benefit of the ones under that authority. Rulers at all levels are called to serve those under their influence. “The one in authority. . .is God’s servant to do you good” (Romans 13:3,4). The service may be to protect, to provide for, or to discipline. In the broadest sense, these civil authorities are commissioned to implement and enforce God’s laws. They are tasked with bringing order into the chaos of a fallen world.

How long will this sort of authority last? Jesus has been called the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Timothy 6:15). David declares, “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations” (Psalms 144:13). There is nothing in Scripture that implies that God will erase civil authority until the very end of time. During the final thousand years, the saints will be called to reign with Him (Revelation 20:6). “Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power....When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15:24,28).

Before we move into a discussion of the second way authority flows from God the Father, we should examine another kind of authority that exists temporarily in our world. This authority does not have its source in the goodness of God, but instead comes from evil power. It too connects people together, but its essence is control and its end is destruction. We will call it *demonic authority*.

In Isaiah 14:13,14, we are given a description of the fall of Satan, who said in his heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God....I will make myself like the Most High.” Because of his blatant rebellion against God’s supremacy, Satan was cast out of heaven (Luke 10:18).

During the temptation of Christ in the wilderness, Satan shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. He tells Him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to” (Luke 4:6). Even though it might be possible that Satan is lying about

this, Jesus does not contradict him. In fact, Jesus later refers to him as the "prince of this world" (John 14:30), and Paul calls him the "god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is also said to hold the "power of death" (Hebrews 2:14).

From the essence of this fallen angel has proceeded all forms of wickedness which expresses itself in those under his influence. Jesus tells the Jews in John 8:44, "You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him." Colossians 3:5 (KJV) expands on the manifestations of this wickedness: "fornication, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence and covetousness, which is idolatry."

All of these expressions of evil can have a bearing on human relationships and are characterized by self-benefit at the expense of another. When authority operates from this ungodly source, it incorporates such things as deception, manipulation, pride, cruelty and control. Peter describes it graphically in 2 Peter 2:17-19. "These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. Blackest darkness is reserved for them. For they mouth empty, boastful words and, by appealing to the lustful desires of sinful human nature, they entice people who are just escaping from those who live in error. They promise freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him."

Jude echoes his indictment. "These men are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever" (Jude 12,13).

Against such bleakness of human degeneracy, there stands another vehicle for human relationship which we will call *spiritual authority*. Like civil authority, spiritual authority also has its source in God. Unlike civil authority, however, spiritual authority cannot exist apart from spiritual rebirth and thus will only be found within the body of Christ. It is eternal, an outgrowth of the bond of love between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Very importantly, spiritual authority never incorporates a chain of command, but flows out of a personal relationship between God and each believer. While we may have differing assignments, we are all priests, receiving power directly from God without an intermediary.

One way to describe spiritual authority is that it draws its strength from the nature of God and ministers to others in exactly the same way God Himself would. In John 5:19 Jesus tells the Jews, "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." Jesus is modeling a relationship with the Father that will work not only for Him, but also for His disciples and for all believers throughout history. "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (John 17:20,21).

When someone rules using civil authority, those who obey his commands are fundamentally motivated by fear of punishment. When someone exercises spiritual authority over another person, the relationship is characterized entirely by love. Jesus says over and over, "If you love me, you will obey what I command" (John 14:15). Not only is love the motive for obedience, but it is also its

reward. “Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21).

It is very significant that the specific obedience Jesus requires of us is that we love one another. “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12,13). The love God has shown us through His Son is characterized by absolute self-sacrifice. In all matters of spiritual authority, there can never be any element of self-interest or self-exaltation. We are called to express the nature of God by living out His love in this world.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul paints this picture of God’s love. “Jesus. . .being in very nature God, did not consider equality something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Philippians 2:6-8). This presents the standard to which we are called. Spiritual authority must be the continual manifestation of the heart of God, which flows outward in an eternal self-divestment for the benefit of the beloved.

Here then we find the biblical starting point for all expressions of leadership in the church. Paul prefaces the above description of Christ’s sacrifice by telling the people their mindset should be the same. “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3,4).

One who stands in the authority of Christ has neither the right, nor does he really have any need, to force obedience in those over whom he has been given responsibility. The love of God compels people in such a way that not only are they drawn to obedience to God Himself, but they are also drawn together in unity. Paul understood this phenomenon. “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and in purpose” (Philippians 2:1,2).

Moving then from this foundation of love and the profound unity it produces, we will now look at another aspect of the Christian *ekklesia*, which is its wonderful diversity. In Ephesians Paul tells us, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it” (Ephesians 4:4-7).

The word grace, or *charis*, comes from a root word that means “calm delight.” It is God’s pleasure to make us varied, or said another way, His pleasure expresses itself in our variety. We are a multi-faceted “body,” with different parts serving different functions. Not only does God delight in being vastly creative, but He also appears to be thrilled when we—as greatly varied pieces—fit together integrally for the good of all. As Paul puts it, “From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:16).

Let us now examine some of the specific ways in which God fits His body together in this panorama of relationship. It is our observation that there exist two distinct kinds of assignments given to believers in the New Testament writings: giftings and offices.

Looking first at *giftings*, these include the ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4:11: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Here we are told that Christ has “apportioned grace” for the expressed purpose of preparing God’s people “for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God” (vss. 12,13).

It should be very clear from this description that the authority of these people—that is, the empowerment (or grace) from God—is for the benefit of the church. The word “to prepare” is more accurately translated “to perfect,” in other words, to make completely able. These gifted individuals are to somehow thoroughly prepare God’s people, who in turn are told to build up the body. Of course, since the “gifted individuals,” “God’s people,” and “the body” are all pretty much the same folks, then what really happens is a mutual edification that results in “unity in the faith” and maturity.

In other words, each of us is allowed to be both a channel and a receiver of the giftings of God’s grace. Another list of God’s “people gifts” to His church is found in 1 Corinthians 12:28. “And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.” This list opens up the flow of grace to a much wider variety of individuals than those mentioned in Ephesians. It would seem that the category “those able to help others” would include just about everyone.

We should note that there is no indication anywhere that these giftings are hierarchical, with one more important than another. The Greek words for “first, second and third” imply simply chronological ordering. We might surmise that the first “bearer of grace” to the body is the apostle who brings the message of the gospel. Secondly, prophets are raised up who can evaluate and confirm the truth of the message. Next God provides teachers who can clearly communicate this truth to the entire group. As the truth is absorbed, believers respond with the varying kinds of service for which God’s Spirit has uniquely equipped them.

The question we must look at carefully is how these giftings fit into our picture of spiritual authority. Clearly there is an outflow of God’s *exousia* through these individuals to His body. The power for “attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of God” is at least in part transferred through these specific giftings. For example, in 2 Corinthians 10:8 Paul speaks of his apostolic relationship to the church at Corinth in this manner, “For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us *for building you up rather than pulling you down*, I will not be ashamed of it.”

Paul understands his apostleship to be the supernatural connecting of himself to a group of people for their spiritual edification. He has been given authority to serve other believers. His letters are permeated with great humility and with brokenheartedness for the people he loves. “Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test, but

that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed.” (2 Corinthians 13:7). He does not set himself above them in any way, but (like Christ) poured himself out for them.

Peter describes the use of giftings very explicitly. “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10-12). The final test of a properly functioning gift is always that it results in glory to God the Father—and glory to Him alone.

In addition to God’s *exousia* being expressed through His giftings, there are also described in the New Testament certain *offices* of ministry that function within the church of Jesus Christ. There appear to be only two such offices: elders (or overseers) and deacons. Whereas the giftings are distributed by God strictly as He chooses, there is some way in which elders and deacons volunteer for (or at least agree to) their assignments, and also some way in which other people are involved in the selection process. Paul tells Timothy, “If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task” (1 Timothy 3:1). Elsewhere he instructs Titus, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

The Bible provides us with very detailed criteria by which both elders and deacons are to be selected. We will look first at the requirements for an elder. “He must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap” (1 Timothy 3:2-7).

In Titus we are given additional descriptors. “An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to much wine, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined” (Titus 1:7,8).

From these similar and very specific lists, we see clear patterns that reveal God’s concept of a qualified leader. The most obvious requirement is that he must be “elder,” that is, old enough (both chronologically and in the Lord) to have a discernible track record of spiritual health and strength. It apparently is also expected that he be a man who is married and has reared children—which might be acknowledged as one of life’s most stringent testing grounds. Finally, there is an extensive checklist of personal qualities that speak of the man’s walk with the Lord through which he has gained mastery over temptations of the flesh.

To be qualified for appointment as deacons, men must be “worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith

with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then, if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of one wife and must manage his children and his household well” (1 Timothy 3:8-12).

It appears that these ministry roles of elder and deacon are to be connected to specific gatherings of believers, which we would call the local church. In Scripture we find that the elders were normally appointed by someone outside the church, such as the founding apostle or someone he designated. As we mentioned, Paul entrusted Titus with this task in Crete. It is probable, however, that the one given the job of selecting elders would lean heavily on information provided by the people who knew which men were qualified to be leaders in their congregation. In the next verse Paul describes the standards for evaluation, and it is unlikely that Titus would have been sufficiently familiar with the people in each community to make his choices without assistance. It would also seem logical that if God had wanted the apostle to pick elders supernaturally, “out of the blue,” there would have been no need for the lists of criteria.

Perhaps what really took place was a consensus of spiritual and rational judgment among the believers in each community, followed by a commissioning endorsement by God’s emissary. A picture of this procedure might be that found in Acts 6, where a problem arose concerning the distribution of food to Aramaic widows. “So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.’” After seven qualified men were selected, “they presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them” (Acts 6:2,3,6).

While in this instance the appointment being made was more likely the office of deacon, the procedure still seems viable for selecting elders as well. In the final count, no one should ever be given a formal title of ministry unless he is in fact already performing its functions, as is made clear in the detailed listings of spiritual requirements. There should be much evidence that the people of a local church are already receiving the grace and ministry of God through these believers in their midst before they are publicly acknowledged as leaders.

Let us make one more observation regarding eldership prior to moving into a discussion of the actual ministries of elders and deacons. In the context of a local body, elders are always mentioned in plural form. They are always a group of men with equally distributed authority. There is never mention of a single elder functioning in isolation, nor is there any support for the idea of a “chief” elder. They are accountable to one another, and as a group they are accountable to the church and to God.

With regard to the functions of these ministries, let us begin first with the deacons. The word for deacon is *diakonos*, which is normally translated “servant” or “minister.” It is quite simply one who does work, work that specifically benefits the church. From the passage in Acts, we might surmise that their work would include the oversight of the distribution of the assets of the church. If their tasks were only menial (which might be inferred from the Apostles’ comment about “waiting tables”), it is hard to understand why they would have sought out men of Stephen’s spiritual strength. It is more likely that the deacons were to manage all the practical affairs of the church, especially those related to the physical or financial needs of the people.

This interpretation is supported by Paul's requirement that deacons have a healthy attitude toward money and a proven record of honesty. Unlike the elders, deacons were actually to be tested before they could be set into office. It is interesting that they had to be men with "temperate and trustworthy" wives, which would also verify their capacity to lead other people into godly behavior.

We should note that the word "deacon" is used in a number of instances in Scripture for people who would not be considered to hold the office in a local church setting. In Romans 13:4 a governmental ruler is called "God's *diakonos*." In John 12:26 Jesus indicates that we are all to be servants. "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my *diakonos* also will be." He told His disciples, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the *diakonos* of all" (Mark 9:35).

Many times in Paul's letters he refers to various people who are serving the body (including himself) as *diakonos*, but there is no reason to believe they all held the office of deacon in the local church. For example, in Colossians Paul indicates the Epaphras was a "*diakonos* on your behalf" (Colossians 1:7). However, Epaphras was not in Colossae, but was instead traveling with Paul. "Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis" (Colossians 4:12,13).

In this light, there is no real support for the idea that the one woman who is referred to as a *diakonos* (Phoebe, in Romans 16:1) had been appointed to any church office. Rather, the explicit masculine qualifications listed in 1 Timothy would weigh against such a conclusion.

Let us move now to the assignments given to church elders. There are actually two Greek words that apply to a man who has been appointed to the office of elder. The first is *presbuteros*, which means simply an older man. This usage is probably derived from the Jewish Sanhedrin, where the older men were given a place of deference and honor. For example, Jesus told His disciples that "he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law" (Matthew 16:21).

The second term that also designates the New Testament office of elder is *episkopos*, which can be translated either "bishop" or "overseer." This word literally means 'one who watches over,' giving us a somewhat clearer picture of the responsibilities with which the elders of the churches were tasked. Whereas the deacons were called to be servants of the people, the elders were primarily called to be their guards.

Beginning with the passage in 1 Timothy, we learn that elders must manage their families well so they would be qualified to "take care of" (*epimelomai*) God's church (1 Timothy 1:5). This Greek word is used only one other time in the New Testament, in Christ's parable of the good Samaritan. "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him" (Luke 10:34). In the next verse the Samaritan also instructs the innkeeper to "take care of" the man. The Greek word comes from two root words that mean to stand close and to pay careful attention. In addition to physically tending his wounds, the Samaritan guarded the helpless traveler.

Later in his letter, Paul instructs Timothy, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17). The word here rendered “direct the affairs of” (in the King James it is translated “rule”), is *proistemi*, which literally means “one who stands in front of.” In chapter 3, this word is used to describe the way a man manages his family (vs. 4). God’s appropriate order should be maintained, and it is at least in part the responsibility of the one who stands before the group. It is clear from 1 Timothy 5:17 that this would especially include any elder “whose work is preaching and teaching.” Order is kept specifically through continual attention to doctrinal clarification and purity.

Peter’s contribution to our quest for understanding the role of elders is found in 1 Peter 5:2. “To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder...Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Our first observation is that he instructs them to “be shepherds.” The Greek word is *poimaino*, which has at least two implications. Number one, a shepherd feeds his flock, that is, makes provision for their needs. Jesus tells Peter in John 21:16 to *poimaino* His sheep. Number two, a shepherd is a ruler. Matthew 2:6 quotes Micah concerning the newborn Messiah: “For out of [Bethlehem] will come a ruler who will *poimaino* my people Israel.”

Peter goes on to spell out three characteristics of this leadership which the elders are to provide. First, they are to do their work in willing obedience to God. Second, they should in fact be eager to serve. And third, their leadership is never to be by force (“lording it over”), but instead by example. Peter concludes his instructions with a reminder that the elders are simply serving as shepherds under a “Chief Shepherd,” and when He appears, they “will receive a crown of glory that will never pass away” (1 Peter 4:4).

One of the strongest evidences for our designation of elders as guardians over the flock is found in Paul’s instructions to Titus. He tells Titus (and us) that an elder “must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). Paul goes on to describe “many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers” who must be “rebuked sharply, so that they may be sound in the faith” (vss. 10,13). Here we can see why those elders who “labor in the word and doctrine” should be worthy of double honor, because theirs is the most important task.

On his final journey to Jerusalem, Paul sends for the elders of Ephesus to give them some parting instructions. “Guard yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers....I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (Acts 20:28,30).

Here we see the important revelation that the elders themselves are not invulnerable to error. “Guard *yourselves* and the flock,” Paul says. This would explain the caution to Timothy: “He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the

devil's trap" (1 Timothy 3:6,7). If there were no risk of failure, these qualifications would be of less importance.

We should recall here Jude's strong warning against the "shepherds who feed (*poimaino*) only themselves" (Jude 12). These are described as godless men who "have secretly slipped in among you" (vs.4). Not only must the elders guard the flock, they must also guard their own purity. Paul clearly expects and requires a high standard of behavior from them. "Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning" (1 Timothy 5:19,20).

As we have been discussing these two kinds of spiritual authority—both the giftings and the offices of ministry—it should become evident that we are not talking about two separate groups of people. Peter was both an apostle and an elder, and he also walked in other powerful ministry gifts, including healing and prophecy. God empowers individuals by His sovereign grace to manifest His *exousia* through many giftings.

At the same time, He also calls certain men to leadership roles. It is very reasonable to believe that He intends leaders to use the gifts with which they have been entrusted. However—and this is important—we must be careful not to make the mistake of appointing a man to a place of church leadership, especially eldership, primarily on the basis of his giftings. The Bible is clear that the criteria for elders has nothing to do with giftings, but instead is based on a man's maturity, his integrity and his character.

Because the body of Christ is an organism with many diverse parts, we should expect to see a multiplicity of the giftings in any group of elders. We would probably find one or more prophets (for the guarding of truth), some pastors and teachers (for the instruction and nurturing of the body), and perhaps an administrator (for the smooth oversight of the various ministries). There would be value too in having an apostle or evangelist on board, to encourage the local church's priority of seeing the gospel spread beyond its borders. In reality, any of the spiritual giftings would benefit the body, because a true elder is wise enough in the faith to apply his giftings only through godly selflessness and compassion for the church.

We should note in passing that whenever an elder is also a prophet, Scripture requires that his gift operate within a recognized group of prophets. "Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said....The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of the prophets" (1 Corinthians 14:29, 32). Whether this testing occurs within the circle of elders itself or within the larger body, it is imperative that the guardians of the truth themselves be protected. Leaders are always vulnerable to public esteem, and the prophet, who speaks for the Lord, is especially susceptible. Jesus warned His disciples, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:26).

We have described now both the nature of the men whom the Bible considers to be leaders in the church, and also their responsibilities. However, we can also gain some important insights into godly leadership by looking at the example Paul himself modeled.

Brothers loved by God, we know that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep

conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord.

As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.

Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 1:4-6; 2:7-12).

What a picture! Here is a leader who brought these people not only words, but “power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction.” He lived among them at his own expense, and his example was so powerful that they were compelled to imitate him. He also acted as a “mother” and “father” to them. With gentleness and compassion, he watched over them. Yet at the same time he was quick to call them to excellence and growth.

Later in this same letter, we find him again bringing strong admonitions. “And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not put out the Spirit’s fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil” (5:14-22).

It becomes very clear that Paul, and the Spirit who is inspiring him, considers the work of the church to be done primarily by the people of the church. The activities described here are precisely those “works of service” which Ephesians 4:12 says are designed to build up the body. Leadership roles might in this sense be thought of as simply a support structure which enables the entire body to do the work of the kingdom. Once again, the goal of the church is that “we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

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