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## THE CHURCH AND ITS ELDERS

By Charles Coats

What are elders? As used in this article, we are discussing that group of men who are appointed to oversee a congregation of the Lord's people (Acts 20:28), and who meet the qualifications as laid down in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. It will be our endeavor to discuss the need for elders, the number of elders, and the authority of elders.

God wants every congregation of the Lord's people to have elders. This is evident when one reads Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5. The Bible uses several terms to describe elders: "elder" (Acts 20:17); "overseer" (Acts 20:28); "bishop" (Phil. 1:1); and "pastor" (Eph. 4:11). (NOTE: Although many religious groups call their preachers, "pastors," this is not a Biblical use of the term. Eph. 4:11 distinguishes between the terms "evangelist" and "pastors.") As one reads Phil. 1:1 and Acts 20:17, he can see that the early congregations did indeed have elders. Although God wants us to have elders, we need to always keep in mind that God wants them to meet certain qualifications (I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-11). Every congregation needs to strive to have qualified elders, and to begin to train and encourage its younger men to one day be elders. Congregations also need elders because someone must be in charge. This gives us a good organizational structure. When we have good elders, the congregation will grow, both spiritually and numerically.

God also wants there to be a plurality of elders in every congregation. This we conclude from the use of the plural throughout scripture: "elders of the church" (Acts

20:17); "appointed from them elders in every church" (Acts 14:23); "appoint elders in every city" (Tit. 1:5). History has shown us that the apostasy of the church began at this point. Instead of elders over a congregation, there soon was AN elder over a city; and then, AN elder over several cities; and finally, AN elder (the pope) over a whole religion. None of this would ever have happened if people had only respected the authority of God's Word and "appointed for them elders in every church." There can never be only one elder over a congregation, and that congregation be scripturally organized. There must always be a plurality of elders.

These elders rule over the local congregation. Many have tried to tell us that elders have a figurative office and lead only by example. Although it is true that elders must lead by example (I Peter 5:3), this is not the limit of their authority. God instructs elders to watch over their charge (Acts 20:28), and also to "convict the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9). How can this be done if they have no authority other than example? Obviously, their authority extends beyond mere example.

Thus, we find that God instructs us that elders do rule over us (Heb. 13:7, 17). Question: Why should we submit to someone that has no authority over us? We would not. Yet, God teaches us that we are to submit to the elders in Hebrews 13:17. While the elders cannot make laws where God has made none nor loose where God has bound, it is their responsibility to see that God's laws are obeyed (Titus 1:9). They also have the authority to rule in the realm of expediency, the best way to carry out God's commands (e.g., the use of more than one container for distributing the Lord's Supper, what time to meet on Sunday, the order of the worship

assembly, etc.). THEY RULE! WE SUBMIT!

Elders must always be on guard for the false teacher (Titus 1:10, 11; Acts 20:28-31). They must be diligent in protecting the congregation from false teaching, whether from the inside or the outside. Godly elders will be sure their pulpits are filled with sound gospel preaching, and they will also be sure that the congregation is aware of who the false teachers are and what is being taught. They will arm their congregations with the weapons to combat false teaching (Eph. 6:13-18).

The elders, as leaders of the congregation, will be instrumental in winning souls for Christ (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15). If the elders are not out trying to teach the lost, you can almost guarantee that the congregation will not be either.

The man who decides to be an elder accepts a grave responsibility. He takes on the responsibility not only for his own soul, but also the souls of others (Hebrews 13:17). My prayer is that the elders we now have, and all future elders, will take a strong stand in defense of God's Word, and will always do the work of an elder "as they that shall give account."

## ELDERS AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

By Ernest S. Underwood

Church discipline is a touchy subject. Many brethren concoct all sorts of wild imaginations when the word is even whispered, and they almost go into convulsions when someone would dare suggest from class or pulpit that it be practiced. Much of this kind of attitude results from a lack of knowledge of what

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the Scriptures teach on the subject. On the other hand, there are some brethren who are well aware of what the Bible teaches about it, but just deliberately reject that teaching.

At this point, let us define our word. Webster defines **discipline** as: "Instruction; training that molds or perfects the mental faculties or moral character: Punishment; control gained by enforcing obedience or order." In this definition can be seen both the positive and negative aspects of discipline.

The Bible also teaches that discipline is both **positive** and **negative**. When Solomon instructed parents to "train up a child in the way he should go" (Prov. 22:6), he was instructing them to give **positive** discipline. When this same wise man commanded, "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod and shall deliver his soul from hell" (Prov. 23:13-14), he was instructing the parents to administer **negative** discipline.

When one comes to the New Testament he finds the exact same principles applied. There are those commands to teach and exhort which are **positive**, and there are those commands to rebuke, reprove and withdraw which are **negative**. By what form of so-called logic (?) can a person or a church demand one of these aspects and reject the other? What makes one **imperative** and the other **optional**?

The Scriptures do teach the necessity of church discipline, but who is to lead in the matter. The answer to this question, and some of the ramifications of the answer, will be the burden of the remainder of this article. Although we will deal only with the responsibility of elders, it should be noted that where a church has no elders, discipline not only **can** be practiced but **must** be.

In Titus 1:5 Paul stated, "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I have appointed thee." At this point he gives the qualifications which must be met by those who are so appointed. One of those qualifications was, "that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and convince (convict - ASV) the gainsayers . . . whose mouths must be stopped" (Titus 1:9, 11). According to this passage, it is the responsibility of the eldership to stop the mouths of the false teacher.

Other passages in the New Testament instruct the elders to **feed**, **watch for**, and **tend** the flock under their oversight. (Cf. Acts 20:28-31; I Peter 5:2). This feeding, tending, and watching over involves making sure that the proper food (the truth) is given, the false doctrine is exposed for what it is, and that false teachers and unfaithful members be dealt with in swift fashion. These things involve fulfilling every aspect of biblical discipline, whether that aspect is positive or negative.

Elders must watch over the flock to guard it from false teachers. Jesus warned that false teachers would come in the clothing of sheep, but would really be ravenous wolves (Matt. 7:15). Peter gave warning that the devil goes about as a roaring lion seeking to devour whom he may (I Peter 5:8). Elders must not be so naive as to think that there are no such persons in the church. And, since they are in the church, the elders have a three-fold responsibility to the flock in the matter. They must **mark** false teachers. They must also **stop the mouths** of these teachers. This can be accomplished by not giving them

the opportunity to speak to those under their oversight. No false teacher must be allowed to address the faithful of God's flock either in person, in articles in periodicals, in Bible School literature, or in so-called translations of the Bible which are nothing more than the false doctrines of men which have the word "BIBLE" on the cover.

A third responsibility of the elders is that of protecting the flock from these false teachings. It is true that those who are older in the faith may not need as much protection because they have grown in the faith to the point that they can recognize error. However, it must be remembered that there are "lambs" (new converts) in the flock also who have not had time to come to the point that they are able to discern such things. These precious ones must not be allowed to be tainted with the impurity and immorality of the false teacher or the unfaithful member of the church. Paul commanded the church at Corinth concerning the incestuous man, to "deliver such a one to Satan" with the warning that "a little leaven, leaveneth the whole lump" (I Cor. 5:5, 6).

Elders, as God's appointed overseers of his church have the responsibility to lead in marking and withdrawing from every unrepentant member of the church, regardless of the social or economic status of that sinful member. Paul gave command to the church at Thessalonica: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the traditions which he received of us" (II Thess. 3:6). And again to the church at Rome: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17). It should be noted that these are **commands** of God. No eldership has any more right to disobey or reject these commands than it does to disobey or reject the commands of God concerning how one becomes a child of God, or how to properly worship him.

Just as one cannot go to heaven without obeying the gospel as it deals with becoming a Christian and proper worship, neither can he go to heaven if he deliberately and cowardly disobeys God's commands to practice what the Scriptures teach about church discipline.

May all of us, whether we are elders, preachers, deacons, Bible School teachers, or others, be determined to do God's will as it concerns church discipline. Let us ever keep before us the fact that God's ways and thoughts are higher than our own, and that he knows what is best. (Cf. Isa. 55:8-9). To do otherwise is folly.

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## ELDERS' DUTY OF WATCHFULNESS

By Wayne Jackson

In his parting address to the elders of the church in Ephesus, Paul prophesied: "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore watch ye . . ." (Acts 20:29-31). Elders do indeed have a sober responsibility of guarding the flock from grievous wolves. Within such a framework, a number of things are necessarily implied.

*First*, the elder himself must be a diligent student of the Bible. His Bible knowledge must be beyond that of the average member of the congregation that he oversees. The elder who superficially studies the Word, and hence evinces such in the classes he teaches, will surely not motivate the church to know the Book. Elders should build good personal libraries, take in-depth Bible courses (where such are available) to thus enhance their qualifications as stewards of God.

*Second*, to some degree, the

elder must inform himself of popularly circulated false religious doctrines. Generally he may do this by subscribing to good religious periodicals that call attention to current trends (the *Spiritual Sword* renders an invaluable service in this connection). He ought to attend Bible lectureships and keep in close touch with the activities of our brotherhood. Far too frequently error has swept like wild-fire through a congregation while the elders were totally unaware that it was in vogue. Be prepared, brethren.

*Third*, elders must take seriously their responsibility to guard the church. They must be absolutely dedicated to that end. Jesus Christ, Himself the chief Shepherd (I Pet. 5:4), characterizes those shepherds who are not committed to a defense of the flock as hirelings who actually care not for the sheep (John 10:12, 13). Elders will give account to God for those souls that they lose to false doctrine through their neglect (cf. Heb. 13:17).

*Fourth*, elderships must know the doctrinal needs of the church and accordingly inoculate against the errors that our people are sure to be confronted with. How many elderships, for instance, have had the wisdom to require courses in the local Bible school program in Christian evidences? Such is needed from the primary grades onward (and why not, when children are taught the theories of evolution from Captain Kangaroo upward?).

*Fifth*, God's bishops must know the teachers who labor under their oversight and be assured of their soundness in the faith. Preachers who teach error, or who are unsure of where they stand on matters of faith, should be removed, even if they are popular with many of the congregation. This writer knows of a preacher who has openly declared that he believes the use of mechanical instrumental music in Christian worship is optional. His elders have said that they disagree, but will defend his right to hold that opinion. They are unworthy of the name they wear! Moreover, elders should be thoroughly aware of the literature being used in the Bible classes.

Through such means is unsound teaching occasionally smuggled into the local church.

*Sixth*, elders must have the courage and the willingness to meet error head-on. They must not only be able to exhort in sound doctrine, but also to convict the gainsayers (Titus 1:9). God, through His inspired prophet of the Old Testament era, pronounced a "woe" upon shepherds who allow the sheep to become "food to all the beasts of the field" (Ezek. 34:5). The elder's task of protecting the church is certainly a stressful one. Dealing with false teachers is never pleasant. But, if we may borrow Harry Truman's expression, those who can't take the heat had best get out of the kitchen! Too, one is appalled at the number of elderships (and I use the term loosely) in some places that utterly refuse to have anything to do with religious debates. The church grew mightily when she kindly but forcefully met the opposition of the sects from without and hobbyists from within. I honestly believe that much of the church's aversion to religious debates today is due to the fact that many, who are weak and uninformed, just do not have total confidence in the doctrine we proclaim. They are denominationalists in attitude if not in action. But churches will never be strong in defense of the gospel until leaderships become strong.

The times are crucial. Elders must arise to meet the challenges of the day. Brethren, future generations of the church are depending on you!

(Editor's note: This article was taken from *The Spiritual Sword*, April 1978. I believe there are many elders today who need to take heed to the things said in this article.)

## Paul's Remarks To The Ephesian Elders

By Charles Coats

In Acts 20:17-38, we have the account of Paul's discussion with the elders from the church at Ephesus. Paul has called them to him (vs. 17)

to give what is certain to be his last remarks to them (vss. 25,38). Let us notice some of the things Paul tells these elders.

**Paul gives them an example to follow.** Paul often used his life as that which could be emulated (cf. I Cor. 11:1). Paul had worked in Ephesus for about three years (Acts 20:31; Acts 19), and these people knew the kind of life Paul lived. He tells them this concerning himself:

(1) "serving the Lord with lowliness of mind, with tears, and with trials" (vs. 19);

(2) "I shrank not from declaring unto you anything that was profitable" (vs. 20);

(3) "But I hold not my life of any account as dear unto myself, so that I may accomplish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God" (vs. 24);

(4) "For I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (vs. 27);

(5) "I ceased not to admonish every one night and day with tears" (vs. 31).

Surely, an example for all elders to follow.

**Paul gives them a charge to fulfill.** In verse 28, elders are charged to watch over themselves and their members. They are told to "feed" (pastor) the flock. This term is an expression used of shepherds who protect and care for their sheep. Elders are charged to protect and care for the church, which Jesus purchased with his own blood.

**Paul gives them a warning to heed.** False teachers would come in (vss. 29, 30; cf. II Peter 2; Jude). These must not be allowed to teach (cf. Titus 1:11). It is a primary responsibility of the elders to fight against false teachers, and not to bid them godspeed (II John 8-11). False teachers can be very deceptive in their practices, therefore Godly elders will have a good knowledge of the Bible in order to be able to recognize false teaching when they see it.

Let me exhort all those who are elders, and those who desire to be elders, to study seriously Paul's remarks to the Ephesian elders.

## The Church of Christ

1. The Bible is its only guide (Rom. 1:16; I Thess. 2:13).
2. Wears a Biblical name (Rom. 16:16).
3. Established at the right place (Isa. 2:2, 3; Acts 2).
4. Established at the right time (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2).
5. Established on the right person (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:36).
6. Saved are in it (Eph. 5:23; Acts 2:47).
7. Its members are enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23).
8. Membership in it is obtained by obedience to God's commands, including baptism (Acts 2:41-47; I Cor. 12:13).

## God's Plan of Salvation

1. Hearing the word of God (Rom. 10:17; Acts 16:32).
2. Believing what is taught (Mark 16:16; Heb. 11:6).
3. Repentance (Acts 2:38; Luke 13:3; Acts 17:30).
4. Confession (Rom. 10:9, 10; Acts 8:37).
5. Baptism (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16; I Pet. 3:21; Rom. 6:3,4).
6. After 1 - 5, faithful Christian living (I Pet. 2:11, 12; Rev. 2:10).

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