

The Church

Elders - Their Ordination and Distinctions - Part 6

Introduction

In the appointment of elders, qualifications are much more important than “how” elders are ordained, that is, the religious ritual of “making” an individual an elder. No where in the scriptures is there mentioned the method by which an elder is appointed. The reason is, it is of little importance! As an illustration consider the builders of the Tabernacle.

- a) They were instructed to make the furniture, etc., according to the pattern yet God did not give every little detail. How long were the pins? Were they round or square? Such a triviality was of no consequence. What they were made of was the important thing. The crowns around the table, were they like little balls, or having ridges like a crown? All that mattered was that the table had to have two crowns but undoubtedly they were beautiful. The artisans were given liberty by God to use their God given minds and skills to make the decoration. The same is true today, for the Lord gave the command: “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mk. 16:15), but He did not limit in how it was and is to be preached. Some use a board, some give out tracts, some in the public square, and some to children. They are all correct. If one gathering believes qualified men should be appointed by raising of hands, speaking with their feet by whom they go to when needing advise, etc., or leaving it to more mature brethren, who put any of us in the role of determining what is right when the Scriptures are basically silent? There are more important matters clearly presented in the scriptures, such as the qualifications for an elder, the multiplicity of elders, and what is their scope of activity and duration as such?

The Distinction From The Apostles, Deacons and The Balance of The Congregation

In reading the scriptures it is evident that in the early days of the churches there were men who were recognized as elders. The following scriptures document that fact:

- a) Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (plural) in each church (singular) (Acts 14:23)
- b) The elders were different from the apostles (Acts 15:4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4)
- c) Paul sent for the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17)
- d) Paul addresses this letter to the “bishops” of the church in Philippi (Phil. 1:1)
- e) When writing to Timothy Paul refers to the elders as distinct twice (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:17).
 - i) In 1 Tim. 4:14 Paul does not say, “by the laying on of hands by the congregation” but “by the presbytery”, a distinct group of men.
 - ii) Again in ch. 5:17 he speaks of the “elders” as distinct from the entire congregation.

Can An Assembly Function Without Elders?

At times there is the suggestion that a church cannot function without elders. This is not true for Titus was sent to the saints in Crete to ordain elders (Titus 1:5) and this was one of the things which was lacking. The deficiency of distinct leadership meant that “unruly and vain talkers” were among the saints causing havoc (Titus 1:10). It is possible for an assembly of first generation believers to function without elders until maturity and shepherding care is manifested among them. It was when Paul and Barnabas were returning to Jerusalem on their first missionary journey they ordained elders (Acts 14:23). This was approximately two years after the gospel had come to the various places they visited, which would indicate the assembly had been functioning for two years without elders.

The great tragedy is that there are some churches which have been in existence for well over half a century and such is their spiritual state that they have no Biblical elders! They have either spiritual children or men without qualifications, or very old men who are incapable of leading and feeding the saints. In such a state there is a gradual declining until the assembly is nothing other than a functional gathering of people, a virtual spiritual social club.

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Their Ordination

There are considerable differences in how an individual is appointed as an elder in a local church. With some there is an elaborate ceremony, with others the bringing of the new elder to the front of the building and the elders lay hands on him and pray God's blessing on him, others just make an announcement that Mr. So in So is now an elder.

The word "ordain"

There are two references in the New testament where elders are ordained and two different Greek words are used. In Acts 14:23 the word is "cheirotoneo" and in Titus 1:5 it is "kathistemi". "Cheirotoneo" occurs in two verses and is translated "ordained" (Acts 14:23) and "chosen" (2 Cor. 8:19). "Kathistemi" occurs in twenty-one verses and is translated "appoint" and is used of those who were appointed to care for the physical needs of the saints (Acts 6:1-3). It is translated "were made" (Rom. 5:19) and of the high priest (Heb. 5:1).

- a) Some have determined that, at a meeting the congregation would vote on who they deem suitable to be elders. It could be done by raising the hands or a secret ballot, and the scripture used is Acts 14:23 where the word used is "cheirotoneo". This is the word used in the Athenian assembly and men were to stretch forth the hand. We cannot tell if they did that or not, or whither this was a method instead of using lots (Acts 1:26).
- b) The word "kathistemi" means "to set before", "to put in the place of rulership", thus the ordaining of the men in Crete would require the recognition of men who had the qualifications and recognition by the saints. Then Titus would appoint them as elders before the people. The local church is not a democracy where everyone has a vote, but as saints recognize certain qualified men as spiritual guides. They automatically "voted" by their actions those men whom they responded to as elders.
- c) Ultimately, if the man has the qualifications the saints will recognize him as such, and whither they vote with their hands, or by response and attitude to the individual, the elders, if spiritual, will recognize this is a work of God and will by announcement or bringing him to the front and praying for him, are simply acknowledging the work of God. There is no scripture for a group of men deciding behind closed doors determining who should be brought on as an elder, and then announcing "Mr. So in So is now one of the elders. That is the opposite to a democracy and is also without biblical foundation. If such is without Biblical foundation, so much the more is an elder acting independent of the others appointing someone to the work. It is hard to determine which is the worse, men determining among themselves without consideration of qualifications, or the response of the saints to the individual, or a show of hands, or voting by activity.

**May God grant us good understanding as He, by His Holy Spirit, deigns to guide us into all truth.
John 16:13**

Rowan Jennings, Abbotsford, British Columbia