

ELDERS, THEIR AUTHORITY

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by Don L. King

We have often wondered why some congregations seem to be willing to get along without elders. There is no question that the qualifications eliminate many men from attaining the office. However, it is interesting to note that while some qualifications take years to acquire (faithful children, etc.) others would not. For instance, a man possesses the needed things to qualify except he isn't as hospitable as he ought to be. How long does it take one to change for the better and begin to demonstrate hospitality? How long to simply say to oneself, "I will control my temper beginning now," etc.

On the other hand, could it be that some of us are reluctant to submit to the authority of elders? Frankly, we have heard a few comments through the years that suggest that could be the case.

There is no question that elders possess profound authority within the boundaries of Scripture. "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine." ([I Timothy 5:17](#)) None but the elders have such written of them. Their authority comes not from themselves, but from the Lord. Christ has all authority in the church, ([Matthew 28:18](#)) so it follows that when authority is delegated it has to come from Him. Through the apostles and the inspiration of the Spirit, the Lord set the guidelines for the authority elders have. Notice also, please, that it is not the "elder" but "elders" who have authority. The authority to "rule" is given to the plurality of elders in the local congregation. Together, and in no other way, they have authority from Christ to rule the congregation. As the fifth chapter of first Peter begins, Peter speaks to the elders (plural). In verse 2 it says, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking no oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;" In [Hebrews 13:17](#) Paul wrote, "Obey them (note the plural DLK) that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that there may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." Robert Milligan and other commentators say this refers to the elders or overseers to whom was given the duty of instructing the members as well as watching over and governing them. Notice also that we have a duty to submit to them. The Spirit said "...submit yourselves..." Milligan says, "If it is the duty of the Elders to teach, it is also manifestly the duty of the other members of the Church to receive their lawful instructions; and if it is the duty of the former to rule, it is equally the duty

of the latter to submit to all their acts of discipline which are not in violation of the law of Christ." (pg. 380-381).

Hence, it is safe to say that the authority of the elders in the local congregation is given by the authority of Christ. We can all recall that in the Old Testament when God delegated authority to someone and the people did not heed it they were punished by God. Let us not be misunderstood. The elders have no authority to make any laws for the church. [James 4:12](#) plainly says that there is only one lawgiver. We know that is Christ. They have no authority to make law nor change even one. Rather their place is to see that the perfect law of liberty, which has already been given by the Lord, is kept as perfectly as possible. In other words, they rule the local congregation under an umbrella of authority already furnished by Christ, our law-giver. Elders, for example, have the right to decide the best time for the congregation to worship on the Lord's Day, based on the conditions among the members, etc. However, they have no authority to decide the day of worship. That has already been established by the Lord.

Some feel that the leaders have authority only over the public assembly of the church. However, that cannot be the case. Some matters outside the assembly must certainly come under their authority. Adultery, a member who is a liar, drunkenness, etc. would surely have to be dealt with by the elders. How could discipline be administered to members guilty of those and other sins except by the elders or those acting in such capacity? It appears to us that in all matters of Christian living and conduct, every member of the local church must be subject to the elders.

Again, let us not be misunderstood. When it comes to matters that do not pertain to Christian conduct or to situations in which our personal judgment is involved, the elders have no authority. Elders have no right to insist that one follow a certain trade in order to earn a living. They have no authority as to the style of home we live in, the make of automobile we drive, etc. It is simply not their place to be involved in such things unless it in some way affects my Christian living, harms my influence and so hurts my work in the church. However, anything that endangers my soul or the church is their business and they have a responsibility to endeavor to help me.

All of this indicates one important fact. Yes, elders are the public leaders of the church. They take the leading role in all the public affairs. However, they also do a great work privately. In order to effectively serve the congregation as shepherds and overseers they must have a knowledge of the private lives of the members. In much the same way as shepherds are in tune with their flocks and can anticipate their needs, so are the elders with their flocks and can anticipate their needs, so are the elders of the Lord's church. Brethren, we need elders. That's the Lord's way. Let us work to develop such men among us and also be willing to submit to their authority.

