

Church Organization

The Elder

Paul and Barnabas traveled through Galatia establishing churches and organizing them by the authority of God. This organization included elders in the body of Christ (Acts 14:21-23). The importance of having elders in every church is illustrated in Paul's statement to Titus who was in Crete. Paul said; "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou should set in order the things that were wanting, and appoint elders in every city, as I gave thee charge" (Titus 1:5). This article shall examine who the elder is, his qualifications, his work, and what other Christian's responsibility toward them is.

Who are the Elders in the Church?

The elders are depicted in the New Testament (NT) as men of "repute" and "pillars" in the church (cf. Acts 15:6; Gal. 2:2). The very terms indicate their high standing in both the eyes of God and men. There are basically three terms that are used for "elder" in the NT that help us identify who these men are. All three of the terms used for the elders are found in Acts 20:17-28 to indicate one office.

The first of the three terms for these men is "elder." The word elder in Greek is *presbuteros* and is defined as, "an elder in respect of age, person advanced in years" (Moulton 340). The second term associated with the office of elders is the "bishop." The word bishop in Greek is *episkopos* and is defined as, "an inspector, overseer; a watcher, guardian" (Moulton 160). The final term for the office of elder is "pastor." The word pastor in Greek is *poimen* and is defined as, "to be shepherd over the sheep... to tend a flock" (LS 652). "one who tends flocks or herds, a shepherd, herdsman... a pastor, superintendent, guardian... to feed, pasture, tend a flock... to direct" (Moulton 333).

Being an older gentleman in the church does not necessarily qualify one to serve as an elder in the body of Christ. The elder of the body of Christ must meet the qualifications set forth in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The elder never serves alone nor is he over a multitude of churches (cf. Acts 14:23 ; I Pet. 5:1ff).

What do the Elders do in the Church?

To begin with, understand that the objective of the elder is not to make up new doctrine or cause people to follow unauthorized works. The elder is one in the body of Christ that is not a novice in the scriptures (I Tim. 3:6). The elder is an aged man who oversees the work, worship, and members of the body of Christ. He is a shepherd to the saints. When a sheep (saint) goes astray, the elder will do all within his power to have that sheep come back to the fold. The elder will be one that is on watch and guards over the sheep that he has been appointed to oversee (Acts 20:28-31). He will inspect the faith of brethren and direct them in the paths they should follow because he is a caring shepherd (consider the use of the term "shepherd" in Matt. 18:10-14 and Jn. 10:7ff).

Note that the work of the elders is a "labor" (I Thess. 5:12). This labor includes shepherding the sheep as stated above. Shepherding will include "watching" for the saints safety (Acts 20:28ff), "admonishing" (warning) (I Thess. 5:12), perfecting the saints in the knowledge of Christ i.e., feeding (Eph. 4:11-13). Those elders who do this work on a full time basis are qualified to receive wages for their work (I Tim. 5:17-18).

What is the Responsibility of other Saints toward the Elders?

Members of the church should “*know them*” (elders) (I Thess. 5:12) i.e., “to regard with favor” (Moulton 283). Secondly, the saints are to “*esteem them exceeding highly in love for their work’s sake*” (I Thess. 5:13). Thirdly, saints should consider the elder that “*rules well*” with “*double honor*” (I Tim. 5:17-18). Lastly, Christians should “*obey and submit*” to their rule because they “*watch on behalf of my soul*” (Heb. 13:17).

Concluding Thoughts

The elders of the body of Christ will see to it that no false doctrines invade the church for which they are responsible. They will maintain the unity of the saints with the purity of the doctrine of Jesus Christ. These men are good shepherds in the sense that they truly care for the souls in their charge. They are not interested in numerical growth if it means a disintegration of unity in truth. When the elder is viewed in his proper light, the members of the body of Christ will certainly love, support, and respect his ordained office.