

The
Church
Without
Elders

Edited By
Thomas H. Thomas

THE CHURCH

without

Elders!

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The Church without Elders
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Introduction

Problems in the Lord's church? Surely there must be some mistake! Yet, we all recognize that there are problems in the church today. As a minister of the Gospel, I have not had the pleasure of working with an eldership of a local congregation. But I have seen the turmoil and frustration that a lack of proper leadership has produced within the church. To this end I have asked several faithful and knowledgeable brethren to each write a chapter for this book. The content of this book shows their many years of experience in the ministry with a combined experience over 100 years of faithful gospel preaching. The intents of this book are two fold:

To shed light on the need of scriptural leadership.

And to show that proper leadership is to let all of the members know that they are a part of the church and not just participants.

Does this book have all the answers? NO! Each writer was asked to write their chapter in their own way based on experience and I firmly believe that as you read each chapter the book becomes a starting guide to help congregations and brethren to understand leadership the Biblical way. Is there a perfect leader outside of Christ? No, we all have our deficiencies, including knowledge or ideas on how to lead the church without an eldership.

Today the Church is in turmoil because of the false teaching of some, change agents trying to depart from the revealed truth. Many members worship without Elders, hence the title of this book. And to those men who are concerned with trying to lead the church today but are unsure of the "How to". This book was created to be helpful to them.

May this book be used for the Glory of the church.

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GOD'S DESIGN FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP
"What the Bible says about Leadership"

Wilburn R. Ashby

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GOD'S DESIGN FOR CHURCH LEADERSHIP

I will present in this study what the Bible teaches about the leadership in the church of Christ. Jesus did not intend to leave his church to be a formless, leaderless group of unguided people. His church will be a thoroughly ordered body of people, not a chaotic, self-willed sect. The church of Christ is made up of people who are obedient to God's will.

In this lesson I will be presenting the organization of the Lord's church and concentrate mostly on the "eldership." Since the church belongs to God and Christ, it is up to them to determine the organization. It, then, is our responsibility to see how they have organized the church and to follow that organization. The church should follow the divine pattern revealed in the scriptures, not the plans of man. The apostles were sent out by Jesus to establish congregations and thus were the authority for the churches. There were no successors to the apostles, so the Bible reveals how the church was to be organized when they were gone. The Bible teaches that men who are to take leading rolls are the elders, deacons and evangelists or preachers. Elders are the "key" men in the congregation, with the deacons, and preachers in lesser roles of leadership. The function of the elders is to oversee, superintend, harmonize, and integrate the work of evangelists, teachers and the whole membership. Therefore, a strong faithful eldership is needed in every congregation of the Lord's church.

THE HEAD OF THE CHURCH:

The church of Christ is an absolute monarchy with Jesus as "King of kings and Lord of lords." The church belongs to him and he serves as its head (Ephesians 1:22,23; Colossians 1:18). The Bible teaches that Jesus holds all power and all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Thus, He and he alone, has the authority to make and establish laws. His laws and teachings for the church is the New Testament, his last "will and testament." "The New Testament must be our authority in all things.

ORGANIZATION OF LOCAL CONGREGATIONS:

Only the local churches (congregations) has officers and are organized on earth. In the New Testament each congregation was autonomous, or self-ruled. Each one is independent of all other congregations and organizations in its government. Each congregations is left free to follow the direction of the Lord as revealed in the scriptures in carrying out the work which God has given the church to do. This arrangement means that each congregation is not necessarily affected by the teachings or actions of other congregations. The proof is this is taught in Acts 20:17, 28 where Paul called together the elders of the church at Ephesus and in verse 28 told them to "take heed...to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." It is conclusive that the extent of the oversight of an eldership is only to the flock in which they have been appointed as overseers. Peter's words also prove autonomy of each congregation. In 1 Peter 5:1-3 he states: "Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising

the oversight." The exercise of the elders' oversight is confined to one particular church or flock. An advantage of local autonomy is that if one church digresses, it cannot carry another with it. Such is the "safety valve" against apostasy provided we hold the pattern of sound words.

THE ELDERSHIP:

God ordained that the local church should be overseen in its work and worship by men qualified for this special task. These men are known as elders, pastors or bishops. Their special assignments are due to the Lord's directives for the church as revealed in the New Testament. They are not the ultimate authority, but rather have the authority to lead the congregation in the decision to carry out the commands of Christ. Every congregation of the Lord's church should want and have elders because it is the will of God. Elderships are not optional. Paul said to Titus, "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 had appointed thee" (Titus 1:5). Paul and Barnabas "ordained elders in every church...and commended them to the Lord on whom they believed" (Acts 14:23). No other individuals have the responsibility of these men. A congregation will never be truly organized until the will of God is carried out in this area. The number one reason every congregation should have elders is that it is the will of God.

THE OFFICE OF ELDERS:

We need to understand first the meaning of the word, "office." I Timothy 3:1 says, "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." This shows that the meaning of an office in the church is a "work." An office in the church is an area of responsibility. or work. Many think that officers in the Lord's church are like officers in the government, having a desk and telling others what to do. Each elder in the Lord's church has a responsibility or work to do. Elders have the responsibility of oversight (I Peter 5:2). They are to watch in behalf of the souls of the members (Hebrews 13:17). They are spiritual shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28).

NAMES OF ELDERS:

Elders in the Lord's church were called by six names, that are translated from three Greek words. Each name has an important meaning.

(1) Elders. This is the most common name and means an older person. This refers to one older in faith as well as years. Elders are the most mature and experienced Christians in the church. One of their qualifications was they were not be novices (I Timothy 3:6). The Bible says that Paul called the elders of the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17). In several cities elders were appointed in every church (Acts 14:23). Titus was left in Crete to ordain elders in every city (Titus 1:5). The name elders shows they were to be older, more mature and thus have respect which years of faithfulness brings.

(2) Presbyters. Another name meaning exactly the same as elders translated from the same Greek word is Presbyters. It is found in the Bible one time, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery" (I Timothy 4:14). This word has the same significance as the word "elders" and should be understood from the above definition.

(3) Bishops. Another name for elders is bishops meaning "overseers." It is found in I Timothy 3:1,2; Titus 1:7 and Philippians 1:1. It is elsewhere used to refer to Jesus as the overseer of our souls, (I Peter 2:25). This name shows the work of over-seeing which elders must do. I Peter chapter five says that they are to have the oversight. This emphasizes that elders themselves do not necessarily do all the work of teaching and leading, but they do oversee all such work. They must superintend or administer the work of the local church. As all organizations must have overseers, God has ordained that the Lord's church have bishops or overseers.

(4). Overseers. As seen above, this word means exactly the same as bishops, and is translated from the same Greek word as bishops. An overseer looks out over the church. He is a watchman over the welfare and business of the congregation. Acts 20:28 says that the Holy Spirit had made the Ephesians elders overseers of the flock. It was their responsibility to keep out false teachers which would come (verses 29,30). The name "overseers" tells of the important work of oversight which is so necessary in the Lord's church.

(5) Pastors. This name for elders is found only once in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11). It is another word meaning "shepherds." Spiritual leaders over the people of Israel were called pastors (Jeremiah 2:8). Woes and curses were pronounced upon those pastors who destroyed and scattered the Lord's sheep (Jeremiah 23:1-7). The word pastor is similar to the word pasture. This further shows the meaning of a shepherd and sheep. Denominational churches differ from the Bible in that their "preacher" is called a pastor. In the Bible preachers were evangelists, not pastors. Pastors were elders in the Lord's church, and there were always more than one in each congregation.

(6) Shepherds. In writing to elders the apostle Peter tells them to feed the flock among them. Then he says when the chief Shepherd shall appear (Christ), they would receive a fadeless crown (I Peter 5:1-4). This shows that elders are shepherds in the congregation under Christ the chief Shepherd. The comparison of elders to shepherds is meaningful. Shepherds in Bible lands were very interested in their sheep They loved them and nurtured them (Psalm 23). They always led ahead of them, never driving them from behind. They knew each problem of each animal and loved every one of them. They protected them, fed them, and watered them. Shepherds would suffer great hardships to find a lost sheep or to keep their flock from harm. This is the kind of officers the Lord wants as elders. The name "shepherd" and all other names for elders in the church help

to give us a good understanding of these men. Elders are presbyters, bishops, overseers, pastors, or shepherds.

To prove from the Scriptures that all these names refer to the same group of men, we will look at three Bible references.

(1) In Acts 20:17-28, all three Greek words that are translated by the six English words are used to refer to the same group of men. In verse 17 Paul calls to him the "elders of the church" at Ephesus. In verse 28 Paul is yet speaking to these elders and charges them: "take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops. Notice carefully, the apostle addresses the ELDERS and says that the Holy Spirit made them BISHOPS. They are the same men! Further, Paul continues in verse 28 and tells them "to feed the church of the Lord" This word, feed, is the Greek word translated "pastor" or "shepherd." It may be viewed from the meaning of each word as follows: The elders, older qualified men, are bishops who oversee the church, or who pastor the flock of God as spiritual shepherds. These names are used in speaking of the same group of men and are not to be distinguished from each other.

(2) A second passage of Scripture is I Peter 5:1,2. In this passage once again all three of the Greek words translated by the six English words are used. Consider: "The elders therefore among you I exhort...Tend (pastor or shepherd) the flock of God which is among you , exercising the oversight (Bishop or overseer). So Peter agrees with Paul that elders, bishops, and pastors are the same!

(3) The third Scripture is Titus 1:5-7. In this passage only two of the Greek words are used but shows they are the same group of men. In giving the qualifications of elders, he says in verses five and six that elders must be blameless. Then in verse seven states, "for the bishop must be blameless. It is obvious that qualified elders become the overseers or bishops of the church.

THE NUMBER OF ELDERS:

The number of elders for each local church is always in the plural in the New Testament. Every example in the Bible presents a plurality of elders over a single congregation. Notice the following passages to see that this was the New Testament pattern. There were a plurality of elders in each of the churches at Iconium, Derbe, and Lystra as appointed by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:23). At Jerusalem the church had a number of elders (Acts 15:2,4,6,22). The church at Ephesus had a plural number of elders (Acts 20:17,28). The epistle to the Phillipians was addressed to saints with their "bishops and deacons,:" thus plural in number (Philippians 1:1). The church of the Thessalonians had a number of "them" that were over the saints (I Thessalonians 5:12). Titus was to appoint elders in each place (Titus 1:5). The churches of Christ at Iconium, Derbe, Lystra, Jerusalem, Ephesus, Phillipi, Thessalonica, and the churches

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