

Eldership

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"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church" (Acts 20:17). "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you--" (Titus 1:5). "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23).

In the book of Acts, as we read the account of the founding of the church, it becomes apparent that the leadership of the various churches was put in the hands of elders who were pointed out by the apostles. They were evidently men who met the qualifications listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and from the account in Acts 20:17-35 they were given a very serious charge: to "shepherd the church of God." I do not believe that any gathering of God's people can profitably exist without some leadership, and the larger a gathering grows, the more important it is that this leadership be established in God's order. The purpose of this article is to briefly review God's plan for leadership in a local gathering, and to encourage the establishment of God-ordained leadership. Although this is a challenging subject, I believe it is critical to the growth of any assembly, and that a neglect of God's order will have serious consequences. Let us search the scriptures with a heart to obey God as He sheds light on our pathway. God's testimony will be strengthened, and each member will be blessed as a result.

The Goal of God

I believe it can help us to review the overall goal of God in the church before considering some of the specific details pertaining to leadership. *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (John 17:20-23). "For 'He has put all things under His feet.' But when He says 'all things are put under Him,' it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all" (I Corinthians 15:27-28).*

These two scriptures (along with many others) are statements of the ultimate purpose of God. We are to be one "as the Father and Son are one," and all things are to be subject to Christ, so that "God may be all in all." Every detail of the working of God in the church today should be consistent with this overall purpose of God. In other words, this ultimate purpose of God does not begin in the next life, but now. Every movement in leadership should have this goal in mind: that Christ Jesus may be the head of every member, the head of the whole body, and that God may be filling all things. Anytime leadership distracts or deviates from this ultimate goal, we may conclude something is being done in the wrong way.

There are some today who say that since Christ is the head of the church, human leadership of any kind is unnecessary and unscriptural. While this view may be held with the purest of motives, I do not think

an honest consideration of all scripture together will support it. On the contrary, I question whether any gathering of significant size can profitably exist without some form of leadership. Others have solved the problem by limiting any gathering to no more than "two or three" members, but I do not consider this to be God's mind. Rather I believe the answer is to see God's plan in leadership and move in His plan in His wisdom and grace. Christ will be exalted to His rightful place, and God's purpose in the church will be realized.

God's Plan for Leadership

God's plan for leadership in a gathering of His people is a plurality of elders functioning as one man underneath Christ. They do not take the place of Christ, or exercise "lordship" over the gathering or any individual, but rather they express the Father's heart and perform the function of a father in the spiritual family. The authority they exercise is not in themselves, but flows only as they move in the grace and Spirit of God. As they submit to Christ and move in grace (the ability of God), God is able to express His mind in His family through these men. If men begin to move in themselves separate from God, they no longer express the Father's heart and become a hindrance to what God is doing. If such a condition is allowed to continue, it will bring a deadening in the gathering and must be corrected.

Because of the difficulties of correcting a leadership that is not functioning under the authority of Christ, many have concluded that the solution is not to have any recognized leadership. Or sometimes leadership is performed by "responsible brothers" but falls short of recognizing elders. While these may seem to be solutions, I do not see any scriptural basis for these approaches. If we follow them, we will see many needs in the gathering go unmet. The scriptures only teach one way, and if we want to enter into the fullness of God's purpose and grow up into all that God has for us, we must go "God's way." While the challenges may seem great at times, we must let God be God and believe that He knows what He is doing. As we obey, we will begin to see why God has designed the body the way He has. God always does things in perfection, and when we create a plan that seems better to us, we do so to our own detriment.

God's method is men--men filled (controlled) with the Holy Spirit. There is no other way. This leaves God fully in control and men fully involved. It may seem spiritual to say "Jesus must be the leader" and leave it at that. Yes, it is true that Jesus must be the leader, but how? How does Jesus lead us? Is Jesus still on the earth in bodily form? Look at the examples we have in scripture. On the day of Pentecost, how did Jesus lead the first gathering? Did the apostles just stay on their knees praying, or do we see Peter standing up and proclaiming the word of God? When the church faced problems with the widows, were men involved? When the lame man was healed, did an angel do it? We know the answers. Men were involved every time and God has not changed His ways. No matter how many problems it seems to create, God's method for leadership is spiritual men who are moving under the control of the Spirit.

Holy Spirit-Ordained Elders

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers ..." (Acts 20:28). I believe that in this statement by Paul to the Ephesian elders, we find the foundation of God's plan for leadership in His church. Paul said that the Holy Spirit had made men overseers (or elders). This is God's plan. He is the authority in His family, and thus He is the One who chooses the elders for leadership. We will consider how He does that, later on, but for now let us realize that we are dealing with God in this matter, not man. If we choose to lay aside God's way, we are choosing to ignore God. How serious is that? We dare not do that.

Authority is probably one of the most basic issues we face. Satan rebelled against the authority of God and led Adam and the human race into sin and death. Everything God is doing is to bring man back under His authority so He can take us with Him into eternity. Subjection to His authority begins now. Thus, overseers are responsible to move under His authority, and every member is responsible to recognize that authority and respond to God.

In many gatherings today, the view of authority is far from what God wants. It seems that it often goes either one way or another. Some men have considered themselves to be "the authority" and have brought great shame and confusion by exercising an ungodly authority over others. Such a misuse of authority can not be tolerated. Often in reaction to this, men have gone to the other extreme and refused to accept that man has any part in exercising authority in God's family. I agree that we are not interested in natural authority (i.e., that which originates in man), but God's way is to exercise His authority *through* man. That means that elders must be spiritual (under God's authority) and each member must be spiritual to be able to recognize the authority of God through eldership.

To not recognize that the Holy Spirit has ordained elders and to not be able to recognize the authority of God coming to us through a God-ordained eldership is to eliminate one of the essential provisions of God for our growth and edification. Rejection of God's plan in eldership leaves every man free to do what is right in his own eyes. It also leaves a gathering of people struggling to move forward without God's provision, and the growth of the gathering as well as individual members will be hindered. I do not believe that a gathering of God's people can rise above the level of existing leadership. Individuals may press on to some degree, but God has ordained that we will grow together. Thus, if we are not able to move together, our benefit from the grace God has given others will be limited. God has given grace to every member, and that grace is to be exercised and received according to the direction of the Holy Spirit. This is God's way, and an eldership properly functioning under God's authority is God's plan to facilitate the proper functioning of every member.

The working in the church of God is all spiritual. It is a failure to recognize and walk in this that often results in a wrong view of leadership. The leadership is often natural, and therefore, any exercise of authority will also be natural. Such leadership will not benefit us. Instead of dealing with the root problem (lack of relationship with God), the focus may become the form of leadership. Eliminating eldership and substituting another form does not solve the problem. The solution is for every member to come under the authority of God, be filled (controlled) with the Spirit, and in faith move in obedience to God's order. This will put eldership in its rightful place, with the whole body able to benefit from the God-given grace of oversight.

The Purpose of Leadership

What is the overall purpose of leadership in the body of Christ? We could say that the basic purpose of all leadership is that all things may be "unto edification" (I Corinthians 14:26). Whatever the activity may be--praise, worship, teaching, spiritual gifts, fellowship, service to others, and so on--God's goal is that He would be glorified and every member built up in their relationship with Him. Nobody (including God) is interested in us just going through ritual or activity out of habit or duty with no edification. That has no meaning in God's purpose and becomes tiring very quickly. If something is not edifying (building us up in our relationship with God), it must be corrected. Will God correct things without using men? I have not found that to be true. My observation (in scripture and in experience) is that God corrects a situation and gives guidance through men that are hearing Him and willing to be used.

As I mentioned earlier, it may be possible for a small group to exist with minimal leadership, but even in that case I think we will always find some leadership. Somebody opens their home and states the time that fellowship will begin. That is leadership. Someone says they are not feeling well and asks for prayer. In response, someone leads in prayer. That is leadership. Somebody says, "Let's stop for lunch and continue our fellowship afterward." That is leadership. It may be minimal leadership, but it is still the leadership that is needed to help a gathering of people move together in an orderly way. By responding to direction through a member, we recognize the leadership which allows for an orderly gathering unto edification.

As a gathering grows in size, such recognized leadership becomes increasingly important. With just two or three families meeting together, the leadership requirements are minimal and easily carried out (even in a natural way). However, with 20 or 30 families, it is not so easy. I don't think that any of us are interested in only natural leadership. We want God, and thus we want spiritual leadership as we are gathering unto the Lord. In an open meeting where each member is charged with moving under the authority of Christ, how do we make sure all things are unto edification? How can unspiritual movement be corrected without hurting anybody? We want to hear God through every member. How can this happen? These are the challenges of leadership.

Some have solved these potential problems by organizing a program in advance, so that everything happens according to a preplanned schedule. But this has the effect of limiting the movement of the Holy Spirit and the spontaneity of every member responding to God. While some may be satisfied with such an "orderly" gathering, many of us who have tasted of something else are not content with that solution. We see the value of leaving a gathering open for each member to function under the authority of Christ. At the same time, an open meeting always leaves the possibility of members moving in their own ability and ideas and not under the authority of God. Having a recognized spiritual leadership is essential to be able to correct any difficult situations with wisdom and leave every member at peace and ready to move forward.

Another reason for recognized leadership is the need for private counseling. A member may be facing a problem which they do not want to reveal openly. To whom should they go? We may say they can go to anybody they want to, and that is true. But can immature or unspiritual members provide proper counsel? A member may decide to go to someone "their own age," or choose somebody they think will agree with them. But that may not be the best choice. It may become a case of "the blind leading the blind" and we know where that ends. Unspiritual members often need to be told who the spiritual

leaders are, so that they can go to the right person. That means we need recognized spiritual leadership.

In general, elders facilitate the whole body functioning under the authority of the Lord. They do not "rule" in such a way as to push others aside or dominate. Rather, they give enough guidance to keep things orderly so that every member can function under the leading of the Holy Spirit and in the grace that they have. We may think this should all take place without leadership, but I think a good scriptural example would be the situation at Corinth. There were many things that were hindering the functioning of the body, but they were not dealt with until Paul gave some leadership. The leadership should have come from elders, but as they are not mentioned, it is likely that they either did not have elders or that they were not functioning properly. As Paul gave the needed leadership, the body was able to see more clearly and to take action together. The conditions that hindered were corrected and the testimony strengthened for the glory of God.

Recognizing Elders

"And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves" (I Thessalonians 5:12-13). What are we doing when we recognize elders? I believe this scripture, along with the statement of Paul in Acts 20:28, gives us the answer. We can only recognize what God has done--what He has given. When Paul and Timothy "appointed" elders, I believe they were "pointing out" what God had already done. It is God who gives men the grace to function in this position, so men only point out what God has done so that it may be clear to all.

I think it is important to see that men do not make an elder an elder. We cannot give grace to a man, and we cannot give him authority. Our place is simply to recognize (or not recognize) the authority of God's grace coming to us through a human vessel. If grace is there, it is because God has given it and our responsibility is just to recognize and benefit from it. The brother who has received this grace from God is responsible to function in that grace (before God) and lay down his life for the flock. It is not a "lording over" but a serving of Christ to every member according to the leading of God. He is responsible for this before God and will give an answer for his labor.

"Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct" (Hebrews 13:7). *"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you"* (Hebrews 13:17). This is a passage in scripture that many would like to eliminate because it seems contrary to their understanding. But if we understand authority and recognition properly, I don't think we need to fear or ignore this scripture. We are not obeying the man separate from God. We are obeying the grace of God coming to us through the man. That is a very different thing. As we obey, we will benefit and grow in our relationship with God. That is the final test.

As we have mentioned several times, eldership is God's design, not man's idea. If we see God's design clearly, we will realize that it is the responsibility of elders to move in the authority and the love of God--they must go together. It is the responsibility of every member to submit to God (in a right relationship), and if we do that, we will be able to hear the voice of God through men and respond to God properly. Again, recognition is simply recognizing what God has already done. Our response is unto God, never just to men. If the word of God is coming to us through men, then we are hearing God and the vessel is forgotten.

So many times, the problem is that we are not hearing God through men, but just the men themselves. This can happen for many reasons, but if this is the case, our relationship with God will not be benefited. We may receive ideas (even good ideas) or truth, but no power with it, or glory to God. We may even do what an elder tells us to do, but if we have not heard God and seen clearly for ourselves, we will probably take the direction wrongly and not benefit. So again, why is eldership so often misunderstood, ignored, or abused? It is because it is done on a natural level instead of in a proper relationship with God. The command is to recognize those who are laboring in the grace of God and to benefit from that grace. Can we do that?

Hearing God Through Men

I think a very relevant part of all of this is the question of how we hear God through men. We may not have thought this through clearly before God, but I would say that if we can't hear God through men, we may not be able to hear God at all. Some have tried to solve this question by just pointing every man to the scriptures. We need the scriptures, but the scriptures speak about God using men. *"As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. If anyone ministers, let him do it as with the ability which God supplies, that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen"* (I Peter 4:10-11). This speaking and ministering is not just quoting the scriptures. We are commanded by the scriptures to speak truth one to another in love. It is a great working, with responsibility on both speaker and hearer.

I think there is a good example in scripture that may help us. Consider the situation of Paul when he was working to help the Corinthian church. He was giving them some very strong direction and they were having trouble receiving it from him. He made a very strong appeal to them. *"We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain"* (II Corinthians 6:1). He was ministering the word of God to them for their benefit, but they were reasoning in their minds and looking at things naturally. He then gave this instruction: *"O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open"* (II Corinthians 6:11-13). God was not going to send an angel, and I really doubt that God was going to speak to them another way. They needed to recognize God coming to them through Paul. That was God's choice in this situation. It is God who chooses how to speak to us, and we all need to be continually sensitive to God's choice in any particular situation. More often than not, God will use men in some way because that works the ultimate purpose of God: bringing us together in oneness. No member can say to another member, "I have no need of you."

I made a statement earlier which some may question. I said that the function of the father in the spiritual family is fulfilled through eldership. For this to be true, the elders must move in the grace of God and speak the mind of God. Remember, they are not functioning on their own but in the grace of God. Their responsibility is to hear God, but not for every member in every situation. As a group of spiritual men, the primary focus will be to hear God for those matters pertaining to the whole body. Then in wisdom and love, they must minister (serve) that word to the whole body until all see and can move together in faith. They do not just "lay down the law," so to speak. They do not say, "We have heard God, so you must obey." That is not the spirit of Christ. They may have heard God (and we trust that is so), but the heart of God is love, and benefit only comes as each member is able to move in faith.

So the question is this: is each member able to hear God through the eldership in matters pertaining to the whole body? If so, then it will allow us to move quickly when we need to, without a lot of questioning and delay. It obviously takes time to develop this confidence and relationship. We are not just blindly following the elders or obeying man. We are recognizing the voice of God (the Spirit within each member gives witness) and we are responding to God. Without a proper relationship in the Spirit, we will either move in a form ("They are the elders, so we must obey") or we will want to know all the details of every situation so we can decide for ourselves in all matters. Either way leaves the eldership ineffective. Our goal is to move as one body under the authority of Christ. The family of God is a place where God is Father in reality, not just in theory. For this to be a reality, each member must be spiritual, led by the Spirit, and able to hear God through men.

One of the great dangers I have observed in a body that has functioning eldership is for members to take the authority in a natural way. In other words, when they have a question, they go to the elders to get an answer. An elder may give them an answer that is good, but then the member goes and acts on what they have heard without getting understanding from God. When questioned about their action, their answer is often, "The elders told me to do this." I personally consider that an utter failure. The elders are not God. They are not the head of the body. Their place is to minister the word of God to each member so that each one can move in faith. If a member has really heard God through an elder, the answer to the question should be, "God showed me what to do," and they should be able to give an answer that witnesses to truth in the Spirit. The responsibility of the elders is to leave each member with God. Anything less than this does not minister faith or build a right relationship with the Lord.

Each member must always be pointed to the Lord. The expectation must be from God and not from men. Yet each of us must be open to recognize the channel God chooses to use. He may answer us as we are on our knees in prayer. He may answer us as we read the scriptures, or as we listen to public ministry. He may speak through a brother or sister. These are just some of the ways that God may choose to speak to us. But overall, God always speaks by the Spirit. God is spirit, it is the anointing that teaches us, and the Holy Spirit is given to lead us in truth. Without this spiritual working, we will not be left connected to God.

All of this is demanding, because it will not work without each member having a real relationship with God. It must be real. Yet is this not what God wants? I think we all want the fullness of God's provision. Eldership is part of God's provision for the body, and without it the growth of the body will be limited and many needs may go unmet. Let us press in to know God in these things, and we will begin to see why God's way is the only way that will bring us into His full riches.

Protection in Plurality

When we read about elders in scripture, we always see them mentioned in plurality. I believe this is very important. We said in the beginning that one of God's goals is that Christ may be Lord of every member. He must also be Lord (or head) of the gathering as a whole. A plurality of eldership is essential if Christ is to be the head of the body. While this may seem elementary, my observation is that this is not easy to implement in reality. The tendency is to move toward a "one man ministry" or "single pastor system." The effect of this is to put the focus on one man, which tends to draw our attention to that man instead of to Christ. In the end, this does not achieve the goal that God wants.

A plurality of eldership that is moving together as one achieves several objectives that are very important in the growth of the assembly. First, as we have already said, it has the effect of pointing each member to Christ. The eldership (even in plurality) is not the head of the body. Christ is the head of His body. He is able to speak to each member and direct each one as He chooses. This is accomplished in reality as each member is filled and led by the Holy Spirit. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to exalt Christ to His rightful place. Our focus must be on God, not on man. Having a single pastor usually causes men to look to him for the final word. This does not allow for healthy spiritual development in each member.

In order for eldership to function effectively, the elders must submit one to another. No single elder can stand out as the "leading elder" with all the answers or "the final word." Each one is responsible to move in the grace that God has given, while submitting one to another. This sets the example for the flock. An eldership that is properly functioning in unity and love will lead the whole body to a place of oneness. Peter says they are to be examples to the whole body. The elders will complement each other in this manner. Some may be stronger in one area than another, so as they submit to one another, the weakness in one will be complemented by the strength of another. Together, they will be able to provide a balanced leadership.

Another reason for plurality is safety for the flock. If correction needs to take place, it can first take place in a private way amongst the elders. The other members of the body do not have to "jump in" and immediately try to correct what they perceive to be an error or weakness. They can have confidence that it is already being handled. Most needs can be handled in this way. By knowing there is balance and plurality in eldership, the flock can rest and concentrate on their own relationship with God. Of course there is always a possibility that the eldership as a whole may take a wrong direction, but if the elders have been chosen properly, this should be an unusual condition.

Plurality also allows for members to approach an elder that they feel comfortable with. They are not limited to just one man. If they have a question about another elder that they do not feel they can address directly, they have a place to go. Of course, this puts a demand on each elder to move in harmony with the others and maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. If a member approaches them about the actions of another elder, they must use wisdom in how to answer. All of this works a great humility in each member and brings everything out of theory into reality. The growth that takes place in each member in this process is real. God's design is perfect for dealing with all the effects of sin and providing the perfect environment for the spiritual growth of every member.

Elders Labor in a Locality

A view held by some today is that because the church includes all who are in Christ in the whole world, it follows that elders are those who meet the qualifications set down in scripture, and they labor throughout the world as the Lord leads. Some would modify this to say that they labor in a city, since all of the churches mentioned in the New Testament appear to be confined to a city area (such as the church in Ephesus). While I agree that all who are in Christ will one day be together with the Lord, the limitations of time and distance do not allow us to dwell together with all believers at this time. My understanding is that the church is universal in scope but local in expression. This means that we certainly need to receive all who are in Christ as the Lord brings us into contact with one another, but the primary place we see the church expressed is in the locality in which we live. It is there that we can function as one body and be built together as a habitation of God. In my understanding, the locality is determined primarily by our ability to function together, not by man-made boundaries. God can make it very clear where He is gathering a people together to function as an expression of His body.

On the basis of this view of the church, elders are those who are raised up by God within a local body for the purpose of shepherding those in the locality. They know the sheep and the sheep know them. They know the details of the local situation and thus are able to make sound judgments pertaining to that particular body. They are intimately involved in the body in which they are recognized. They are "among the flock," not at a distance. They are not "super-spiritual" men scattered throughout the world to which we go for the final answer to our questions, but a plurality of brothers among us that we have recognized as mature spiritual brothers who can lead the flock.

It follows, then, that elders do not exercise their oversight outside of the locality in which they were recognized. They do not know the condition of other gatherings, and it is not their business to do so. It is not that they cannot travel to another place, but when in another gathering, they do not function as an elder. They may have another ministry (such as a teacher), but if they exercise that ministry, they do so at the invitation of that gathering and under the oversight of the local eldership. A brother who is visiting in such a situation will want to honor the local leadership in every way.

If a brother who is an elder moves to another locality for some reason and becomes a part of the assembly there, he would come in as a member and function as such, but he is not automatically an elder in that assembly. If, in time, the gathering chooses to recognize him as an elder in that gathering, that would be a choice for them to make in God, but he is not an elder in the new gathering just because he was an elder in a previous gathering. This leaves each gathering to function underneath the headship of Christ and to be responsible for the testimony in their locality.

A related question to this would be the movement of other members from one assembly to another. What part (if any) should elders have in the movement of members? I think if we consider the example of the natural family, it can help us. Suppose there are two families that live close to each other with several children in each family. Would we consider it a healthy situation if the children just stayed at the "family of their own choice" each night? I think we can agree this would not be good. Children can visit another family, but they *belong* to one family. I think this is a good way to think about the spiritual family. Believers may visit another assembly from time to time, but it is not healthy to "jump around." Our movement needs to be orderly, and with purpose and pure motives. In the case of the natural family, the movement would be under the supervision of the fathers of the families. In the spiritual family, the movement of members should also be under the care of the elders in each

gathering. This is not to restrict fellowship, but to encourage all movement to be with purpose and unto edification for all involved.

The Function of Elders

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away" (I Peter 5:1-4).

Let us consider in more detail the function of elders. Of course, we cannot cover every detail, but we can gain a general vision of God's mind. I think we can summarize the functions as follows:

- Example
- Serving
- Oversight
- Counseling

Example: God made Jesus Christ to be many things to us, but the first thing we notice in His life is that He was an example for us to follow. We did not know what God was like until Jesus revealed God to us. He told Thomas that "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). His whole life was a demonstration of the very character of God. *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).* It was no longer just looking at nature or listening to the prophets, but rather beholding God in the flesh. In the scripture above, Peter says that this is one of the functions of elders: to be an example to the flock of a disciple and lover of Jesus Christ. Elders are called upon to lead, and they first lead by example. Elders should be able to say with Paul, *"Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern" (Philippians 3:17).*

The presence of a good example (testimony) among the elders is probably the most important factor in allowing them to lead effectively. To say, in effect, "Do as I say but not as I do" takes away the effectiveness and the authority that God wants to manifest through them. The members may "put up with them" and be kind and respectful, but they will not respond readily to instruction and direction. This creates frustration in both the elders and the members. That is why the matter of qualifications is so important. We cannot be overly critical and demand a perfection beyond what God requires, but there is nothing more powerful than a group of mature men of God, with a good testimony, who are responding to God and letting Him change them "from glory to glory."

Serving: An elder has a servant's heart. He has set others' needs before his own and delights in taking the lowly place to "wash the feet" of his brethren. *"So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who*

is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them'" (John 13:12-17).

Such a lowly attitude in the lives of a group of brothers has a powerful effect in opening the door to hear further direction. Peter says that elders are not to be those who "lord over others" but rather serve with humility. Authority in the church is revealed in this humble place of caring and serving. Many times, the serving is in things that seem small and insignificant. If men are faithful in these small things, it opens the door for bigger things. But the opposite is also true--that is, if elders offend in small things, it has the effect of shutting down relationships in bigger things.

Oversight: We have already seen that the function of oversight is basically watching out over the functioning of the flock, so that all things may be done unto edification. This oversight is done in a very quiet and unobtrusive way. A strong visible leadership is usually only necessary when a problem arises that distracts the whole flock. Elders observe what is happening, and when problems arise, they provide leadership in such a way as to direct each member to respond to the Lord. They never exercise authority in a way that leaves men with men, but rather leaves men with God.

In carrying out this function of oversight, elders must sometimes exercise authority as they perform the function of the father for the heavenly family. Our spiritual Father is in heaven. How does He order His family? His design is through a plurality of men with His grace. They function underneath the authority of God. They hear God. They communicate what they hear in such a way that brothers and sisters are left with God. If the sheep are at rest, feeding and functioning under the Lord, then they are hardly seen. They are like a shepherd sitting under a tree, watching the sheep graze. If you don't look closely, you may not even see him. But watch what happens when a wolf comes out of the brush heading for the sheep. The shepherd springs into action with force. He is called on by God to protect the flock.

In our day, the mention of authority in connection with leadership often brings an initial negative response. "Is not Christ our head? Is God not our only authority?" The answer to these questions is yes, but the other half of the question is, "How does God exercise His authority?" If we search the scriptures with this question in mind, we will see that most of the time God exercised His authority through men. So the challenge then for elders is to move only in the authority of God, and for the flock to benefit, they must recognize God's authority coming to them through men. This is always a challenge, but it is God's chosen way, and we must remember that God always does things in perfection.

It is important to recognize that the elders do not do all of the work. Rather they oversee (watch out over) the work that is being done by each member. For example, suppose that one member has a good teaching ministry. They will want to encourage that brother in his ministry, that the flock may benefit. But if the ministry is not edifying for some reason, they should not take a "hands off" attitude, but move in grace and love to see it corrected in whatever way is necessary for the ministry to be beneficial. So many times, leadership is afraid to take action in this way. Instead, they let the flock suffer. This is not helpful either to the brother involved or to the flock. Why should we be afraid? We should be submitted to one another so that we can speak the truth in love and all can learn together. That is the beauty of the body of Christ. Elders must take the lead when action is needed.

Oversight is always quietly watching what is taking place among the members and seeking to move ahead of problems, not behind. Many times problems can be foreseen and action taken to prevent or minimize them. This takes sensitivity. It cannot be done with a "controlling" spirit. Rather it must be

done in an unnoticed way as much as possible. As has already been stated, much of the work of elders is private and done in the spirit of serving and helping. Many times, a suggestion is all that is needed.

Counseling: As elders "shepherd" the flock, individual needs in members will always come to attention. The need may arise because of a member asking for help, or it may be observed. Either way, the member needs personal attention. The shepherd sees a sheep fall into a ditch. He goes to lift it out and care for its wounds. He nurtures it until the sheep is back to normal and able to fend for itself. He then pulls back into the shadows, not drawing attention to himself. If elders are functioning properly, you may be in a gathering for weeks and not be able to detect who they are. They are not "up front," but behind the scenes. The Lord Jesus is exalted, not the elders. You know when a leadership is functioning properly by observing that all focus is on Jesus. He is to be lifted up in every way. He is the only one who can handle that attention properly. He is God.

If elders are moving in the right spirit, it will open the hearts of the flock to feel comfortable in coming when they have a problem they do not know how to deal with. On the contrary, if elders move in a wrong spirit, the members may not feel they can approach them and get help. This is not to say that every member will always be open, but simply to encourage those in leadership to move in love and care. In the natural family, the father is mindful of each child. It is the same in the spiritual family. Our heavenly Father is mindful of each child, and part of His care for each member will come through the eldership. This is a great responsibility and can only be done in the grace and power of God.

I believe a good step for any gathering to take in the process of recognition is to study the scriptures and come to a common understanding of the function of elders. Without that understanding, we may fear. Perfect love casts out fear, and understanding God's plan is part of that perfect love. We cannot have wrong expectations of elders. They cannot do what every member must do, but every member cannot do what only a recognized eldership can do. If we diligently search the scriptures in these things, I believe God will be faithful to clear up misunderstanding so that we can move together in faith.

The Function of Deacons

Our focus here is primarily on elders, but I would like to briefly mention the subject of deacons. I believe there is much confusion on this subject, and I would like to suggest a few things that could be helpful. First of all, the term "deacon" is not a translated word. The Greek word is "*diakonos*," and in the passage in I Timothy, the translators chose not to translate the word but rather leave it up to the reader to apply it properly. The word "deacon" basically means "servant," or one who executes the commands of another. It is often translated as "minister" or "servant." Obviously, that is quite a broad term, so further clarification is required for us to know what kind of service or ministry is intended.

The first passage most go to is found in Acts 6, where seven men "full of the Holy Spirit" were chosen to address the problem being faced by the early church, of certain widows being overlooked in the distribution of food. Although the word "deacon" is not found in most translations, the word is there in the original. However, it is not just used to apply to the seven men who "served tables," but also to the apostles.

There are slight differences in the root word, but notice how the word "deacon" is used. *"Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve [deacon] tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of*

good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry [deacon] of the word" (Acts 6:2-4). In other words, there was a "serving" of tables and also a "serving" of the word of God by the apostles. Thus Stephen could be called a deacon because he was serving in the matter of food for widows, and Peter could be called a deacon because he was serving or ministering the word of God.

If we go back to the passage in I Timothy then, we have qualifications for deacons, who are "servants" or "ministers." For several reasons, I believe that the primary application of the qualifications in this passage is for ministers of the word of God. One indication is I Timothy 3:9 which says that deacons must hold the "mystery of the faith with a pure conscience." I would say that is a reference to those who minister the word of God. This would include prophets, teachers, and evangelists. An elder is not necessarily one of those, so I believe Paul is giving us similar qualifications for those men (deacons), after listing the qualifications of elders.

Another reason I believe this passage applies primarily to ministers of the word of God is that they occupy a very prominent place, and thus a clear testimony is very important. They lead the church publicly by proclaiming the word of God. A man who does that without a good testimony brings great reproach on the testimony of God. His ministry cannot be effective. Not only will it not be effective; it will have a deadening affect on the assembly because people may listen politely while inwardly not receiving it, and likely become hardened to the word.

In general, I think we can say that anybody who "serves" in any capacity should be qualified for the service they render. However there may be some areas of service that a member is qualified to function in without meeting the full qualifications of a minister of the word. For example, a brother may be very faithful in financial areas and be helpful in attending to some needs of the gathering. Yet he may be divorced and unable to change that condition. Based on scripture, this would disqualify him from serving as a minister of the word, but not for serving in the area of finance. That is just one example, but I think there could be many others of a similar nature.

The main point I wanted to bring out is that we may have men with a gift of teaching or other public ministry, but that does not necessarily mean they will function as an elder. They may function as a deacon (minister), and if they do, they should "be tested and then let them serve." They also may be recognized by the church and set apart to fulfill their calling or ministry in the church. While some may not have this understanding of deacons, I offer this for us to consider before the Lord.

Qualification of Elders

This is probably one of the most difficult areas for any assembly. The basic qualifications are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Actually, these are qualifications that almost any member should be able to meet. They are primarily the elements of a good testimony or example. As we have already mentioned, elders are an example to the flock before they are anything else. They need to be able to say with the apostle Paul, "Follow me as I follow Christ." If they cannot be our example, how can we hear the word of God through them?

The qualifications center around a good testimony, especially in the family. The church is the family of God, so if a brother does not have a good testimony in his own family, how can he labor in the family of God? If there are weaknesses in his natural family, he will likely carry those same weaknesses into the spiritual family. The natural family is the "proving ground," where a man is tested before he can

serve in this capacity in the spiritual family. I do not believe the scripture teaches that a man *must* be married or have children, but the same mature character traits we would see worked out in a family should be seen in some way. The apostle Paul had no wife or family, yet he spoke of himself as a "nursing mother" and one who "exhorted, and comforted, and charged every one as a father his own children" (I Thessalonians 2:11).

The subject of children is probably the most difficult of all. The scripture says that a man must "have children in submission with all reverence." In Titus, it says that his children must be "faithful." Some translations say "believers," but I think a careful study will show this is a poor translation. A man cannot make his children believe. A father cannot fill his children with the Holy Spirit. Only God can do that. But I do believe if a father is leading his children properly, they will want to know the God that He knows. They will want to do his will and follow in his footsteps. This is the characteristic that we are looking for in his children.

Also notice that we are looking for how a man is managing his household. His household is those who are under his authority. When a son or daughter moves out of the house and is on their own, they are no longer in a man's household. The grace we are looking for is how a man manages those who are under his care. We would expect that when a member of his family moves out, they would reflect the training they received from their father. To move out in rebellion would raise a question in our minds that must be answered. We cannot make rules on these situations, but rather we must be confident that the Holy Spirit can give us the ability to render proper judgment. We are not looking for "perfection" but maturity, stability, and a proper relationship with God. We are looking for marks of spirituality, someone we can trust to lead us on in our relationship with God. We must not compromise the standards given in scripture but neither should we go beyond them to make it a place that no man can qualify for. God will lead us in this if we will be still and listen to Him.

A common question pertaining to qualifications seems to be about past failures. In other words, if a brother has had failures in his family in the past, does this disqualify him for life? This may not be an easy question to answer in every case, but I do believe it can be answered. What were the failures? If there were failures in the past, have they been corrected today? We are all growing, and a brother may have learned from the failures, corrected them, and have his present house in good order. Are the past failures such that they bring discredit on the person today? In other words, how would we or the community around us look upon the man? One of the purposes of meeting the qualifications is to make sure that an elder has a testimony that would not hinder others as he gives leadership. If we have to constantly overlook obvious weakness or failures, then the brother cannot exercise effective leadership.

When judging these things, we need to consider the insight and evaluation of spiritual brothers very carefully. Some may want to raise the standard too high while others may want to compromise. Coming to a common judgment of the whole assembly may not be easy but I believe we should be able to do so. The witness of weak or unspiritual members may have to be limited, but no member should just be "pushed aside." Each should receive careful consideration. Honest fellowship in the love of God should bring us to one mind and one judgment.

What If We Don't Have Elders?

So where do we begin? Every gathering of God's people has to begin someplace, and in the beginning there are probably no recognized elders. What do we do if we have no elders? When do we need elders? How will we know? These and many other questions surround our subject. I do not propose to answer all of them, but I want to give some suggestions that I trust will be helpful.

My observation is that the size of a gathering has a significant bearing on whether elders are needed or not. A gathering of four families does not need two elders watching over the other two families. This creates a very unhealthy spiritual atmosphere. Four brothers can function together as a brotherhood to handle the oversight of the gathering. The purpose of recognizing elders is not so that "we can be a church" or so that "we can be in order." Rather it comes from a need to function in an orderly way so that all things can be unto edification. If there are only four brothers, any subject can be handled properly among these brothers. They can pray together, get the mind of God together, move together, and submit one to another in love. God will bless that type of working.

But we trust the gathering will grow as they reach out to others. So how do they function with a dozen brothers? That becomes more difficult. It is hard to gather all of the brothers together for every question. Some among them will be more mature and some may not be able to handle every question. The need for recognized eldership will become more apparent in a gathering of this size. The Holy Spirit is the one who is preparing a bride for Christ, so we must believe that He will lead and give wisdom for each situation.

Another factor will be the maturity of the members. A dozen mature brothers may be able to function quite well as a brotherhood. But if a few are mature and a number are younger or immature it may be more difficult. A tendency in such a situation is for a "de facto" leadership to develop without formal recognition. In other words, the older brothers start to fellowship privately on how to handle sensitive issues, then give leadership. But this bypasses God's order. Are these brothers qualified? If not, the leadership they give can be misleading and ineffective, resulting in further problems. If they are qualified and are giving good leadership, why do we not recognize them as elders?

Lack of recognition can lead to a "hands off" attitude toward obvious needs in the lives of the members. An older mature brother who is qualified as an elder and has the care of God in his heart may see the need, but be hesitant to move to meet the need because the flock has not recognized him. The situation may "backfire," with the response "Who gave you authority to touch this?" Anticipating the reaction, he may choose not to move, so the need goes unmet. I believe if we have brothers in our midst who are qualified and desirous of functioning, we need to give them the permission to fulfill their God-given grace in the body. This is love in action.

A gathering of believers may consider the question of recognition and conclude for one reason or another that they cannot recognize elders. It may be that they do not have brothers who "aspire" or those who aspire may not be qualified. But the gathering still needs leadership. What should they do? I believe that the Holy Spirit will give the answer we need in every situation as we look for that leadership. Perhaps a few older mature brothers may be set aside to give limited leadership. Perhaps the whole brotherhood may need to be involved in significant decisions. Whatever the temporary solution may be, I think it is important that the gathering be moving toward a proper leadership. If brothers are not qualified, they should know the area of weaknesses and be moving diligently to correct those areas. The whole gathering should be praying that God will raise up elders who can lead them into green

pastures. "Pray the Lord of the harvest" is the command from Jesus. We cannot just drift with no goal in sight. We should never settle for less than God's design.

How Do We Recognize Elders?

Let us now consider a few details of how a gathering of God's people would recognize elders. I think we can summarize the main areas as follows:

- Understand the function of elders
- Understand the qualifications of elders
- Make a proper judgment of those who desire to function in this grace

My own suggestion for a gathering that does not have recognized elders would be for the brothers to study the scriptures on the function of elders. After they feel they have a basic understanding, one or two brothers could bring some ministry to the whole body so that every member would have a fresh view of God's purpose in eldership. I think this helps to eliminate fears as well as wrong expectations. There should be a place given for fellowship so that questions can be asked and answered. In all of this, I would encourage that we maintain God's order. In other words, sisters should be included, but in such a way that does not draw them out in a public way.

I would then suggest the same procedure for the area of qualifications. Our standards may be too high or too low. We want to understand God's standard so that we can move properly. Again, a study of the scriptures, depending on the Holy Spirit to lead us, is God's way.

If we are fortunate enough to have access to the ministry of an apostle, he may be able to help us through this time. This should be somebody who is familiar with the gathering and with whom we feel comfortable in God (in other words, there is a level of trust established). He is not the authority, but can help in pointing out those who could serve in this capacity. He does not make a man an elder--he just points out what God has already done. If we do not have the ministry of an apostle to draw from, we may know brothers who have a ministry (such as a teacher or elder in another assembly). Such brothers may be able to help us through the process of recognition.

The church is called to exercise judgment regarding those who desire to function as elders. For leaders to be effective, the flock must be at rest. This may take some time and we cannot rush the process, but neither can we linger for years. We need to be moving with purpose toward God's goal. We may not have recognized elders today, but if not, we need to know we are moving in that direction as an assembly.

When recognizing an elder in our midst, I believe the proper place of the church is to give their witness. We are witnessing to the calling of God (grace, qualifications, and the timing of God). A witness is not a vote. The church does not vote on things. A vote would give each member an equal say, with no accountability. A witness is accountable for how they answer. For example, we may have 20 members that are called upon to approve an elder. Most may say "yes" but two members say "no." The two must be questioned as to why they say no. Their reasons may be valid or not. The maturity and spirituality of those that witness may be questioned. The witness of an immature witness may need to be set aside. But one valid witness from one member is enough to stop us until the objection is cleared

before God. As much as possible, we are looking for 100% witness from spiritual brothers and sisters.

There are many ways that a witness may be conducted. In general, we may want to move in an anonymous way to begin with, so that each person gives their witness without being affected by others. But in the end, each member must be accountable for their witness and be able to answer for their decision. They can be questioned, and if necessary, their witness may need to be disregarded, as explained above. The witness of a member who does not have a good testimony cannot be allowed to carry a heavy weight. Every member should be carefully listened to, and if their witness is not accepted, it should be done with care and a solid basis in scripture. The witness of the sisters should be gained in such a way that does not pull them out of their place of submission in God's order.

Surely such a process will test our relationships and submission to one another, but for the sake of the testimony of God and the building He wants to accomplish in the body and in every member's life, I do not believe we can lay this process aside. It is good for all of us. We can be accountable before God and in submission one to another. If it is done in the right spirit of love and truth, all will benefit, no matter what the current situation may be.

A Final Encouragement

My strong encouragement to all is to address this area of leadership with seriousness. Too often we just let things drift and do not move with purpose. We do not realize how much we are missing. God wants us to have His leadership in our midst and to benefit from it. If we are serious about the testimony of God and our growth (and I trust we all are), we need God's provision in recognized eldership. We dare not neglect this just because the problems seem too great. God will be with us and show us the way through. Let us consider the words of Peter again.

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away" (I Peter 5:1-4).