

THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

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“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 NKJV).

All authority in heaven and on earth, physical and spiritual, resides in God, “for there is no authority except from God” (Rom. 13:1). Christ Jesus sits today at the right hand of the Father invested with this authority, all things having been put under His feet by the Father (Matt. 28:18; 1 Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:20-23).

All other rightful authorities possessed in heaven or on earth can only be exercised under the superior authority of Christ. Spiritual principalities and powers are ultimately subject to Christ (Eph. 1:21). Human governments possess authority because they are “appointed by God” (Rom. 13:1; cp. Jn. 19:11). Parents are to be obeyed “in the Lord” by their children because parental authority is rightfully delegated by God who has all authority (Eph. 6:1). These authorities exist by divine right, and will answer in divine judgment as to their care and exercise of that authority.

Christ has been made “head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). If there be any authority in the church, it must first have been delegated by Christ in His word. Any authority taken without divine sanction would be in violation of divine will. For example, there is no command, example, or necessary inference to authorize any man or council to sit in authority over the universal church and direct the actions and teachings of all local congregations. Christ has delegated no such authority which some man-made religions have assumed in the past and today.

The local congregation is where we find organization and authority revealed and delegated by Christ who is head of the church. Addressing the church at Philippi, Paul wrote, “To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons” (1:1). Those called here “bishops” possess authority within the local church. The only way we know this is by the New Testament revelation of Christ. It is there that we learn the source, nature, and scope of the authority of those called elders/bishops/shepherds.

Source of the Authority of Elders

The source of the authority of elders comes from Christ, the head of the church. God has “put all things under [Christ’s] feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). It was by Christ’s authority that the apostle Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). It is in His divine word that we find the qualifications of scriptural elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). “Elders” is always spoken of in the plural. No one man is to assume this important office alone in a local church. This wisdom is from above, and their authority is delegated from Christ.

The authority of elders does not derive from the congregation they serve, nor from any board or council of men. The authority of elders certainly does not come from the elders themselves, for they serve under the authority of Christ. Elders who serve by their own authority are a danger to the souls of the flock.

The Nature of the Authority of Elders

To understand the nature of the authority of elders, it is necessary to understand the Bible words used to describe elders and their rule:

Proistemi – Romans 12:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:5; 5:17

To set or place before; to set over; to be over, to superintend, preside over (Thayer)

Hegeomai – Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24

To be a leader; to rule, command, to have authority over (Thayer)

Poimaino – Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2

To rule, govern: of rulers (Thayer)

Episkopos – Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:2

An overseer, a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian, or superintendent

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While some try to convince brethren that elders are to lead by example only, these words above indicate otherwise. They possess delegated authority from heaven and are to rule and govern as servants of God and those they oversee. Scriptural elders will rule with humility, seeking to please God and the good of those they are given the responsibility to oversee.

Elders do not have authority to make whatever laws they desire. There is only one Lawgiver, Christ (Jas. 4:12). They cannot change any part of the law of Christ or make additional laws. They are to oversee that the law of Christ is followed in a local congregation of God's people. In matters of human judgment the elders exercise their delegated authority to determine the best course in following God's will. When God's authority is specific, they must follow what Christ has authorized. An eldership has no authority over the personal judgments of Christians outside the assembly unless it violates the will of God and brings reproach on the name of Christ.

The members of a local congregation are to "obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb. 13:17). The members of the congregation are to respect and obey the elders. Disrespect and rebellion against godly elders is disrespect and rebellion against Christ. Elders must also be careful not to cede their authority to deacons or any other member of the congregation. Once rebellious members learn they can control the elders through threats of moving their membership, withholding their contribution, or by any other means, the elders will have lost much of their authority and respect.

The Scope of the Authority of Elders

Each local church is designed by Christ to be autonomous, or self-governing, taking care of its own affairs and making its own decisions. The eldership of one local church has no authority to oversee and control the decisions and affairs of another congregation(s).

This divine limit on the scope of an eldership's authority is understood because they are to take "heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..." (Acts 20:28). The apostle Peter, himself an elder, more specifically wrote, "Shepherd the flock of God *which is among you*, serving as overseers..." (1 Pet. 5:2). This principle was key to discerning the error of the sponsoring church arrangement that infected numerous churches in the mid-1900s in supporting large works such as radio programs (i.e. Herald of Truth), missionary work, social activities, and large preaching campaigns (city-wide gospel meetings, etc.). No eldership has the authority to oversee any work larger than what the local church they oversee can plan and conduct. Local churches certainly can scripturally cooperate in doing the Lord's work without violating the autonomy of each local congregation.

Conclusion

Scriptural elders possess delegated authority from Christ by which they oversee and direct the scriptural work of a local congregation. This is God's plan and each congregation should seek to appoint qualified and desirous men to this good work. A faithful congregation led and ruled by godly elders is a glory to God and a shining reflection of His wondrous authority.