

Elders: Not as Lords

by Casey Head

The Bible clearly outlines the organization of the local church. There are no committees or corporate headquarters, nor do we find any complicated denominational structure with global governments and local synods. What we do find, however, is actually quite simple and very practical. God, in His great wisdom, has designed local churches to be self-governing- not overseen by any central headquarters or other local church. Within the church, the Lord has also designed two offices- elders and deacons. In this article, however, we will focus on the office of the elder.

Elders shepherd the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). These men must meet the qualifications that are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and as you can see, the standards are high! Now, can just one man serve as THE elder of a local church? No. What we always find in the New Testament is a plurality of men serving as elders (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17). With these few points in mind, let us move on to the actual job that elders have- what they are and what they are not.

As seen in the above two passages, elders are to shepherd or oversee the flock in a given locality. Paul wrote to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." These officers are told to oversee and to feed (pastor) the local church. What does an actual shepherd do? They keep the flock in line. And how do they do that- with tazers and pistols and violence? No! They shepherd the flock by keeping it where it ought to be and by helping the weak and fallen! Is this role forceful and domineering or is it gentle and loving? There may be times where a harsher approach is taken, but against who? The flock or the wolves that try to destroy the flock? The latter! The same points are made in 1 Peter 5:2, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof." Once again, elders are told to feed and to oversee. Elders are shepherds, not dictators.

Peter continues his discussion of elders in 1 Peter 5:3, "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." How do elders lead? With rough commands and "Thus saith the elder" like authority? Or, do they lead by example, and is their oversight motivated by love and concern for the flock? Elders are not rule setters, but rather they ensure that the members of the church are following the rules that have already been set forth by Christ. As seen in verse 4, "And when the *Chief Shepherd* shall appear." Who has the real authority here? It is Jesus Christ! Must we submit to the elders? Yes (verse 5). But more importantly, we, along with the elders, submit to the final authority of the Lord.

Again, the elders of a congregation are not rule-setters and lawmakers, nor are they strict disciplinarians with whips and scourges. Their primary responsibility is to make sure that the flock stays together, and that unity is achieved through the word of God (John 17:17). Both their encouragement and rebuke must be derived from the scriptures (2 Timothy 4:2). When an elder begins to act outside of the scriptures, he has failed in his role.

Before we close, we must recognize that elders are not "super Christians." They are tempted just as we are, and they will sin just as we do. Paul makes this point in 1 Timothy 5:19-20, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." Are elders invulnerable to sin and weakness? Not at all. And when they sin in such a way that their leadership is questioned, then they must be rebuked. Also, when Paul says "receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses," he is not saying that an accusation cannot be made, but rather that it should not be received without witnesses.

In conclusion, elders are not to serve as "lords" over the local church. Their job is to shepherd and oversee, their staff being the word of God. Elderships are desirable, and they make the local church run more smoothly, but when an eldership becomes corrupt, or when their duties are shirked, problems quickly arise and chaos often reigns. Let us all submit to the authority of Christ!