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God's Purpose for Elders

by Ian Hufton

It has been said that ministers are the most dangerous of all the people in the church.

How do you feel about ministers (elders) in the church? Your answer will probably depend on the experiences you have had with all the various ministers you have known.

The first thing we should all realize is that there are two kinds of ministers. The first and best, in my view, is the minister who serves Christ first, the people second and himself third. The other kind of minister is the one who serves his own interests first and God and the people second. Can you tell the difference?

Jesus warned His followers to beware of the second kind, when he said: *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.* (Matt 7:15)

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? (KJV) (Matt 7:16)

GOD'S DESIRES

The important thing is not what you or I think, but what God says and what God wants. Let's take a short look at what the Scriptures reveal on the subject of elders in God's church.

PAUL'S PRIORITY FOCUS

Examine the following Scriptures and you will see that it was very important to Paul that each church should have ordained elders as soon as possible.

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. (Act 14:23)

"Ordain" in this verse means "select, appoint, choose."

Paul not only was busy ordaining (appointing) elders himself, but he instructed his fellow workers that they must

also be doing it. Paul tells Titus what needs to be done, in the verse below.

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)

In this verse, the word "ordain" means to designate, appoint, make, constitute.

Paul does not specifically say, in Scripture, that Timothy must be busy ordaining elders, but it is obvious that he had been so instructed. Otherwise, it would make no sense for Paul to give Timothy the long description of bishop/elder/minister qualifications. If you are not going to be ordaining ministers, you don't need the list of qualifications.

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; (1 Tim 3:2)

For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not... (Titus 1:7)

When Christ said, "I will build My church", He chose to use the Apostle Paul to be one of the main workmen on this fabulous project. Paul then goes out to execute the master plan of "church building". A critical part of this master plan is "ordaining elders in every church", so Paul had to have been instructed by Christ on how the leadership role of the church would be organized.

Paul did indicate to Timothy how he should go about the training of men for leadership roles in the church:

And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:2)

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Paul is saying that Timothy needs to identify the faithful men who are able to teach others. Once identified, Timothy is to train them in the things Paul taught and then to pass it on to other faithful men who are able to teach others, also. By repeating this procedure, the church that Christ is building can expand at a rapid rate and reach many people.

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

ELDER = Strong's 4245 -generally = older, a senior specifically = sanhedrist, council member or christian presbyter

WHAT IS A BISHOP?

Strong's # 1984 episkope (ep-is—kop-ay'); from 1980; inspection (for relief); by implication, superintendence; specially, the Christian "episcopate": KJV-- the office of a "bishop", bishoprick, visitation. (DIC)

Below are the verses that mention bishops (overseers) in the New Testament. You may want to read preceding and following verses for all Scriptures listed in order to get the context and complete thought.

...and his bishoprick let another take. (Acts 1:20)

Paul...to all the saints...with the bishops and deacons (Phil 1:1)

...If a man desire the office of a bishop... (1 Tim 3:1)

...A bishop then must be blameless, the husband... (1 Tim 3:2)

...For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God... (Titus 1:7)

...unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls. (1 Pet 2:25)

In simple terms, an elder (older) is ordained (appointed) to a bishop (overseer).

WHAT DOES GOD WANT HIS CHURCH DOING?

1) *...and upon this rock I will build My church...* (Matt 16:18)

2) *Go...and teach (make disciples of) all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of...* (Matt 28:19)

Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end... (Matt 28:20)

3) *And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors (shepherds) and teachers;* (Eph 4:11)

For the perfecting (complete furnishing--thorough equipment) of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: (the church) (Eph 4:12)

WHY DOES GOD WANT ELDERS IN HIS CHURCH?

1) *...he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church.* (Acts 20:17)

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. (Acts 20:28)

2) *Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind;* (1 Pet 5:2)

3) *...Jesus saith unto him (Peter), Feed My sheep.* (John 21:17)

4) *Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:* (James 5:14)

ELDERS ARE TO FEED AND SERVE THE CHURCH

And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ. (Acts 5:42)

For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church. (1 Cor 4:17)

Yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. (1 Cor 14:19)

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; (1 Tim 3:2)

These things command and teach. (1 Tim 4:11)

And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men,

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who shall be able to teach others also. (2 Tim 2:2)

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
(2 Tim 2:24)

GOD WANTS ELDERS TO FEED THE CHURCHES BY TEACHING AND BY....EXAMPLE!

a) *Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.*
(Phil 3:17)

b) *Not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us.*
(2 Thess 3:9)

c) *Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, 'in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.* (1 Tim 4:12)

d) *The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.* (1 Pet 5:1-3)

e) *Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?*
(Matt 7:15-16)

Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.
(Matt 7:20)

WHO CAN BE ORDAINED (APPOINTED) AS AN ELDER IN GOD'S CHURCHES?

a) *This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of*

the church of God?) Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. Likewise must the deacons be grave, not double—tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; (1 Tim 3:1-8)

For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. For there are many unruly and vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision: Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.
(Titus 1:7-11)

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WHEN "CHURCH ELDERS" FAIL?

We must understand that elders/ministers/bishops can fail. Paul knew this would happen after his influence was removed from the church at Ephesus.

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. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified. (Acts 20:28-32)

WHAT SHOULD THE CHURCH PEOPLE DO IF AN ELDER FAILS?

Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality.

(1 Tim 5:19-21)

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If an elder sins, he must be “rebuked before all”. This is for the benefit of all the church. Christ inspired Paul to write this and Christ and our Father edited these verses into Holy Scripture. This is for the health of churches. That is why the strong language about “*I charge you*” and “*without preferring*” and “*nothing by partiality*”. The rebuke would need to fit the failure. Major failures would require a major rebuke. If this were the rule of thumb in the churches, churches would be stronger and healthier. Sadly, little or none of this procedure has been done, so the next generation does not learn to “fear”.

WHAT WOULD GOD ADVISE FOR TOTAL FAILURE BY AN ELDER?

We have a case in the Bible, where the apostle John briefly describes the failure of an elder, then gives the solution for those who want to follow God's ways.

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: (3 John 1:9-13)

Diotrephes had taken control of the church where Gaius had been attending. Gaius has written to ask, “*What do we do now?*.” John's answer is simple. “*Don't follow evil fruits, but follow good fruits.*” This is every church member's responsibility whether saint, elder or deacon. All of us must answer before the Judgement Seat of Christ. Did we follow those with good fruits or did we follow those with poor or bad fruits? Christ will want to know. We, the brethren of the church, must make it our business to be certain

that any teacher, elder, etc., that we listen to, has good fruits.

I personally have a quick and simple method of evaluating a teacher's fruits. I listen and watch to see if the teacher/leader the people he is leading/teaching. If this is not clear to me, I listen with caution, until the fruits become plain. Paul points out in the following Scriptures, that among a leader—teacher-elder's greatest attributes, should be the “*caring for the people.*”

But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state. For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's. But ye know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in the gospel. Him therefore I hope to send presently, so soon as I shall see how it will go with me. (Phil 2:19-23)

Brethren, it is plain from these Scriptures, that God wants elders ordained in every church and that “faithful teachers teaching others to be faithful teachers” is a powerful “God ordained” way to build God's church stronger and larger (for the glory of God, not man).

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. (Eph 6:10)

(All Scriptures are KJV unless otherwise noted)

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