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Leadership Guides No. 1

Leadership in the Church of God

What principles govern the Church?

That question might disturb some brethren, for it implies that the church can be 'governed'. Should it? Is 'leadership' necessary? What are the Bible principles for the conduct of the local congregation?

This article addresses the internal workings of the *local* assembly and its needs. It has been established Biblically [see the articles *The Small Church* and *Church Governance*] that church 'denominations' are humanly-devised developments for control in the church. The Biblical pattern is for local autonomy not structurally beholden to a central organization or hierarchy. So our question is: *how is the local assembly governed?*

Everything In Order

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament shows plainly that each local congregation should not be adrift in confusion but should be orderly, with properly appointed leadership. The apostolic writings make this quite clear. When the matter is discussed they advocate structure – 'bishops [overseers] and deacons' (Philippians 1:1), writes Paul. 'Elders' according to Paul and Peter and James.

In no other situation would anarchy – confusion, lack of leadership - be tolerated! Certainly not in business, or in a sports club, or in government! And the effect of such 'anarchy' in families is plain. The church of God, too, is designed to be an orderly society.

The Bible evidence for internal structure in an assembly is overwhelming. But too often the form is misunderstood and abused. As a church evolves, human nature seeks to organize it and almost inevitably it comes to be dominated by a ruling class. Earlier centuries of Christianity witnessed the evolution of a hierarchy of sub-deacons, deacons, priests, bishops on up to – as in the Roman Church – an infallible Pope. Modern church history has witnessed an abusive hierarchy of apostle, prophets, evangelists *etc* - functions, not ranks. God's heritage, the people of God, became limited to the

'clergy' while the brethren became 'mere laity'. [Gk *kleroo* = 'to assign a portion, an inheritance' – I Peter 5:3, Ephesians 1:11] And until recent times, the priest or vicar or minister wielded an authority that induced a spirit of fear in the people. The democratic 'spirit of the times' has generally diluted this power over the people. Many, however, remain confused as to the Bible teaching.

The adverse effects of hierarchical authority in the churches of God has been discredited by its 'evil fruit' – and abandoned in some degree. The danger, however, lies in the wholesale abandonment of *all* authority in the assembly. Past perceived hurts have induced a cynicism about the imposition of authority figures. Bible Christians, however, will be guided by the Scriptures.

Principles of Leadership

There are key guidelines in Scripture for leadership. Ignorance of - or ignoring – them will inevitably generate confusion and ultimate destruction. The Bible guidelines include discussion on function, attitude, origin, and qualifications for leadership.

Jesus, by word and by example, primarily addressed the matter of attitude. Instructing the apostles in leadership he warned them not to behave authoritatively as do secular leaders. James and John had just sought from him an assurance of power positions – to the annoyance of the other disciples. They are, rather, to be *servants* of the brethren, Jesus tells them (Matthew 20:20-28). As Paul put it, "helpers of your joy". He told the elders from the Ephesian assemblies: "*Be shepherds of the church of God*" (Acts 20:28). Peter, too, described the role of elders in this way: "*Be shepherds of God's flock that are under your care, serving as overseers - not because you must but because you are willing, as God wants you to*

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be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to [patterns for] the flock” (I Peter 5:1-3).

Church leaders, in other words, are not isolated in some ‘ivory tower’, but toiling alongside the brethren in the work of the church – just as the shepherd is out on the rough and rocky hillside with the flock.

Who Will Lead?

But where do we find our elders?

The church of God is a ‘spiritual organism’, the members of the Body being fully recognized only by God. The visible body in the beginning was in two parts – individual independent local assemblies, and a ‘roving apostolate’. The latter, during the lifetime of the Twelve, exercised a dual role. The inspired apostles were commissioned by Christ to maintain and to pass on to future generations the purity of his teachings. And they also laid the foundation for maintaining the integrity and stability of each assembly.

The two roles are inter-linked. The apostles personally taught the Gospel message as received from Jesus Christ - ‘*the truth of the Gospel*’. But they also gathered around them ‘students’ to carry on their work. Timothy is one example. Paul told him: “...*the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others*” (II Timothy 2:2). Christ's message was to be accurately handed down the generations.

Note that this ‘inspiration’ ceased with the twelve apostles – it did not pass to future generations of teachers. We can but do our best to properly interpret the apostolic teachings.

By his missionary work the apostle Paul raised up churches all over the place. He would preach, some would respond – and Paul would move on. The new brethren met together for fellowship, and through their evangelism their witness grew. The apostle had a loving care for all these assemblies – but couldn't be regularly with all of them. So in his place he sent those he had trained. Timothy he sent to Ephesus, Titus to Crete. They were to combat error (I Timothy 1) and to generally promote sound teaching.

The other major responsibility of the apostolate was to appoint leaders - elders - to the local congregations (Titus 1:5).

As in Jerusalem (Acts 6) these elders were men from the local assembly – but men who were suitably qualified for the task. Paul drew his guidance from the pattern of leadership in Jerusalem and from the inspired methods of Moses (Deuteronomy 1:9-17): “*Take you [Moses said to the people] wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes, and I will make them rulers over you*”. Paul applied this, for example, in Antioch (Acts 14:23). He would apply the qualifications for office – the

same guidance he had explained to Timothy (I Timothy 3) – and guided by the congregations (they were best placed to know the man) he appointed elders to the local assemblies.

Wise Guides

Some have seen in this a form of ‘apostolic succession’. It was, however, simply the essential wise guidance of ‘an elder statesman’ of the church. And it is no less necessary in our day. While there are no apostles today, it is yet vital that the appointment of an elder in a local congregation be supervised by someone who is widely respected in the church of God. In a ‘start-up’ assembly such a one should be *from outside* the group.

Each appointee must fulfil the qualifications as an overseer (Gk *episcopos*), having been thoroughly tested against the criteria Paul outlined to Timothy. Such a procedure helps to authenticate the appointment in the eyes of the church at large. For the church is indeed ‘one Body’. A leader appointed internally and without an outside experienced hand is more likely to be viewed with suspicion. He may, for example, have been appointed because he is sympathetic to a peculiar, and unbiblical, locally-held destructive false doctrine. Paul had divine wisdom guiding his instruction!

Of course, such an heretical group will probably ignore ‘intervention’ from outside. If so, their credibility as an authentic part of the Body will be noted, and it may become impossible to co-operate with them.

In sum, when an assembly of brethren is of sufficient size to require a formal structure (perhaps a dozen families or so in regular attendance) an elder ought to be appointed in accord with the above criteria. They are reliable local men of proven worth and ‘*known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom*’ (Acts 6:3), and ‘*famous in the congregation*’.

Spiritual Gifts

As an assembly becomes established, it will become apparent that the brethren are each gifted in some way by Jesus Christ. Wrote Paul to the infant Roman church: “*We have different gifts, according to the grace given us...*” (Romans 12:6-8). He lists them – and perhaps surprisingly ‘leadership’ doesn't head the list!

But *all* the gifts in an assembly are needed. A mature assembly will be ‘fitly joined together’ to accomplish the work Jesus has set for it. Because the local leadership seems to have abdicated, Paul tells the Corinthian brethren what they ought to do about maintaining order in the assembly (I Corinthians 14:26ff). Thankfully, his instructions have been preserved for our guidance.

We can see here the need for brethren not to ‘*forsake the assembling of yourselves together*’ (Hebrews 10:25). Only by regular contact and committed involvement by everyone in the work of your assembly can Christ achieve his purpose for it. A huge failing of the Body of

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Christ in our day is the ‘butterfly Christian’ who flutters from one group to another, never settling for long in one place, taking and not giving! He or she frustrates the work of Christ. Their spiritual gifts cannot be properly integrated into His work.

Leaders in the church are not churned out from some denominational or other institution and arbitrarily assigned to an assembly with which they have no previous connection. However, each Christian should seek ways – within or outside of a church institution - by which he or she can hone their inborn skills and spiritual gifts for the benefit of the church, as in speech or music training.

To maintain godly order in an assembly, therefore, demands someone who is properly gifted. They are not chosen from the ‘old boy network’ or because of their generous financial support, *etc.* Elders are *spiritually gifted* to be overseers (Acts 20:28). They will have the necessary gifts combined with godly character.

What Do Elders Do?

While being aware that we are all brothers, the shepherd must shepherd – *he leads*. That’s his job. He is to ‘feed my sheep’. He is to guard the brethren from predators. He is to uphold the assembly as a beacon of probity in his neighborhood. He is to be an example to the flock of righteous living. He must be able to boldly defend the Word in face of false teaching, and be sufficiently knowledgeable to teach sound doctrine. He is to counsel, and to anoint the sick. He will guide the assembly and nourish the spiritual gifts of the brethren, preparing them for ‘works of service’. He is the ‘father’ of the church family.

Responsible To Christ

No small task, indeed! And it isn’t surprising that he is to be open to scrutiny from others.

It’s very clear that the strict Biblical guidance for eldership is by no means superfluous. One of the qualifications of an overseer is ‘*able to teach*’ (I Timothy 3:2). James writes that anyone who presents himself as a teacher of the people of God bears heavy responsibility: “*Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly*” (James 3:1).

Each one of us, and especially those in positions of leadership in the assembly, is directly answerable to Jesus Christ – for his conduct, and for what he teaches. Now that could be more scary than answering to a mere man or to a group of men!

What You Must Do

Given the heavy charge laid by God on the local church leadership, it’s vital that all brethren be vigilant to ensure that anyone appointed to any church office is fully equipped for that work. All of us need careful vigilance to ensure the leadership is of top quality and fulfils the Bible criteria for leadership. A check-list based on the Biblical guidance is a must. Probing questions must be asked without embarrassment! [*See Guidelines No 3*]

On the other hand, with such a burden of responsibility on elders, it’s not surprising that the inspired Scriptures urge the brethren to support them. “*Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith*” (Hebrews 13:7).

The writer continues: “*Obey your leaders and be submissive. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you*” (v. 17). Paul adds: “*Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you and are over you in the Lord and who admonish [counsel] you. Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other*” (I Thessalonians 5:12, 13). The purpose is not to elevate them on a pedestal – but simply to ensure a proper environment in which they can exercise their responsibilities.

There can be no Biblical argument for thinking that structure within an assembly of Christians is superfluous. What is unbiblical is men and women lording it over the flock for private advantage – whether financial or to deliberately undermine the faith or for personal power and influence. What is unbiblical is a local assembly torn by indecision and doctrinal squabbles through lack of qualified leadership, and focused inwardly rather than fulfilling the role for which Jesus Christ has raised it up.

So – maintain vigilance. An assembly that is at peace with itself and willingly subject to wise and compassionate leadership is an assembly well fitted to fulfil its work for the Saviour.

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