

# LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

## KEY BIBLE READING

**"And He [Christ] Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;"** (Ephesians 4:11-13).

## MINISTERIAL LEADERS ARE A GIFT FROM CHRIST TO HIS CHURCH

A close examination of the Key Bible Reading reveals that Christ Himself has undertaken to provide prepared and anointed leaders for the church. The four basic leadership positions mentioned are APOSTLES, PROPHETS, EVANGELISTS, and PASTORS AND TEACHERS. These leaders are given to the church by Christ **"for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying [or building up] of the body of Christ..."**

The last two titles, "pastors and teachers" are combined because each forms a part of one ministry - that of ELDERSHIP. In this reading the Greek word is translated by the old English word 'pastor,' but in every other instance of its use in the New Testament it is more correctly rendered **"shepherd."** A shepherd is one who tends and feeds his flock, and so the function of 'teaching' is also closely associated with the ministry of eldership.

In practical terms, it is the office of the ELDERS that has the most immediate relevance for the normal operation of the LOCAL CHURCH.

## ELDERS

In the bible, certain Greek words associated with eldership have been translated in different passages with alternative English meanings. For example:

The Greek word '*presbuteros*' has been translated in English as **"elders"** or alternatively as **"the presbytery."**

Similarly, '*episkopos*' (Greek) has been translated **"overseers"** or **"bishops"**

And '*poimen*' (Greek) has been translated **"shepherds"** or **"pastors."**

An important key to understanding the nature of eldership is to recognise that these alternative English words (elders or presbytery), (overseers or bishops), and (shepherds or pastors) are interchangeable.

However it should also be noted that the English words **"elders," "overseers,"** and **"shepherds,"** are preferable to the older terms of **"presbytery," "bishops,"** and **"pastors."** The meanings of the former are more clearly understood whereas the latter have been corrupted by centuries of denominational misuse. For many people in the church a 'presbytery' is the house the parish priest lives in, a 'bishop' is the regional ruler of many churches, and a 'pastor' is the paid minister in charge of one church. There is no scriptural warranty for any of these misconceptions.

The three words ‘elders,’ ‘overseers,’ and ‘shepherds,’ are interrelated in the New Testament because they all refer to the same group of people. For example Peter writes, **"The elders [*presbuteros*] who are among you I exhort, ... Shepherd [*poimen*] the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [*episkopos*].."** (1 Pet 5:1,2).

And similarly when Paul **"sent to Ephesus and called for the elders [*presbuteros*] of the church,"** he said to them, **"take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopos*], to shepherd [*poimen*] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."** (Acts 20:17,28).

To put it simply, **"elders"** refers to the group of people who hold the office of eldership, **"overseers"** refers to the authority they have as elders, and **"shepherds"** refers to the function they perform. And, as we have seen from the Key Bible Reading, teaching forms a vital part of the shepherding function.

### **ELDERS *should be* TEACHERS**

In the list of leadership positions presented in Ephesians 4, elders are given the dual title of **"pastors [ie 'shepherds'] and teachers."** In outlining the necessary qualifications of an elder to Timothy, Paul includes teaching. **"A bishop [ie 'overseer'] then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; .."** (1 Tim 3:2).

Similarly, in instructing Titus to **"appoint elders in every city,"** Paul writes **"For a bishop [ie 'overseer'] must be blameless, as a steward of God, ..holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able to, by sound doctrine [literally 'by sound teaching'], both to exhort and convict those who contradict."** (Tit 1;5,7,9).

The attribute of teaching is so desirable in an elder that Paul says, **"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine."** (1 Tim 5:17).

### ***The* ELDERS *are* SHEPHERDS**

While the elders have the responsibility of watching over the spiritual life of the whole local church, they are also required to provide for the spiritual progress and well-being of each individual member of the body. The writer of Hebrews encourages the saints 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).

Elders must be prepared to discipline, exhort, encourage, or admonish, in the wisdom and love of the Lord. This may be extremely arduous, so Paul urges the church to honour their ministry. **"And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour 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."** (1 Thess 5:12-13).

A natural part of the shepherding function is to 'tend the sick' and minister in healing. James asks **"Is anyone among you sick? 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. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up."** (Ja 5:14-15).

When the Lord heals in these cases, He is not so much responding to the faith of the elders, as He is upholding them in their obedient use of the authority that He has placed in their hands.

## ***The ELDERS are OVERSEERS***

The two primary roles or functions of an elder are shepherding (which includes teaching) and oversight. Of these the most critical responsibility is that of oversight.

When Paul "**called for the elders of the church**" and said them, "**take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,**" he was addressing a team of elders who had oversight of the church at Ephesus. This illustrates an important point. Nowhere in the Scriptures is there any reference to a single elder or 'pastor' having oversight of a local church.

The Bible always refers to the elders (plural) of a local church. This plurality of elders is a necessary safeguard against heretical teaching, or a church being directed down a wrong path by one dominant leader. For this reason it is unscriptural for a single 'pastor' or 'minister' to be appointed as the head of a local church. The current concept of a 'pastor' being an academically qualified clergyman, who is employed to preach to and govern over a particular church, has its origins in man rather than God.

The conventional practice of a 'pastor' ministering to the needs of the whole congregation is also unscriptural. The biblical record shows that it is God's will for each member of the body of Christ to minister to the needs of others. In describing the body-life of the church, Paul writes "**...God composed the body, ...that the members should have the same care for one another.**" (1 Cor 12:24,25). The apostle Peter makes the same point. "**As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.**" (1 Pet 4:10).

Elders are required to exercise oversight over the work of the church, but this does not mean that they then do the work on behalf of the brethren. Rather their responsibility is to provide oversight over the church body as its members minister to the needs of one another.

## ***ELDERS are SPIRITUAL WATCHMEN***

In keeping with their duty as overseers, elders were also charged with the responsibility of being spiritual watchmen.

In his final address to the elders of the Ephesian church, Paul warned of the dangers that would confront their flock in the near future - "**For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among you men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.**" (Acts 20:29-31).

Paul was not alone in sounding the alarm. Our Lord Jesus Christ warned that "**false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.**" (Matthew 24:24). And Paul's brother apostle Peter also gave notice of a coming tide of deception, declaring "**...there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed.**" (2 Pet 2:1-2).

There is an obvious need for the local church to have the covering oversight of anointed elders. Throughout the New Testament the warning is sounded to "**Test all things...**" (1 Thess 5:21). For example, the apostle John cautions the young church, saying "**Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone**

**out into the world."** (1 John 4:1). And in the book of Revelation, Christ commended the Ephesian church because they **"...tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them to be liars.."** (Rev 2:2).

The role of elders as spiritual watchmen over the church has almost completely disappeared. This explains why the church has so easily fallen prey to the deceptions of Antichrist. Real eldership provides a protective covering over the flock, because it is their task to guard the doorway and keep the predators out. But when that post is left vacant, **"savage wolves ... come in ... not sparing the flock."**

### **ELDERS *should be* SPIRITUAL WARRIORS**

As watchmen over the flock, it is critically important that elders are in a position to wield their spiritual authority against the attacks of Satan. In recent years, people well versed in spiritual warfare have been warning the church of certain 'controlling powers' of darkness, set in place over our cities by Satan. Whole centres of population are brought into bondage in this manner, stifling and distorting the spiritual growth of their citizens.

Cities are vulnerable to this type of attack by the power of the enemy because their spiritual leadership is fractured and disjointed. This means there is no legitimate authority in place to withstand the onslaught of Satan. However if the Lord's appointed elders of a city were to meet together as one entity - acting in one accord and wielding their authority as spiritual overseers in the name of Jesus - then tremendous power would be released by the Lord and the strongholds of evil cast down.

The Lord upholds the positions of authority that He has instituted. In this case He has decreed that the elders of a city, rather than the denominational clergymen, have the authority of oversight for the local church. This does not discount the possibility that some denominational ministers may indeed be legitimate elders. But their authority as elders is derived solely from their preparation by the Lord, and not from any theological qualifications or religious status they may have acquired.

The Lord will not fall short in upholding the authority of His elders if, in unity, they contend with the 'controlling powers' over their city.

### **OVERSIGHT *of* WORSHIP**

At one stage Paul admonished the Corinthian church for speaking in tongues in a disorderly manner during their public fellowship meetings. His direction to them was, **"If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. But if there is no interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. ... Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order."** 1 Cor 14:27-28,39-40).

Disorderly speaking in tongues is only one example of charismatic lawlessness needing to be contained within a local church situation . The responsibility for maintaining an orderly atmosphere in church meetings rests on the shoulders of the elders.

### **OVERSIGHT *of* MINISTRIES**

The charge given to Christ's leaders in the Key Bible Reading is to **"...equip...the saints for the work of ministry..."** Elders are therefore responsible for recognising and anointing emerging ministries within the local church, and then providing them with a covering of oversight.

Paul's first letter to Timothy provides an illustration of this principle, when he writes "**Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery** [ie eldership]." (1 Tim 4:14).

In addition to recognising and encouraging those ministries that emerge from the fellowship, elders should also provide avenues for their operation, and ongoing supervision and support.

### *The SELECTION of ELDERS*

In the early church, apostles selected elders as part of their ministry of establishing new churches. Paul assisted both Timothy and Titus in this task by writing to them and outlining the qualifications required for eldership.

He wrote, "**A bishop [ie overseer] then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence ... not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he should fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.**" (1 Tim 3:2-4,6-7, and similarly Tit 1:8-9).

These first apostles chose elders under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This was acknowledged by Paul when he talked to the elders of the Ephesian church, saying to them "**...take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...**" (Acts 20:28). And this principle continues to apply once the local church is established and authority is surrendered to the oversight of elders. While it then becomes part of the function of eldership to recognise and anoint new elders who emerge from within the fellowship, it is always the Holy Spirit who makes the choice.

Whereas man tends to choose according to personal reputation or professional standing in the community, the Lord knows what is in man. "**For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.**" (1 Sam 16:7). The Holy Spirit is the only reliable guide in selecting those who are elders approved by Christ.

The selection and role of elders in the modern church bears little resemblance to the New Testament pattern. In the current age it is common for elders to be elected by a popular vote involving the whole congregation. Their tenure of office is usually limited to a period of three years, rather than the life-long commitment required from their early church counterparts. In reality their ministry has been minimised to a nominal position - stripped of authority in the government of the local church - reduced to the status of administrative assistants to the 'minister'.

This study of eldership over the last few pages is sufficient for us to grasp the critical importance of the role of elders to the spiritual well-being of the local church. Elders are the Lord's designated overseers and therefore vital channels for the exercise of His authority. We need to go on from this and recognize that by restoring the true authority of elders, we would actually be doing a great deal towards restoring the real authority of our Lord Jesus Christ as the head of His church.