

EXALTING JESUS CHRIST AS AN ELDER IN HIS CHURCH

By Dub McClish

INTRODUCTION

Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phi. 2:9–11).¹

God the Father has placed His Son on the very highest pinnacle of fame, honor, glory, and power. He so loves the Christ that when we honor the Son we also glorify the Father: “That all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father. He that honoreth not the Son honoreth not the Father that sent him” (John 5:23). There is no greater or nobler pursuit in life for any human being than to praise, worship, glorify, and exalt the Son of God.

The exaltation of the Christ is not accomplished merely by our words, although our words of praise to Him and to the Father are well-pleasing to Them: “Through him [Christ, DM] then let us offer up a sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of lips which make confession to his name” (Heb. 13:15). We must also exalt God and His Son by our works: “And whatsoever ye do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17).

Every Christian (indeed, every person on earth) has the responsibility to exalt Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. As stated in the passage just above, we do this by making our words and deeds conform to His will—by doing all things “in the name [i.e., by the authority] of Jesus Christ.” Many of our obligations to God are universal—they are for all without classification or qualification (e.g., Christ’s plan of salvation [Mark 16:15–16]; worship in spirit and truth [John 4:23–24]; et al.). However, there are some responsibilities of service that relate specifically and

directly to certain sub-groups of individuals (e.g., to husbands [Eph. 5:25, 28]; to wives [v. 22]; to children [6:1–2]; to fathers [v. 4]; et al.).

Another such group within the church that is given class-specific direction and responsibility is elders. The Holy Spirit gave them specific instructions concerning their functions in the kingdom. If they fail in these obligations, they fail to exalt their Lord. In fact, failure in their responsibilities as elders brings shame and dishonor to Him. Hence, the study of what the Bible teaches about how elders are to exalt Christ takes on great significance, not only for the sake of the souls of the elders, but for that of the souls under their care as well.

CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE SCRIPTURALLY QUALIFIED

Scriptural elders (bishops, pastors) are made—that is, designated—such by the Holy Spirit (Acts. 20:28). He does not thus appoint them in any direct or miraculous way whatsoever. Rather, He appoints them by (1) so stipulating the qualifications for those who would serve in this capacity (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Tit. 1:6–9), and then (2) charging faithful saints to seek out and appoint such men to be elders (v. 5). When men are named “elders” who lack one or more of the traits the Holy Spirit says they must have, they are made elders by men, not by the Holy Spirit.

No other group of men has a more direct effect or greater impact on the local congregations (and thereby on the church as a whole) than their respective elderships. The strength of each company of bishops is related directly to the qualifications of its individual constituents. This fact explains why their qualifications are so strict and why we must carefully follow “all things according to the pattern” (Heb. 8:5b) regarding these Scriptural standards. There is no time that is more crucial in the life of a congregation than those times when men are being considered for elder appointment. This is serious business indeed.

The scope of this chapter is not broad enough to embrace a study of each of the specific elder qualifications. We can only observe a few pertinent principles relating to them:

1. The qualifications are absolutely mandatory, as indicated by the word *must*, either stated or implied, before each of them (1 Tim. 3:2–7; Tit. 1:7–9).
2. All of the qualifications **to some degree** must be found in **each man** (note the singularity of the terms: “a man,” “he,” “the bishop,” et al. [1 Tim. 3:1–2] and “any man,” “the husband,” “the bishop,” “that he may,” et al. [Tit. 1:6–7, 9]). These requirements are not satisfied if all of them are met merely by the group of elders, while some individual pastors lack one or more of them.
3. Were these qualifications entirely arbitrary it would still be incumbent upon us to honor them. But they are not random or arbitrary—they are imminently practical. They relate directly to and indicate one’s preparation for the work and responsibilities of overseers of the Lord’s people. Therefore, a man bereft of these qualifications will be unable to do the work an elder must do.
4. It follows from the preceding principle that each elder must have each qualification to some degree **before** he is appointed. Some have expressed the idea that a good-hearted man who has **some** of the qualifications can be appointed and **begin** serving as an elder, with the anticipation that he will “grow into” the ones he lacks. Not so. This approach violates the very purpose of the qualifications: to limit the eldership to men **who have already achieved** the spiritual maturity vouchsafed by them. “And let these also first be proved,” stated explicitly concerning deacons (1 Tim. 3:10), is clearly implied concerning elders as well. In principle, it is “all or nothing at all”: If we can dispense with one or two of these inspired requirements, we can dispense with all of them. Besides, if a man is genuinely “good-hearted” he will not allow himself to be appointed if he is unqualified in any respect.

Unqualified elders are actually living in rebellion against Christ. How can such glorify and exalt Him?

CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE MEN WHO TAKE HEED TO THEMSELVES

Actually, self-examination is the responsibility of every Christian. To all of the Corinthian saints Paul wrote: “Try your own selves, whether ye are in the faith; prove your own selves” (2 Cor. 13:5). More specifically, Paul’s directive to Timothy implies that preachers are to engage in spiritual self-examination: “Take heed to thyself, and to thy teaching. Continue in these things” (1 Tim. 4:16). Likewise, very pointedly, Paul said to the Ephesian bishops, “Take heed unto yourselves” (Acts 20:28). Necessarily, the self-examination is to be done in accordance with some standard. The implied standard is the Word of the Lord. Paul’s statement is not merely a polite suggestion to be carried out one time and then forgotten. The words *take heed* are from a present tense imperative Greek verb, signifying a command that is to be carried out continually. The idea is, “Take heed **now** to yourselves and **continue** to do so.”

Although in the very nature of the case elders must be men of unusual spiritual maturity (because of their qualifications), they are still fallible and finite men who must wrestle with temptation daily. They can (and sometimes do) succumb to doctrinal and/or practical error, as do other mortals. In the very context of the charge to examine themselves, Paul warned, “from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things” (v. 30).

This injunction (to examine themselves), faithfully followed, would accomplish two significant purposes, both of which would preserve the Lord’s people from terrible and destructive circumstances.

1. Paul’s order would be a preventive strike against an elder’s going astray. A bishop who constantly and honestly monitors his behavior alongside the revealed standard for his personal attitudes and behavior, responsibilities, and work, will be much less likely ever to digress greatly from it. By such steadfast gazing into the Lord’s spiritual mirror he will be able to detect and correct small blemishes before they develop into ugly patterns of disfigurement that he might find most difficult to repair (cf. Jam. 1:23–25).

2. Habitual self-criticism in an honorable man will forestall his continuing to occupy the “office” of a bishop when he ceases to be qualified. If he either cannot or will not make the necessary correction to measure up to God’s qualifications, he will not continue to encumber the eldership and the church with his unauthorized presence among the qualified men. It is without Scriptural foundation to consider the tenure of a bishop as a lifetime appointment, yet this seems to be almost a universal assumption (even if unconscious) among the saints. When a man fails the qualifications **before** his appointment, he cannot be **appointed** with the Lord’s approval. Likewise, when a man fails the qualifications **after** his appointment, he cannot **remain** an elder with the Lord’s approval. The church should not have to suffer the trauma of removing unqualified and ungodly elders. (In fact, the very thought of it is so distasteful and traumatic that few congregations can muster the spiritual courage to do it.) Men who rise to the maturity level required for real pastors of the flock of God ought to be mature enough to resign their posts when they fail the self-testing. Alas, the men who go astray as elders are so often infected with pride and power-lust that they would sooner risk destroying the flock than losing their places of prominence and power.

Elders who would exalt the Christ must be men who faithfully examine themselves in light of the unbending Word of God.

CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE MEN WHO TAKE HEED TO AND OVERSEE THE FLOCK

Paul’s order to the Ephesian elders included the following charge: “Take heed...to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops...” (Acts 20:28). These men must examine not only themselves, but the congregation in their care as well. As with their self-examination, their examination of the church is not to be merely momentary or occasional, but continual. This activity demands a dedicated sensitivity to the spiritual needs of each member of the congregation. Elders thereby watch in behalf of the souls in their charge (Heb. 13:17). The aim

of this watchfulness of the church is to be able at last to give account to the Lord concerning the souls in it with joy rather than with grief at the Judgment Day (v. 18).

To enable them to properly gauge the needs of the church, the Lord gives the eldership oversight of it. The word *bishop* (Acts 20:28, et al.) is from *episkopos*, signifying an overseer, superintendent, guardian, or bishop.² Peter says that the work of elders includes “exercising the oversight” of the “flock of God” (1 Pet. 5:2). Bishops are the ones who are to “take care of the church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5). They must be blameless as God’s “stewards” in so doing (Tit. 1:7). *Steward* is from *oikonomos* (lit., a house-arranger), which “...denoted the manager of a household or estate....”³ As a literal steward was to pay attention to the needs of his master’s household and family and see that they were met, so elders are to do for the household of God.

Elders who view themselves as merely honorary “officers” on an “executive board” that meets occasionally to make a few “corporate” decisions have totally misconstrued their Scriptural role. There is no way they can exalt Christ with such a conception of their God-given mandate. Elders must be observant concerning anyone who may begin going astray, either morally or doctrinally. They must watch, not just for the purpose of detection, but also of correction. Many sheep have strayed so far away from the fold by the time elders notice they have gone, that they can never be brought back. For the failure of elders to watch and oversee as they should, vicious two-legged wolves have devoured many congregations. Paul warned the Ephesian elders to “take heed” and to “watch” so as to protect the flock from just such predators (Acts 20:28–31). The fact is clear from the New Testament that the responsibility for the spiritual safety, progress, growth, and indoctrination in the Truth of the church they oversee is upon their shoulders. Just as they must give account of the church to the Lord at last, so must they give account of themselves as watchmen and overseers of the church. Elders cannot exalt Christ if they are not careful watchmen for the safety of the church.

**CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE MEN WHO SUPPLY
THE NEEDS OF THE CHURCH**

Paul commanded the Ephesian elders to “feed the church of the Lord” (Acts. 20:28). Similarly, Peter exhorted the elders to whom he wrote: “Tend the flock of God which is among you...” (1 Pet. 5:2). Actually, they were both giving identical instructions, for both *feed* and *tend* are translated from the same Greek word (*poimaino*), though this fact is not evident in the ASV.⁴ This word literally means to “...tend a flock, keep sheep,”⁵ thus “...to act as a shepherd.”⁶ It has a much broader meaning than merely to provide food for sheep, although this is an important part of the responsibility of a shepherd. The shepherd’s full duty is seen in the beloved twenty-third Psalm, in which Jehovah is described as a shepherd to His people:

Jehovah is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: He guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life; And I shall dwell in the house of Jehovah for ever (Psalms 23:1-6).

While the faithful shepherd supplies food for his sheep (“green pastures”), he also provides peace, encouragement, edification, courage, guidance, protection, and comfort so that the sheep “shall not want.”

In referring to the local church as the “flock of God” and to elders as having the responsibilities to do the work of shepherds toward it, Paul and Peter imply that these men are spiritual shepherds or pastors (from *poimen*, “...a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks”).⁷ Paul wrote of pastors in the church: “[The Lord]...gave some to be...pastors and teachers” (Eph. 4:11). It is logical (and correct) to understand him to be using this word in reference to elders and bishops, rather than to preachers or evangelists (the latter of whom are specifically distinguished from pastors in the same verse).

While the elders have duties toward members of the church that go beyond the spiritual food (teaching) they provide, this is one of their more significant charges. A man is not fit to

serve as a bishop unless he is “apt to teach” (*didaktikos*, “skilled in teaching”) (1 Tim. 3:2).⁸ Further, he must know and hold to the faithful word so “...that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers” (Tit. 1:9). The elders “who labor in word and teaching” are mentioned as “worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17). This statement does not imply that some elders did not teach at all, but rather that some devoted their entire time to it and should be financially supported for doing so (for so *double honor* means).

Elderships are directly responsible for that which is taught in the classrooms, the pulpit, the church bulletin, and all other teaching media. While they need not do all of the teaching **personally** (an impossibility even in an average-size congregation), **they must know and are responsible for what is being taught**. This knowledge includes the material that is used and is being taught in the Bible classes. Elders need to know that the teachers are both morally and doctrinally sound. Whether they determine this concerning each teacher by personal interview, by written questionnaire, or by some other means or a combination of them, they must do it or be guilty of dereliction. They dare not merely assume that all is well in these matters. It is their Scriptural charge as overseers and pastors to find out—to know.

Elders must practice a “zero-tolerance” policy toward the teaching of any religious error. Many churches have been undermined by and lost to various erroneous “isms” advocated by brethren through the years because elders were inattentive, apathetic, ignorant, or cowardly relative to false teachers. The current monster of liberalism in the church could have been killed aborning had elders been informed, alert, and strong enough to allow it no place at all in their respective congregations. Instead, in hundreds of cases it was tolerated in its earliest manifestations as a “different approach” that was harmless.

Numerous overly-benevolent elderships have through the years continued to retain and support half-converted, namby-pamby, doctrinally-soft preachers long after their true identity was known. They kept them in their pulpits until they had converted much of the church and sometimes the elders. Now most of those elderships would not think of inviting and supporting

any besides religious wolves to come in, further devouring the flock. One who claims to be a Gospel preacher has no excuse for perverting the Gospel and will be damned eternally for so doing (Gal. 1:6–9). However, the ultimate blame for the destructive and powerful influence liberalism has had and is having on the church must be laid at the feet of elders. They could (and should) have prevented the rotten preachers from getting in the pulpit, or upon learning their liberal identity after the fact, they could (and should) have removed them, denying them the platform and support they have received in congregation after congregation. **It was their business to do this—“the buck” stops with them.**

If elders fail at the point of tending the flock, particularly at the point of providing them with sound teaching and protecting them from error, they fail completely. They are “elders” in name only and cannot possibly exalt the Head of the church.

CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE MEN WHO EXERCISE THEIR AUTHORITY IN THE WAY HE SPECIFIES

Christ has delegated authority to the eldership in each congregation to fulfill the responsibilities He has given them. This writer has always thought it strange that anyone who respects the New Testament would question this fact, but some adamantly do nonetheless. Some elders have likely shrunk from fulfilling their responsibilities toward the church due to the strong and loud denials by some brethren that an eldership possesses any “authority” except by its “example.” Contrariwise, the Biblical case is strong **for** the authority of elders and **against** those who deny it. We invite the reader to consider the following propositions of proof:

1. Authority is inherent in the verb *poimaino* (to tend, shepherd, pastor), as indicated in the Lord’s letter to Thyatira: “And he that overcometh, and he that keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give **authority** over the nations: and he shall **rule** them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to shivers; as I also have received of my Father” (Rev. 2:26-27, emph. DM). *Poimaino* is translated “rule” and the nature of the authority it connotes is made clear by the context.

2. Authority is inherent in the noun, *episkopos* (“bishop,” “overseer”). Thayer says of *episkopos*: “**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.**”⁹ The word does not lose its implication of authority when applied to an elder in the Lord’s church: “Spec[ifically] **the superintendent, head or overseer of any Christian church.**”¹⁰ While discarding the denominational concept of a single bishop over one or more churches in the foregoing quotation from Thayer, his comment demonstrates that the word *episkopos* retains all of its flavor of authority when applied to elders in the church.
3. Authority is inherent in the noun, *oikonomos* (“steward”), used of elders in Titus 1:7: “For the bishop must be blameless, as God’s steward; not self-willed, not soon angry, no brawler, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre.” Thayer gives the following definition: “**The manager of a household or of household affairs; esp[ecially] a steward, manager, superintendent...**to whom the head of the house or proprietor has invested the management of his affairs....”¹¹ Managers and superintendents in any realm of life are endowed with authority to manage and superintend that which is been placed in their charge. This is no less so with elders of the church.
4. The authority of elders is evident in the words of Hebrews 13:17: “**Obey** them that have the **rule** over you, and **submit** to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account; that they may do this with joy, and not with grief: for this were unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17, emph. DM).¹² All three of the words emphasized above relate to whether or not elders have authority over the church. *Obey* is from *peitho*, which means, according to Vine, “...to be persuaded, to listen to, to obey,...” and he adds, “The obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”¹³ *Rule* is from *hegeomai*, meaning “to lead the way; to take the lead...; to be chief, to preside, govern, rule.”¹⁴

Matthew 2:6 provides a vivid illustration of the authority resident in *hegeomai* in a context that does not directly relate to elders: “And thou Bethlehem, land of Judah, art in no wise least among the **princes** of Judah: for out of thee shall come forth a **governor**, who shall be **shepherd** of my people Israel [emph. DM].” *Governor* (a prophetic reference to the Lord) in this passage is from *hegeomai*, just as *them that have the rule over* is in Hebrews 13:17; cf. vv. 7, 24). *Princes* in the passage above is from the similar term, *hegemon*, which denotes “**a guide; a leader; a chieftain, prince.**”¹⁵ I fail to see how these two Greek words, which are the common ones used in reference to governors, princes, and chieftains, somehow lose all of their meaning relating to authority when applied to elders, bishops, pastors. The third term emphasized in Matthew 2:6 above is “shepherd,” which comes from *poimaino*, the very word used to describe elders and bishops as seen earlier (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

I also fail to see how these Greek words could indicate the authority which resides in Christ as a governor and a shepherd, but when they are applied to elders, bishops, and pastors in the Lord’s church they suddenly lose all of their flavor of authority. In fact, they do not. By no means are we affirming that elders have authority identical and equal to that of the Christ (Mat. 28:18). We are asserting, however, that elders have authority in some sense beyond that of mere example or persuasion in the local churches, or the Holy Spirit would not have applied these authority-intensive terms to them.

Submit in Hebrews 13:17 is from *hupeiko* (the only appearance of this word in the NT), meaning “**yield, figuratively give way, submit** to someone’s authority.”¹⁶ If members of the church are to yield to the authority of elders, then elders must possess some degree of authority.

5. Authority is resident in the word *proistemi*, used by Paul to describe elders in 1 Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders that **rule** well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and in teaching [emph. DM].” Thayer defines this term as follows: “**to be over, to superintend, preside over....**: 1 Tim. 5:17.”¹⁷ Paul uses the same term

again, apparently also in reference to elders: “But we beseech you, brethren, to know them that labor among you, and **are over you** in the Lord, and admonish you” (1 The. 5:12, emph. DM).

Reason suggests that if a shepherd has authority **over** his flock of sheep, if superintendents have any authority **over** that which is in their charge, if stewards have any authority **over** the houses they manage, and if governors and rulers have any authority **over** those governed by them, **then the elders of a local congregation have authority over the church.**

Frequently those who attain a place of authority, whether in government, business, or other fields, abuse it and exercise it wrongfully. This phenomenon has happened in the church many times. It is possible that Diotrephes (3 John 9–10) was an elder. Whether or not he was, he was a Christian who had let power go to his head and had become a local “pope.” It is likely that some who have concluded that elders have no authority except that of their example have seen an elder or an eldership abuse the authority given them by God. The overreaction is to deny that elders have any authority at all. However, the abuse of a legitimate principle (which we have shown the authority of elders to be) can never rightly be used as an argument against the principle itself. The solution is not to throw out the Scriptural concept of the authority of elders, but to throw out the elder or eldership that abuses it.

There is a loud and clear warning in Scripture about the abuse of authority by elders: “Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as **lording it over** the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Vine says that the word rendered “lording it over” (*katakurieuo*) means “...to exercise, or gain, dominion over, to lord it over....”¹⁸ Thayer gives a bit of a different connotation: “**to bring under one’s power, to subject to one’s self, to subdue, master...**”¹⁹ Whatever Peter means in this warning, his words must not be understood as canceling all of the words from his own

pen, as well as from those from Paul, that clearly denote authority resident in the elderships in local churches. In fact, in the context of the warning about “lording it over,” Peter enjoins the work of tending the flock and exercising the oversight, both of which demand the exercise of authority. Thayer’s definition of *katakuriuo* gives us the clue to the significance of the warning: Elders are not to be despots or tyrants, who by bullying and harsh tactics seek to intimidate others so that they are their personal subjects. Vincent’s comment catches the real flavor of the warning: “Other words [i.e., besides *katakuriuo*, DM] are used for the exercise of **legitimate** authority in the church: *proistemi*, **to be over** (1 The. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17); *poimaino*, as ver. 2, **tend**. But this carries the idea of **high-handed** rule.”²⁰ Elders who thus misuse the actual authority God gave them in the church are a disgrace and always cause grievous problems.

What is the realm of the authority of elders in a local congregation, or in what area do they have authority? No men, including elders, have any authority to create new spiritual doctrines or alter those already given in the New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16–17; Jude 3; Rev. 22:18–19). Rather than **making new** religious or spiritual legislation, elders are charged with **keeping** the church they oversee within the **bounds of the New Testament legislation** (Acts 20:28–31; Tit. 1:9–14).

The authority of elders lies in the realm of optional matters concerning the practical ways of carrying out the obligatory responsibilities stated in the New Testament, including keeping the church pure. The church has the obligation to preach the Gospel to the world (Mark 16:15–16), but the practical details (i.e., how to do it, how much money to spend on it, where to begin, and all such like) must be decided by someone or ones. We are obligated to assemble for worship, instruction, and fellowship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2; Heb. 10:25), but the details of how many times, where, the time(s) of meeting, and many other details are optional. Elders have authority to make decisions in all such optional considerations. Their qualifications are imminently practical in preparing them for the wisest possible decisions in

these matters. Elders exalt Christ when they use the authority the New Testament gives them for the purpose given.

The Scriptural authority of elders belongs to the eldership, rather than to any single elder. Each of the passages indicating the authority of elders addresses the entire body of the elders. Many cases exist in which a single elder has taken it upon himself to speak for or make decisions for the eldership. Each elder is subject to his fellow elder(s) just as every other member of the congregation is.

CHRIST-EXALTING ELDERS MUST BE MEN WHO INITIATE AND EXECUTE DISCIPLINARY ACTION WHEN IT IS NEEDED

That the New Testament teaches the church to discipline its members who will not discipline themselves is beyond controversy (Mat. 18:15–17; Rom. 16:17–18; 1 Cor. 5:1–13; 2 The. 3:6, 14–15; et al.). The New Testament just as clearly teaches that when a church has elders, they are to make decisions concerning the optional details (e.g., when and how) of this obligatory action. Consider the following:

1. Paul ordered the Ephesian elders to take heed to the church and watch because “wolves” (who would infiltrate the flock to feed on it) were on the prowl, and some of their own would arise to lead the sheep astray (Acts 20:28–31). Surely we are not to suppose that the apostle intended for them to understand that they were to watch for such destructive elements and developments and, upon discovering them, merely observe that the flock was being devoured while doing nothing. The whole point of Paul’s admonition was that bishops (overseers) were to be good shepherds and protect the sheep, demanding their leadership in disciplinary action.
2. In the list of qualifications Paul wrote to Timothy, he said the bishop must be: “one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (but if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Tim. 3:4–5). An elder must have proved that he could and did rule (from *proistemi*, see

item 5 above) well his own house or family. If he could not do so, he would hardly be prepared or qualified to “take care of” the church. Surely, none would question that a father has responsibility to take the lead in the nurturing, tending, and discipline of his children (Eph. 6:4). If the proper experience he has had in ruling well his own family involves keeping his children in subjection and if this is evidence that he is qualified to take care of the church, then it must follow that he has the responsibility to help God’s children properly behave. This duty might well involve leading the church in withdrawing fellowship from one or more members from time to time.

3. In the qualifications for elders sent to Titus, Paul was very specific about the disciplinary function of elders:

Holding to the faithful word which is according to the teaching, that he may be able to exhort in the sound doctrine, and to convict the gainsayers. For there are many unruly men, vain talkers and deceivers, specially they of the circumcision, whose mouths must be stopped; men who overthrow whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.... For which cause reprove them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith (Tit. 1:9–11, 13).

At least three types of disciplinary action are described above: (1) convict the gainsayers, (2) stop their mouths, (3) reprove them sharply. The implementation of these actions is to be accomplished specifically by elders.

Elders are not described in the New Testament as taking disciplinary action separate from the congregation. Rather, the entire congregation is to take such action when necessary. The whole church in Rome was to take part in and honor the marking and turning away from the false and beguiling teachers (Rom. 16:17–18). The Corinthian Church was to assemble and act as a unit in delivering the immoral brother to Satan, so as to keep company with him no longer (1 Cor. 5:4–5, 9, 13). Likewise, Paul’s instructions concerning withdrawing fellowship were addressed to and incumbent upon the entire church at Thessalonica (2 The. 3:6, 14–15; cf. Mat. 18:15–17). Obviously, a church can Scripturally exist and function without elders. It can also

discipline its own members whether or not it has an eldership. However, when a congregation has elders, their responsibility of shepherding, overseeing, tending, and ruling places the responsibility of leading the church in its disciplinary action upon their shoulders.

When elders decide that such action must be taken (assuming it is justified by the circumstances) and they announce that a brother or sister must be withdrawn from, the church is obligated to follow their leadership. One who comforts and extends misplaced sympathy to the one withdrawn from in such cases is in rebellion against the elders, and therefore against the Lord who gave them congregational authority. He also thereby aligns himself with the guilty brother or sister and "...partaketh in his evil works" (2 John 11). The sympathizer thus makes himself a subject of discipline if he does not repent.

It is shameful to contemplate how few elderships ever lead their congregations in withdrawing from erring, impenitent members. Are all of the members of the vast majority of congregations so righteous that practically none needs to be publicly disciplined? I doubt it. My observation is that elders have all too often been willing to wink at immorality, false doctrine, and divisive behavior rather than deal Scripturally with it. This neglect has resulted in severely weakened churches in some cases and apostasy of the entire congregation in others. Elders simply cannot exalt Christ if they are unwilling to lead the church boldly in its obligation to cast out those who will not repent of their impurity of life or teaching.

CONCLUSION

There is no greater or more demanding work in the entire world than that of serving as an elder, bishop, pastor in the Lord's church. The potential for exalting Christ in such service is almost without limit. However, the greater the potential for good if one serves well, the greater the potential for harm if one fails. We praise and commend the many good men who have faithfully discharged their duties to the Lord and to the church through the years as shepherds of the flock. No men deserve more earthly honor than do these because they genuinely exalt the Christ by noble service and life. Few men serve in this great responsibility with less

encouragement than they do. Let us encourage such worthy men and let us pray that in His providence the God of Heaven will raise up more great men for this great work.

ENDNOTES

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 299. We refer to “bishops” as “elders” and vice versa in this chapter because the Scriptures use these terms interchangeably (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5–7).

³ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1940, rep. 1966 [one-vol. ed.]), 4:74,

⁴ The inconsistency of the ASV in rendering *poimaino* by two different terms in reference to elders/bishops/pastors in Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet. 5:2 is inexplicable, unless some editorial committee completely went to sleep. Although the KJV uses the same word in both places, it uses the narrower term *feed*, rather than the more comprehensive *tend*.

⁵ Joseph Henry Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Assoc. Pub. and Auth., Inc., n.d.), p. 527.

⁶ Vine, 2:87.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:167.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4:112.

⁹ Thayer, p. 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 440–441.

¹² Some question whether or not Heb. 13:17 (along with vv. 17, 24) refers to elders. Arguments questioning this application are weak indeed, and suspiciously, they all come from those who deny that elders are endowed with any authority in the local congregation. This writer cannot find any others who had (or have) rule over the saints, except the apostles. However, these saints would hardly need to be told to submit to the apostles. They were rather being told to submit to those who had spiritual “rule” over them in particular. Who else, as seen from the very terms used to describe them, could these be but their elders, bishops, pastors?

¹³ Vine, 3:124. Since this word connotes a response to evidence and reasoning, rather than one brought about by order or command, some argue that this fact proves that elders have only “persuading authority.” However, this is an invalid inference. We do not argue that elders should not try to teach, reason with, and persuade those in their respective congregations to believe and do what is right, nor that

members of the church should not respond to such persuasion. We fail to see how this fact negates the numerous other Scriptural indications of their authority that goes beyond mere persuasion.

¹⁴ *The Analytical Greek Lexicon* (New York, NY: Harper and Bro. Pub., n.d.), p. 184.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Bauer, p. 846.

¹⁷ Thayer, p. 539.

¹⁸ Vine, 1:333.

¹⁹ Thayer, p. 332.

²⁰ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub. Co., n.d.), 1:666.

[Note: This MS was written for and delivered at the 1999 Shenandoah Lectures, San Antonio, TX. It was also published as a chapter in the lectureship book, *Exalting Jesus Christ*.]