

THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

Bobby Duncan

While this lecture has to do with “The Authority of Elders,” I want to begin by talking about some things that are foundational to our study. I want to talk about some things that will help us see it is absolutely essential that authority in a local congregation be vested in some person or some body of people. I will then show from the Scriptures that the eldership is the body of people who have been designated by God as the ones in whom authority is vested.

A great dictum of the Restoration Movement is stated in the following words: “In matters of faith, unity; in opinion, liberty; and in all things, charity.” We would do well to repeat this from time to time, and to be reminded of its implications. Perhaps it is superfluous to point out that matters of faith are those things believed because they are clearly revealed in the Bible, for “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). Matters of opinion are those things concerning which the Bible is silent. In such cases, of course, each one is free to have his own opinion. It is a tragic mistake to treat matters of faith as if they were nothing more than opinion; it is also a tragic mistake to treat matters of opinion as if they were matters of faith. We call those people liberal who treat matters of faith as if they were nothing more than opinion. We usually refer to those as being anti- who treat matters of opinion as if they were matters of faith. We must not deny people liberty in areas of judgment or opinion.

In matters of faith, unity can be obtained by all who follow the teaching of the Word of God. In First John 1:7 the inspired writer declares, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.”

Notice, please, that walking in the light causes us to have fellowship with all others who are walking in the light. If two parties are not in fellowship with each other, then at least one of those parties is not walking in the light, and perhaps both of them are not. If both are walking in the light, then they will be in fellowship with each other. To walk in the light means, of course, to follow the teaching of the Word of God. God's plan for unity in matters of faith is for all to follow the teaching of the Word of God.

But there is a sense in which all the members of a local congregation also must be united in matters of judgment or opinion. Notice the words of Paul from First Corinthians 1:10: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

The church built by Jesus has only one organization, and that organization is the local congregation. No congregation is a member of any larger organization of congregations. The passage we just read, while showing that denominational division is wrong, was actually written to enjoin unity in the local church at Corinth. To the Philippians Paul wrote, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). The psalmist said, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psa. 133:1). In John 17:20-21, our Lord prayed, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." The words of Paul recorded in Ephesians 4:1-3 should be read often by us all: "I

therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

This is not to say we can all think alike in matters of judgment; it rather shows that there must be unity and harmony of action in a local congregation, even in the realm of judgment or opinion. It should be easy for us to see why such is the case. If it were not so, it would be impossible to have an orderly period of worship or an effective program of work. The hour at which the church begins its worship on the Lord's day is a matter of judgment, or personal preference. For example, some might prefer to meet at nine o'clock, some might prefer nine-thirty, while others might prefer ten o'clock. Each believes his preferred time would be best. But each one is not at liberty to begin the service at whatever hour his own personal preference or his own judgment dictates. That would create mass confusion. The number of songs to be sung and the number of verses of each song are both in the realm of opinion. In every congregation there would probably be differences of opinion with reference to these things. But look at the confusion it would cause if each one acted on his own personal preference with reference to this matter. There must be unity and harmony with reference to such matters. Who a congregation selects to preach in a gospel meeting is a matter of judgment, so long as the one selected is sound in doctrine and in life. Yet there would be different opinions with reference to the best one to invite. In such cases the entire congregation must act harmoniously, and not according to the wishes or personal preference of all the individuals that make up the congregation.

There are hundreds of decisions in the realm of judgment which must be made, and which affect the entire congregation. If a church is to have unity and harmony, there must be unity and

harmony even in matters of judgment. Since human judgment and personal preferences do often differ, then it becomes essential that all the members of a local congregation yield to the judgment of certain ones in order to have unity in matters of judgment.

We raise this question then: to whose judgment are the members of a local congregation to yield so that unity and harmony might prevail? Does the Bible answer that question? Has God ordained that certain ones oversee the congregation, and that all the members submit to those overseers? He has, and that right clearly and emphatically. Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." The words *obey* and *submit* are quite significant. If I, a member of a local church, do not obey the elders of that local church, then I am not obeying God, because God said obey the elders. If I do not submit to the elders, then I am not submitting to God, because God said for me to submit to the elders. Notice also the clause, "that have the rule over." This entire clause translates one Greek word. The same word is translated "Governor" in Matthew 2:6 in speaking of Christ, and in Acts 7:10 when it is speaking of Joseph.

Another significant thing about this verse is it says the elders "must give account" of those for whose souls they watch. How could justice demand they give account of that over which they exercise no control and over which they have no authority?

Back in verse 7 of this same chapter the writer says, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." It is interesting to note that the same Greek word is translated "have the rule over" as is so translated in verse 17.

First Thessalonians 5:12 says, "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you." This verse does not name the elders as being the ones who are over us, but we know from Hebrews 13 and other passages they are the ones under consideration in this verse. This verse says they "are over you in the Lord." Some have the mistaken idea that elders can make a given decision respecting the congregation only if that decision coincides with the wishes of the members of the congregation as a whole. If that were the case, then the elders would not be over the congregation; instead they would be under the congregation. Paul should have said, "And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are under you in the Lord, and admonish you." But that is not what he said; he said, "and are over you in the Lord."

In First Timothy 5:17 this same Greek word is used by Paul when he writes, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine." Notice that the word *rule* is used. This is the same word, both in English and Greek, which is found three times in First Timothy 3. In listing the qualifications of elders, the apostle says, "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity." Question: Does a man have authority over his children? Look also at verse 5: "For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" Look also at verse 12, where the qualifications of deacons are being discussed: "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well." Would one take the position that God never intended for a man to exercise any authority in rearing his children? Fathers are to rule their children, and elders are to rule the church.

Several years ago a good brother wrote an article in which he said that the Greek word which

means “authority” is never used with reference to the relationship obtaining between elders and the congregation. Does that prove an eldership has no authority over a congregation entrusted into its care? If so, that same argument would prove that fathers have no authority over their children, for that word is never used in connection with the relationship of fathers and children. This does not negate the fact that fathers are to rule their children in harmony with the will of God, and that elders are to rule the church in harmony with the will of God.

In Acts 20 there is an account of Paul’s sending from Miletus to call for the elders of the church at Ephesus. When they came, Paul said to them, "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). The word here translated “overseers” is in other passages translated by the word *bishop*. Thayer defines the word as meaning, “*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.*”

There is no doubt that some elders have done a poor job, just as some preachers have done a poor job. There is no doubt some men have been appointed to the eldership without being scripturally qualified. There is also no doubt that some elders have sadly misunderstood their work and have abused the authority God has given them. These facts, however, do not justify our over-reacting by repudiating God’s plan for the government of his church, or by insisting that elders have no authority.

Some have argued that the only authority an eldership has is the authority of setting a good example. First Peter 5:1-3 is used:

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.

The words, “neither as being Lords over God’s heritage,” are taken to mean that an eldership has no authority to make decisions with respect to a congregation, or to expect the members of a congregation to abide by those decisions. Some believe the elders are to carry into their meetings the wishes of the congregation and make decisions accordingly. They think elders are like those elected to the legislature, that is, that it is the job of the elders to represent the wishes of the people in meetings of the elders. But the government of the Lord’s church is not a government “of the people, for the people, by the people.” It is rather a government of God’s people by those appointed of God to govern His people. If an eldership’s decisions must be representative of the wishes of the members of the church, then there would be no need of elders. A simple vote of the entire membership would more nearly guarantee that all decisions properly represent the wishes of the majority.

Elders are not acting as “lords over God’s heritage” when they make decisions which might not be in harmony with the wishes of the majority of the members. They are acting as “lords over God’s heritage” when their decisions reflect their own personal interests instead of the best interests of the church. A statement in Mark 10:42-45 illustrates this point:

But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Jesus here declares that the apostles would not exercise lordship. Does that mean the apostles had no

authority to give commands and expect those commands to be obeyed? Certainly not! The apostles were told, "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mat. 18:18). Paul told the Corinthians, "If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (I Cor. 14:37) To say the apostles were not to exercise lordship was not to say they had no authority to command and expect their commands to be obeyed.

A parallel passage in Luke 22:25 says, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors." The idea is that the relationship between an apostle and those to whom he gave commands is not the relationship of a king to his subjects. The subjects serve the king, and the king is the source of benefits to his subjects. But those who obey the commands of the apostles are not serving the apostles; they are serving the Lord, and the Lord, not the apostles, is the source of all benefits to those who serve him.

Even so with an eldership. Elders do not rule so the congregation might serve them, but so it might serve the Lord effectively. Furthermore, the Lord, not the elders, is the source of the benefits and blessings which come to those who serve him by faithful submission to a devoted eldership. To refuse submission to an eldership simply because its decisions do not coincide with my personal preferences would be equal to refusing obedience to an apostolic injunction simply because it does not suit me to obey it.

When an eldership acts in what it considers the best interests of the church, even though the members of the church do not like the action, the elders are not "being lords over God's heritage." If an eldership used its authority merely for the personal welfare or satisfaction of those who make up

the eldership instead of for the general well-being of the church, then it would be abusing its authority. The elders would be acting as “lords over God’s heritage,” and this would be a clear violation of First Peter 5:3. There can be little doubt that some elderships have abused their authority in this manner. An over-reaction to this abuse has led some to affirm that the scriptures actually give elders no right to make decisions with reference to the congregation. But the fact some may have abused their authority is no justification for taking the position that an eldership has no authority.

The elders of the Ephesian church were warned by the apostle Paul in the following words:

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 [Acts 20:29-31].

I ask you, why warn the elders and tell them to watch, if the elders have no authority to make any decisions respecting the congregation they oversee? And how could they even be called overseers if such were the case?

God’s plan for unity in the church with reference to matters of faith is that all follow the written revelation of God’s will. God’s plan for unity in the local church with reference to matters of judgment is that all submit to the judgment of the elders of the church. I have no more right to refuse to submit to the eldership of the local congregation in matters of judgment than I have to refuse to submit to the word of God in matters of faith. The former is just as much a violation of the will of God as is the latter.

Before I bring this discussion to a close, it needs to be mentioned that we are discussing the authority of an eldership, and not the authority of an elder. Sometimes an elder will have the mistaken idea that he, as an individual elder, has some authority to make decisions with reference to

the congregation. But the authority we have talked about does not reside in an elder, but in an eldership. (I know there are some who have objected to the use of the word *eldership*, saying that word is not in the Bible. That is true, but the word *presbytery* in First Timothy 4:14 is defined by Thayer as meaning a “body of elders.” That is all in the world we mean when we talk about the eldership.) We must recognize that there is a great deal of difference between the authority of an eldership and the authority of an individual elder. How much authority does one elder have to make decisions affecting the congregation? The same amount of authority any other one member of the church has. If God had intended that the congregation be overseen by one elder, He would not have required a plurality of elders over each church.

This is not to say that the body of elders cannot delegate certain authority to one elder to handle some particular job in the way he thinks best without consulting the other elders. But when he so acts, he is acting, not as an elder, but as one authorized by the elders to do a certain thing. The eldership might also delegate authority in the very same way to any other member of the church, even those who are not elders.

There is a difference also between superintending the activities of a congregation with proper authority and in being dictatorial or dogmatic in so doing. The eldership that is dictatorial and dogmatic is one which imposes its own personal will on others in an arbitrary way without consideration of what might be best for those under its supervision. Such an eldership considers its decisions above review, and never gives consideration to the fact it may make a mistake. The wise eldership will always acknowledge its own humanity and ask for input on the part of every member of the congregation. And since the decisions of an eldership are within the realm of judgment, it can be expected to make some mistakes. After all, none of us can claim never to err in judgment.

Should the members of the congregation submit to the elders, even when the elders have made a mistake in judgment? The answer is yes. Why? There are two reasons that come to mind. In the first place, if it is in the realm of judgment, how do you know they have made a mistake? All you know is that the judgment of the elders differs with your judgment in this particular matter. To say they made a mistake is to exalt one's own judgment above the judgment of the entire eldership. Unless enough time has elapsed that a certain decision has proven to be a mistake, we need to be careful about declaring a decision of the eldership to be the wrong decision. It has always been a source of amusement to me that a certain matter could arise, and the elders discuss that matter, pray over the matter, perhaps study it for several weeks, and then make a decision based on the very best information they have. But the very minute their decision is announced some good brother who was not in on the discussion and who has not given one minute's thought to the matter can immediately proclaim the elders have made a mistake. Do you know why that man is not an elder? Because an elder cannot be self-willed (Tit. 1:7), and that man is self-willed. He is determined that his way is best, even though he does not have access to all the facts, and despite the fact his way flies in the face of the entire eldership.

A second reason why we must submit to the eldership, even if the elders make mistakes, is because the Bible teaches that we are to submit to the elders. God knew that elders would not be perfect. He knew they would be human beings and, as such, would make mistakes. Still he said, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17).

Preachers can do a great deal to help members of the church love and appreciate their elders,

or they can do a great deal to keep members from submitting to the elders. If a church has a sound eldership, the preacher should remind the members of that fairly regularly. He should let the members know he respects the elders, and encourage them to do the same. If he privately grumbles and complains to the members about the mistakes made by the elders, he is conditioning the members to be unhappy with the leadership of the church. This is not to say there should be any hypocrisy on the part of anyone, but sincere appreciation should be shown those who make the sacrifices necessary to be elders in the Lords church.