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Series 2. Understanding the Church

Episode 6. Elders and Ministries

Jesus proclaimed in Mt. 16.18, “*I will build My church,*” but Jesus is now in Heaven and the Church is on the earth. However, the church is now spiritual in which Jesus Christ may now connect with the soul of man for fellowship, communication, and the ordaining men and women into specific services for the building up of His Church. The two primary areas are firstly the government of the Church for which He raises up *elders* to oversee it, and secondly He ordains and sets into place *ministries* to serve the Church and give it maturity. There are important distinctions between *elders* and *ministries* that must be understood.

Acts 14.23 “*So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*”

1 Pet. 5.1-4 “*The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be*

revealed: ²Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ⁴and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

There are a few very important facts that may be gleaned from these opening scriptures. First, before departing a church in a given local, the apostle Paul would appoint *elders* to oversee, feed, protect, and guide the flock in His absence. These *elders* were spiritually mature individuals, solid in the faith, and faithful in their calling in Christ. Note that the scripture reads “*elders*” as in more than one, because of the critical nature of such an appointment was too great to fall upon the shoulders of any one individual. These elders are what may be referred to as the “governing body of the church.” In fact, one of the first leadership conferences is noted in Acts 20. In verse 17 it is noted that, “*Paul sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church.*”

Paul called for the *elders* of the church because they were the overseeing governing body of the Church. This is “trickle down” theory which states, if the leadership is enriched with spiritual understanding and growth, it will over time spread into the whole church. At this gathering he challenged the elders with a most powerful mandate, stated in Acts 20. 28. He said,

“²⁸Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

This was not an appointment to be taken lightly. It was not as if they were being charged with overseeing members of some organization or some corporation. They were, however, charged with protecting, feeding and guiding a flock of believers, keeping them safe, caring for the entire flock from the oldest to the youngest, just as a shepherd would guard his flock of sheep from danger and lead them to fertile pastures and good drinking water. What made this flock so special, above all others, is that they were purchased with the very blood of Christ.

This flock were not just a group of followers that just joined the church because of the promise of heaven and eternal life; or an assembly of believers which became a part of the church by being baptized in water; or a congregation who professed Jesus Christ as Lord. Something preceded all of that, something of great spiritual magnitude and power. They were, and we are, *purchased*, redeemed at the cost of the shedding of Christ’s blood unto death on the cross, securing our deliverance from the bondage and condemnation of sin. Of what value do you think that God the Father places upon the blood of the Lamb of God? This is a most sober mandate, “*to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*”

There is a note of urgency with Paul’s words, a sensing of some deep awareness and concern for the flock of the Church at Ephesus, because he understands human nature and

he understands the nature of principalities and powers of the kingdom of darkness all too well. He issues the following somber note, Acts 20.29-31,

“²⁹For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. ³⁰Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking [n]perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. ³¹Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

This charge of Paul to the elders of the Church of Ephesus is most sober, challenging, and binding. It cannot be taken lightly then, by those elders, nor can it be taken lightly by those who God places in oversight of local churches today. Both Rm. 14.10 and 2 Cor. 5.10 speak of the “*judgment seat of Christ*,” before which all believers must stand. This is not the “*Great white throne judgment*” of Rev. 20.11 in which God judges all humanity, some unto life, others unto the second death. Although the Word of God clearly states that, “*There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.*” Rm. 8.1, yet it also clearly states that “**we**,” the believers, must all stand before Christ and to give account of our lives and receive due reward or loss for the things done in these bodies. Faithfulness is chief a criterion in judgment, both now and at the end of this age.

One of the first actions of Paul was to appoint elders in every church to oversee, feed, protect, and guide it. This is noted in Acts 14.23,

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

I believe this too should be the action of every local church, that the governmental authority should not lie in the hands of a single man or some appointed head, or an elected official, but in elders approved and set into place by Godly men. This is the strength and backbone of the Church.

The case of the Uncircumcised

When Paul and Barnabas were preaching the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles at Antioch, certain Jews came down from Judea preaching the necessity for circumcision and keeping the law for salvation. Acts 15. 1-2, 6,

*“¹And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the **apostles and elders**, about this question....⁶Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.*

So, Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to discuss and argue this matter. They met with the governing body of the Church consisting of the apostles Peter, James, and John and the elders. The elders of the Church of Jerusalem were a principal part of this decision-making process. The Gospel, as preached by Paul and Barnabas, was acknowledged as true having no need of

circumcision or keeping the Law. It is written in v.22 “*22Then it pleased the **apostles and elders**, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas...*” And in v.25 “*25it seemed good to us, **being assembled with one accord**, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, 26men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

The apostles and the church elders were in one accord with the decision that circumcision was unnecessary for the Gentile, and that conclusion was agreed upon by the whole church. So important was this decision that they sent Judas and Silas with Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch to verify the letter and to *27report the same things by word of mouth*. Thus, the elders were an integral part of this historical decision.

A Word to the Elders

Every elder appointed to oversee the flock should prayerfully study in detail Peter’s admonition and exhortation to elders, 1 Pet. 5.1-4,

“1The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.”

These words must not only sink into the heart, but also be pursued with all diligence of understanding of each and every clause; these clauses being: “*Shepherd the flock of God which is among you,*” “*serving as overseers,*” “*not by compulsion but willingly,*” “*not for dishonest gain but eagerly,*” “*nor as being lords over those entrusted to you,*” and “*being examples to the flock.*” Fragile souls are gained and lost, built up or torn down, strengthened or diminished, by the actions of the elders; so vital are their roles it is added “*and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.*” Elders must be motivated not by the promise of reward, but simply by gripping “the call” of our Lord Jesus Christ into His service.

Ministries of Service

Our focus now returns to the opening verse of scripture, 1 Pet. 5.1 “*1The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder.*” Peter was an apostle yet also considered himself an elder. The distinction for which lies in the fact that being an *elder* pertains to the **governance** of the Church whereas being an *apostle* pertains to the **spiritual service** to the Church. The first, the **governance** by the elders, means they exercise continuous oversight and authority over the Church, responsible for its doctrine, administration, safeguard, and overall well-being of the flock.

The latter, **service**, is more often explained as **ministry**. This word comes from the Greek word *diakonia*, which in its narrowest sense means “waiting on tables,” but in its larger sense means active **service**, and more specifically refers to the Spirit-empowered service guided by **faith**.

There is a close Biblical connection between the two words: *ministry* (service) and *faith*, the latter meaning an inborn persuasion by Christ, an anointing with the power to walk in that ministry.

Chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians has much to say about the various ministries in the Body of Christ; a ministry in which every member supplies. The last verse gives an abbreviated listing of some of these ministries 1 Cor. 12.27

“27Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. 28And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. 29Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? 30Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? 31But earnestly desire the best gifts.

By this explanation, a ministry is spiritual which origin is not of man, nor of the will of man, but *appointed by God*. A distinction must be made between Divine appointment and the schooling of the Spirit and the schooling and appointment by man. One may be schooled in the finest seminary or Bible school yet lack the anointing of the Spirit for the service. This, of course, does not mean that one called of God into ministry should not go to a Bible school, but it does underscore the deficiency of ministry without anointing.

Personally, I have witnessed “pastors” preach sermons, officiate in baptisms, weddings, and burials, counsel and teach youths, and at various points in their “ministry” fall away, some even doubting their salvation in their later years. I have seen individuals selected by a governing board to serve a church or mission or college campus whose qualifications are based solely on the college degrees attached to their name, for example, MDiv for Masters of Divinity, STB for bachelor of Sacred Theology, etc. It was in my opinion their service was marred by intellectualism, liberalism, logic and reasoning, ambition, and lack of spiritual anointing. Certainly those without such credentials, but functioning under the anointing, were better qualified for service.

The apostle Paul was taught by Gamaliel, a well-known Jewish law teacher in Jerusalem; he was trained in the strict interpretation of the Law. He was zealous in his religious faith even to the point of persecuting the Church of Christ. But he gladly abandoned all of that for the revelation of Christ and the reality of His Holy Spirit in him. Thus, he writes in Phil. 3.7-11,

“7But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. 8Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ 9and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; 10that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, 11if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The chasm between religion and spiritual life in Christ is great and is not easily crossed. But with the coming of the Spirit of Christ into one’s life no thought is given to the ways of religion or the promises of the world; a crisis occurs in the heart, and one abandons all for Christ.

Undoubtedly, men and women are gifted by the Holy Spirit to serve the Body of Christ. They are raised up, anointed, and set into place to function in some spiritual capacity. The human body has many members to it, some prominent and critical to life, others less noticed but necessary for the quality of life. A man may be disabled with the loss of a limb but could not survive with the loss of his heart. So too in the Body of Christ some ministries are critical to the functioning and growth of the Body while other ministries serve the Church in various capacities adding to the overall well-being of the Body. Eph. 4.11-16 speaks of some of the major ministries and their purpose to the Church,

“11And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, 12for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, 13till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, 15but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ— 16from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.”

If we were to extract the essence of truth out of this passage, we would conclude that all ministries, involving every member of the body, work together for the spiritual maturity of the Church, towards or approaching the stature of Christ. What is meant by *the stature of Christ* includes both Christ-likeness in character and the co-working with Christ in His service in the earth today. The Church must become a living organism which grows in stature wholly acceptable to God; capable of being used of Christ in the destruction of Satan and his kingdom of darkness and bringing souls to salvation and spiritual maturity.

A distinction can thus be made between *elders* and *ministers* in their nature of authority in the Church. Regarding *elders*, first I wish to make it clear that there are scriptural statements regarding only men as elders. In terms of value of the soul, no distinction can be made between gender, race, culture, education, or wealth. However, when it relates to the government of the natural family, the man is set into place as its head to oversee the family, provide for its safety and well-being. In order for the family to function well as a unit the roles of man and woman are predetermined by God. That is just the God-given nature of the family unit.

Simply by extension of the Divine principle, all Biblical indications point to men being placed as elders in the government of the Church. Some may take exception to this and “feel” differently about it. There are some important scriptures pertaining to “authority” and the role of men and women in the Church; but their discussion must be delayed for now, to be taken up next time.

However, when it comes to *functioning* in the body of Christ, absolutely no distinctions are made between gender, race, culture, and so on. In this case there is hard evidence supported by scriptures:

1 Cor. 12.13 *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into **one Spirit.**”*

Gal. 3.28 *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are **all one in Christ Jesus.**”*

Col. 3.11 *“where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but **Christ is all and in all.**”*

These three verses in summary: *all been made to drink into **one Spirit, all one in Christ Jesus, and Christ is all and in all.*** This established an incontrovertible truth that whether it be in particular ministries or gathered together as the functioning Body of Christ with the manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit, oneness and equality prevails. The manifestation of the gifts of the Spirit is presented in 1 Cor. 12. 7-11

“7But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: 8for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, 9to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, 10to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.”

Thus, all members of the Church, in functioning together as the Body of Christ, may freely and without restrictions enter into their God-ordained ministries of service and function in the gifts of the Spirit. Once again, there is one exception to this rule which is highly controvertible; and that is the role of women in certain ministries in which they may exercise authority over men in the Church, ministries such as pastor and teacher. This we will take up next time, Lord willing.

E2.S6 Questions for Discussion

1. Explain the character of the church *elder*. What vital role must he play in the church?
2. Why was Paul so adamant that the elders be watchful and diligent upon his departure? Cite any examples that you know having happened.
3. What importance did the elders play in the church at Jerusalem?
4. In 1 Pet. 5.1 Peter describes himself as being both an apostle and an elder. Explain how he would walk in both roles.
5. Contrast a “religious” ministry born out of the will of man with that of a spiritual ministry born out of Divine appointment.
6. Name a number of church ministries. What ministries are the most vital to the church?