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## TOWARD A BIBLICAL VIEW OF THE ELDERSHIP

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Two important questions arise in view of the eldership: The first is, "Does your church have elders?" Second, if your church has elders, "Is the eldership in your church a biblical one, one that is Bible-based both in its make-up and function?" The first question is not difficult to answer. The second, though more difficult to answer, can nevertheless be answered as one compares the eldership in his church with that of the New Testament. And by the way, the way these questions are answered has far reaching consequences to each church and its overall ministry.

The term *elder* is used because it is the most frequently used word in the New Testament to refer to the preaching/teaching/oversight ministry in the church of Christ. We could just as easily (and correctly) have used the term *pastor* or *bishop*. The New Testament elder is also the pastor and bishop of the church. The terms, elder, pastor, and bishop are used interchangeably by New Testament writers to refer to the same church officers. (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5-7; I Peter 5:1-4)

Your answer to the first question might be, "Oh yes, we have an elder. We recognize our pastor as an elder." But the question is not, "Do you have **an** elder?" but rather, "Do you have elders (plural) in your church?"

New Testament churches had elders, i.e., they had more than one pastor in each church. This is one of the most clearly established patterns in the New Testament. The first church, the church at Jerusalem, had elders (Acts 11:27-30; 15:4); the churches of Crete were to have elders appointed in order to make up what was lacking (Titus 1:5); and the churches composed of Hebrew Christians had elders (Hebrews 13:7, 24).

James, in writing to "the twelve tribes scattered abroad," (Christians throughout the empire) assumes two things about these Christians. First, he takes for granted that wherever they are they will gather together in local churches. And second, each of these churches will have a plurality of elders. (James 5:14) James just assumes that the pattern established under apostolic authority at Jerusalem would be in practice wherever God's people were found.

Now, back to the question, "Does your church have elders?" If the answer is no, then why? Why does your church not have elders? Is not an eldership biblical? If

indeed the bible is the basis for what we believe and practice, then an open and frank consideration of this subject forces itself upon us. If the churches of the apostolic era had a plurality of elders or pastors, should not our churches today have the same?

The second question asked above is just as important as the first. If your church does have an eldership, is it biblical in both its make-up and function? Perhaps that question can best be answered by asking a number of related questions and answering them from the Scriptures. At each point compare your church's eldership with that found in the Bible.

**Question #1:** Where did the churches in the New Testament get their elders?

**Answer:** From within their own congregation. This had to be true of the Jerusalem church since it was the first church. (Acts 11:30) It was the Apostle Paul's practice to ordain men to the eldership from their own church. (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) Too, the qualifications for the office require that one be a long-time member of a church before appointment to the office. (I Timothy 1-7) How can anyone know if a man is hospitable, patient, and one who rules his own house well unless there has been frequent and extended contact with that man? Further, there is absolutely no indication anywhere in the New Testament that a church got or called its pastor from another church.

**Question #2:** How did one become an elder in the New Testament?

**Answer:** By desiring the office (I Timothy 3:1); by meeting the qualifications for the office (I Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-11); by being chosen by the congregation (Acts 6:1-6; Acts 14:22); and by being ordained by the existing officers. (Acts 6:1-6; I Timothy 4:14; 5:22) All of these provisions are together required for serving in the eldership of the church.

**Question #3:** What are the qualifications for the office of elder?

**Answer:** The qualifications for the office of elder are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-11. All the qualifications are a must. Not only must the man aspiring to the office meet the qualifications but those choosing him must know if he meets them. This implies two things for the church in the selection of its pastors: the church must know and understand the qualifications for the office, and the church must know the man personally who is desiring the office.

**Question #4:** What are the elder's duties?

**Answer:** Preaching/teaching and overseeing/ruling in the church. One has well said that the main function of an elder is "teaching divine truth and enforcing divine commands." (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11; I Thessalonians 5:12-13; I Timothy 3:2; 4-5; 5:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24)

**Question #5:** Is there a hierarchy of authority in the eldership?

**Answer:** No! All elders are equal in authority. This truth is indicated by the fact that all of the elders are to have the same qualifications (Titus 1:5-11); all are to be equally obeyed (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24); and the responsibilities to oversee and teach are equally committed to all (Acts 20:17, 28-31; I Timothy 3:2, 4-5). Besides, there is no indication at all in Scripture that one elder was over the other elders.

It should be pointed out that although there is an equality of authority among the elders there will be a diversity of gifts and abilities. It is in this diversity that Christ's church is properly pastored.

Although there are other important questions that might be considered, it is hoped that these will help lead the reader on *toward a biblical view of the eldership*. The eldership is important. It is not a side issue. The stability of Christ's churches depends on biblical leadership.(Acts 20:25-32; II Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:9-11) It is the responsibility of every Christian, every church member, to see to it that the church that he is a part of has a God-approved, biblically qualified ministry.

Finally, does your church have a biblical eldership? If not, is anything being done to correct this irregularity? May God Himself give each of us grace to bring about reformation not only in our own lives but in His church. Submission to Christ's lordship is evidenced in our doing His will. Is He your Lord?