

The Messenger



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

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Dedicated to the Proclamation of the Truth in the Spirit of Love (Ephesians 4:15)

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Elders in the New Testament Period

by Gary Henry

A. The EXISTENCE of the eldership.

1. The eldership is a divine provision for a legitimate need. Paul wrote of Christ that “He 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” (Eph. 4:11, 12).
2. Following an initial period of establishment, congregations of Christians in the New Testament were supplied with elders – Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; etc.
 - a. The practice was universal – I Tim. 3:1-13, 14, 15. Paul’s instructions as an apostle were the same in each congregation – cf. I Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 11:16; 14:33, 36.
 - b. The individuals appointed to this work were known as:
 - 1) **ELDERS** (presbyters).
 - 2) **OVERSEERS** (bishops).
 - 3) **SHEPHERDS** (pastors).
 - c. Although they are not synonymous, these terms are interchangeable in that they all describe the same group of men within a congregation. The terms describe separate aspects of the same work – Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; I Peter 5:1, 2.
 - d. The eldership was related to other roles, gifts, and works – Eph. 4:11.
 - 1) The elders’ *oversight* was distinct from:
 - a) The apostles’ and prophets’ *revelation* of truth – Eph. 2:20.
 - b) The evangelists’ *communication* of truth – II Tim. 4:2, 5.

- 2) It was possible for one man to serve in more than one capacity, e.g. Peter – I Peter 5:1.
- e. Elders were sometimes miraculously gifted, but the eldership did not inherently require such gifts – Rom. 12:6-8; I Cor. 12:28-31; Cf. I Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9.
- f. Elders were sometimes financially supported – I Tim. 5:17, 18; I Pet. 5:2.

B. Four important CHARACTERISTICS of the eldership.

1. *Male* – I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6.
2. *Plural* – Acts 20:17; Phil. 1:1.
 - a. The “presbytery” (or “eldership”) in I Tim. 4:14 implies a plurality of elders.
 - b. Even documents outside the New Testament, such as the *Epistle of Clement* (ca. A.D. 96), reveal that congregations in the apostolic period had a plurality of elders.
3. *Coequal* – Acts 20:17; Phil. 1:1
 - a. In the New Testament period, no elder had any more authority than his fellow elders.
 - 1) It was a later development when one elder in each congregation came to be thought of as the “presiding elder” in that church.
 - 2) It was an even later development when the term “bishop” was distinguished from “elder” and used to refer to an elder who ruled over all the congregations in a geographical area.
 - b. The *Jerusalem Bible*, a Catholic translation, is without justification in its rendering of *episkopos* (bishop) as “presiding elder” in I Tim. 3:1: “To want to be a presiding elder is to want to do a noble work.”
 - 1) An interesting admission is made by the *Jerusalem Bible* in its marginal note to this verse: “The word *episcopos* used here by Paul had not yet acquired the same meaning as ‘bishop’.” To be more precise, we would say it did not then have the meaning of “bishop” *as that term is used by Catholics today*.
 - 2) Not only did “bishop” in the New Testament not mean what Catholicism later made it mean (head over all the congregations in a “diocese”), but in the New Testament there was not even any distinction between the “elders” and the “bishops” within a single congregation.
 - c. Wherever we go in the New Testament, elders/bishops were coequal with respect to the ruling authority within a congregation.
4. *No oversight outside of the local congregation* – Acts. 20:28; I Peter 5:2.
 - a. Unlike elders, the apostles did have authority that extended beyond the bounds of any one congregation. Cf. I Cor. 7:17; 16:1; etc.
 - b. The oversight of elders was limited to “the flock of God which is among you” (I Peter 5:2). Cf. Acts 20:28.

... *To be continued* ...