

# THE ASSEMBLY MESSENGER

Proclaiming the Timeless Truths of the Church to a New Generation of Believers

Volume 98-15

Dear Reader

As we continue our study of how a local assembly is to function, we want to determine whether God has established any *leadership* within assemblies gathered on God's True Ground. We saw in the previous Newsletter that the only Scriptural religious *authority* is in the gathered local assembly, not in any subset of brothers or sisters. But *leadership* is another question. A leader goes out in front of the brethren, seeking by the Word to show them the right way, whereas a ruler sits back and tells (orders) his subjects what to do. His subjects must heed him ... or else! A ruler has authority!

We believe God *has* established leadership or oversight in each local assembly. Those leaders are called elders. Let's see what Scripture says about them.

## Elders: Their Appointment as Seen in Acts and Titus

Without any fanfare elders in the local assembly just appear in the book of Acts (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2). But a careful reading of Acts gives us great insight into who elders are and how we get them. In Acts 20:17 Paul called for the elders of the Ephesian assembly. He told them to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock among which [wherein, JND] *the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

This one little verse is full of important doctrine! A few men in the Ephesian assembly were made elders (Gk: *presbuteros*) by *the Holy Spirit*, not by the appointment of any group of people, including the assembly! They were spiritually-mature (not necessarily the oldest) men whom God gave an *office* (as opposed to giving spiritual *gifts*, which they also possessed, as do we all) *within the local assembly* where they expressed fellowship, to act as *overseers* or *bishops* (Gk: *episkopos*) — two English translations of the same Greek word. *Episkopos* speaks of the *character* of their work. They were to be watching out for the spiritual needs of the assembly. The verse goes on to further define that character of work as *shepherding* or spiritually feeding (Gk: *poimaino*) the assembly. A good shepherd loves and cares for the sheep under his care and does his best to ensure their health, safety and well-being. He cares for them for his master.

It seems as if everything that God does in relation to His Church, man corrupts it by meddling in what is entirely God's prerogative. We have seen some of these meddlings while studying what is *not* God's True Ground in previous Newsletters. Isn't it enough that the Holy Spirit appoints elders? Why then does man want to do his own appointing? *It is a basic slur against the work of the Holy Spirit!* But they think they have two verses! Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 are used by many to show that the *assembly* should appoint elders, but let's see if these verses supports that conclusion.

Paul and Barnabas had been traveling to many assemblies (Acts 14:14, 20). We then are told, "So when they had appointed [chosen: JND] elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord." Who are the "they"? Who did the choosing? *Surely Paul and Barnabas*: wherever they went they appointed elders in the assemblies. Note "elders" is plural: there *never* is the thought in Scripture of *an* assembly having *one* elder, although it is possible in the unusual case of an assembly where there is only one brother. The New Scofield Bible points out that the Greek word *cheirotoneo* (appointed, chosen) has the thought of raising the hands in making the choice. This note seems to imply that it was a vote by the congregation! Nonsense! The *apostles* chose, evidently *by pointing out with their fingers who the Holy Spirit had appointed as their elders!* God had revealed to the apostles who He had chosen and they pointed out those divinely-appointed elders to the assembly. The assembly had no other way to know because they

didn't as yet have the written instructions of the New Testament. So human appointment completely fails when trying to use Acts 14:23 as justification.

In Titus 1:5 we read that Paul left Titus in Crete to "set in order the things that are lacking and appoint (establish -- JND) elders in every city, as I commanded you." The Greek word *kathistemi* (ordain) comes from two Greek words meaning "to cause to stand over against, to set" (Vine). This fits well with the use of the word *establish* by JND. Under the English word *appoint*, Vine continues with the meaning of *kathistemi* in Titus 1:5, "Not a formal ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the appointment, for the recognition of the churches, of those who *already* had been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit and had given evidence of this in their life and service." Exactly! The Holy Spirit-appointed elders were there, but evidently not recognized or functioning effectively as an oversight. Titus was to *establish* them in that position, for the assembly was to function in an orderly way. Titus was acting under the direct authority of Paul the apostle, as an apostolic delegate. *We today have neither apostles nor their delegates.* Again, this verse cannot be used to prove the human appointment of elders in assemblies today.

### **How Does An Assembly Know Who Are Their Elders?**

How then does an assembly know who the Holy Spirit has appointed as elders in their midst? The answer is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, "And we urge you, brethren [of the Thessalonian assembly] *to recognize* those who labor among you and are over you [take the lead among you -- JND] in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love *for their work's sake.*" We have the qualifications of an elder given in both 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 (which we will look at next). Who in the local assembly, *meeting the divine qualifications*, is laboring in the assembly to help ensure its functioning according to the Scriptural pattern, taking the lead when situations develop, admonishing as needed? When I see those brothers, then I am to *recognize* them as Holy Spirit-appointed elders, their work commending them, and esteem [regard -- JND] them very highly for their difficult but divinely-given assignment, being carried out faithfully.

Three expressions in these verses deserve a little more comment.

- First, the word translated *recognize* in the NKJV or *know* in the JND is, according to Strong's Concordance, *eido* in the Greek. At least one meaning is *to perceive* — to recognize them by what is evident in their work.
- Secondly, the KJV and NKJV speak of the elders being "over you," which could give the thought of them being some kind of superior. But the Greek word is *proistemi* and means "to stand before," to lead (Vine), or as Darby translates it, "to take the lead among you." That is quite a difference!
- Thirdly, the Greek word translated *esteem* or *regard* is *hegeomai* and seems to have the thought of willingly (but not blindly) *allowing* the elders to lead you as opposed to the more common thought of *esteem* -- of putting them on a pedestal -- which can only lead to pride and a great downfall.

### **The Spiritual and Moral Qualifications for Elders**

"If anyone aspires to exercise oversight, he desires a good work. The overseer then must be above reproach, husband of one wife, temperate, prudent or sober-minded or discreet, of good behavior, hospitable, apt to teach, not addicted to wine, not violent, not addicted to contention, not greedy for money, conducting his own household well, having his children in subjection with all gravity (but if one does not know how to conduct his own house, how shall he take care of the assembly of God), not a novice lest he become conceited and fall into the fault of the devil ... having a good testimony or reputation from those without ..." (1 Tim.3:1-7, JND, NKJV, NASB Paraphrased Composite). See the similar list in Titus 1:6-9.

If *God* has put the desire to help shepherd the local assembly into one's heart, it is a good thing. Only be sure it is of God, not the fleshly desire for self importance, as with Diotrophes (3 Jn.9)! But that doesn't

mean the assembly will automatically recognize him as an elder. Has he met the qualifications? Prove-out time is definitely involved. The requirements for an elder, an overseer, are tough! And we have no right to overlook any of these requirements. Maybe there are so few qualified elders today because we have grown so careless in the Lord's things. We attend the meetings of the assembly when it's convenient and often do our best *not* to get involved, specially in anything that might be the least unpleasant or controversial, or would require a continuing commitment of time and energy. We often are more interested in worldly, fleshly "fun" activity, entertainment or relaxation, than in making a serious commitment of time and energy to the Lord's things. To many, problems are a discouragement instead of a challenge to resolve before the Lord. As a result we often become part of the problem instead of part of the solution. Then we wonder why God doesn't use us and why we are not spiritually-joyful people. Sadly, it seems that younger brethren today are so caught up in the world's affairs and its ways and material things that there are fewer and fewer who are maturing into these qualifications. We should realize that the moral qualifications *ought* to be true of us all, but they are *musts* for an elder. The assembly needs to be careful not to allow one to take the place of an elder who is Scripturally disqualified.

Both sets of verses clearly indicate that an elder must not only be married, but have well-behaved, faithful children. The *reason* is even given. The home is the proving ground. If the brother can't manage his home, including his children, in a godly manner, then he is unfit, disqualified, to lead as an elder in the local assembly. Scripture is plain! Yet the qualifications for being married and for having orderly children have come under attack perhaps more than any other qualifications. Could it be that there are unmarried men, or men without children, who have taken the position of elder, although not qualified, and want to maintain that position? We can be assured that the *Holy Spirit* will never choose one to be an elder who doesn't pass such a basic test!

Note too that Scripture doesn't speak of the *wife* of one husband. As in all public positions of leadership, God has given that responsibility to the *man*, not to the sisters. The Lord willing we will look at the roles of men and women in relation to the Church in much more detail in a future Newsletter.

### **1 Timothy 5:17**

"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the Word and doctrine." The Greek word translated "rule" is again *proistemi* which we just saw has the meaning, as Darby correctly translates it, of "let the elders who *take the lead* among the saints ..." Some elders, along with leading the saints, may also be particularly gifted and active in teaching the Word and helping to ensure that the assembly maintains proper doctrine. These do two jobs -- oversight and teaching -- and thus receive double honor or respect. Again, it is not putting them on a pedestal. The double honor appears to be connected with the expression that "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (v.18) and appears to indicate a responsibility to help such doubly-hard-working elders in needs they may have — needs perhaps arising out of the huge amount of time and energy required to fulfill his God-given double work on behalf of the assembly.

### **Shepherding: The Failing Shepherds of Israel**

The *function* of an elder is to oversee, to shepherd, to lead. Peter, an elder himself (1 Pet.5:1), being a married man (Mt.8:14), tells the elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [*exercising oversight* -- JND], not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly, not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but by being *examples* [*models*, JND] to the flock" (1 Pet.5:2-3). 1 Timothy 3:5 says he is to "take care of the church of God." Peter is careful to point out that oversight is not *ruling*, but the desired outcome in the assembly is sought by being *personal examples* of what is right conduct, right teaching, right direction, etc. Acts 15:2,4,12,22-23 indicate that elders initially have up-front responsibility, but in that which affects all, the *whole local assembly* must be quickly involved. Again, their

only authority over the assembly is the moral authority of the Word of God which they present to the saints by example and word.

Ezekiel 34:1-10 levels a scathing rebuke to the shepherds of Israel. It says, “Woe to the shepherds who feed themselves. Should not the shepherds feed the flocks ... the weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost, but with force and cruelty you have ruled them ... so they were scattered ... and no one was seeking or searching for them.... Behold I am against the shepherds and I will require My flock at their hand ... I will deliver My flock from their mouths ...” In New Testament application, what a responsibility elders have! How terrible to be found under the judgment of God because of careless or willful failure! What a promise to every burdened assembly, that if it is faithful to God, it will be delivered from any Diotrephes-like “elder” (3 Jn.9-11).

### **Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24**

Hebrews 13:7, 17 and 24 all use the word *rule* in King James-based translations. In each case it is the Greek word *hegeomai* which is translated *esteem* or *regard* in 1 Thessalonians 5:13. Darby translates the word as “your leaders” in each case; Vine suggests “your guides.” It seems, literally, it would be, quoting verse 17 as an example, “obey those who you *esteem* or *regard highly*, and be submissive ...” As to the word *obey* in verse 17, Vine points out that the Greek word for *obey* is *peitho*, which has the thought of obeying because you have been convinced or persuaded by what the person has told you, that what he said is the truth. It’s not the authoritarian “because I said so and you must obey me.”

### **Elders When in Error**

Elders aren’t immune to correction. Elders are part of the assembly and subject to the same care and, if necessary, disciplinary procedures as anyone else. The assembly is always to judge or discern the correctness and appropriateness of what is being said or done (1 Cor.14:29): it is the divine safeguard against elders taking an unscriptural position. But an elder who takes a *Scriptural* stand may well make enemies (unfortunately), so each individual (as well as each assembly) is instructed, “Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses” (1 Tim.5:19). But if an elder, or anyone else, sins *publicly* and does not repent, the sin must be stopped: “Those who are sinning, rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest may also fear” (1 Tim.5:20; Gal.2:11-14). Yet, as far as possible, the office is respected, so “rebuke not an elder *sharply*, but exhort him as a father” (1 Tim.5:1, JND). In other words, elders are to be given moral recognition.

### **The Contrast to the Current Practice in Many Local Churches**

Most sadly, the above Scriptural order for elders in each local assembly is often set aside and elders are appointed by the vote of the congregation or worse still, by the vote of some group less than the whole assembly, or even worse, the elders appoint themselves! Then they often *rule*, calling themselves “the oversight,” and they decide what the assembly will see, who will preach in its midst, who will be disciplined, who will be received. Indeed, whole “fellowships” operate on this unscriptural principle of the rule of appointed elders. Often, if there is an opening in their ranks, the so-called “oversight” (not the assembly) will appoint the successor.

All of the above is a terrible slur upon the Holy Spirit who alone appoints elders, and upon the Head of His Church who has ordained that authority is only in the gathered assembly, not in its eldership. Further, by overturning or ignoring the Lord’s order for His Assembly, His Headship is denied, whereas all direction and control is to come from Him. Such sinful practices should not be tolerated among the assemblies that seek to gather around the Lord, to His name (Mt.18:20), and which claim to seek out and follow the Head’s directions! RPD

## Summary and Suggested Reading

It should be plain from our study that the human appointment of elders is wrong. Assemblies should recognize as elders those appointed by the Holy Spirit, who are doing the work *and* meet the divine qualifications, and respect their guidance in the spirit of Acts 17:11. Office is local, but gift is universal. Therefore, a brother who rightly exercises oversight in one local assembly, would not do so in another local assembly. But if a brother has a spiritual gift from the Head of the Assembly, he could use his gift anywhere.

The previously-recommended books on the Church — particularly “*the Church of the Living God*” by R.K. Campbell and “*The Church, Its Beginning, Doctrine and Order*,” by R.P. Daniel — each have informative sections on the question of elders. Also, *Office, Gift, Priesthood* by A.J. Pollock is helpful, obtainable from Believers Bookshelf. A *Scripture Truth* reprint, “*Elders, Overseers, Bishops*” by Frank Wallace, is available while very limited supplies last, from Bob Costen.

There are a number of books that have helped us with the Greek words, which we believe will help you too. We highly recommend that you own a J.N. Darby translation for its very accurate rendering of the Greek; that you have Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*; that you have *Strong’s Concordance* with its Hebrew and Greek Dictionary; that you have a Greek-English interlinear translation of the Stephens text; and that you have J.B. Smith’s *Greek-English Concordance to the New Testament* (where each Greek word is arranged in a spreadsheet format to give all the locations for various English translations of the word).