

ELDERS

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All living things must grow or else they will die. When a baby is conceived, it begins at that point to grow. It grows to the point that it leaves the mother's womb and is born. It eats and grows or else we take it to the doctor to see why it is not growing. The Lord's church is alive in Christ and must either grow or it will die. The Bible teaches we are to grow: *As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:* (I Pet. 2:2). Again we read from the pen of Peter, *But grow in grace, and [in] the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him [be] glory both now and for ever. Amen.* (II Pet. 3:18).

We need to remember that growth in the congregation begins with each member. Having just the right program is not the answer. Preaching and teaching just the right lessons will not succeed alone. All congregations, including Nesbit, need to grow -- **BUT THAT GROWTH MUST START WITH INDIVIDUALS!** Higher and greater numbers do not, in and of themselves, always represent spiritual growth. Spiritual growth begins within the heart of individuals and as they grow, they will bear fruit for the Lord and numbers will result. This growth could be faster in some and slower in others.

Having stated the above, let me move to the heart of the article. In order for congregations to grow and be all that God intends, elders are needed. God organized the church in this fashion: *Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:* (Phil. 1:1). We see that by A.D. 60-62, the church at Philippi had bishops and deacons. This is God's design and desire and anything less is inferior to God's plan. However, time must be given in certain cases and situations to allow this to happen. This does not mean that the church can not grow and progress until elders can be appointed. Every congregation which does not have elders needs to be. The Bible says elders must be *given to hospitality* (I Tim. 3:2). This does not just mean if an opportunity comes knocking at the door help, but it means that elders should be seeking these opportunities to help. This would require sincere concern on their part. Elders are to *take heed to all the flock* (Acts 20:28). This means they are not to show partiality but have a sincere concern for all. Elders are not to be *lords over*

working toward that goal -- indifference on this subject is no better than substitution for God's plan. The Bible condemns the principle of substitution for what God has commanded (mechanical instruments of music, women preaching, etc.) and yet many congregations fail to apply this principle to appointing elders. Congregations who feel they are doing "alright the ways things are without elders" and consequently make no effort to appoint them, are just as guilty as those who use mechanical instruments of music in worship and the such like.

Before men can be appointed to serve as elders they must have the respect of the people. This respect is not demanded, but rather, **EARNED**. Men must also be qualified according to the Holy Spirit's teaching before they can serve as elders. We will attempt to look at what kind of men can serve as elders. Since the Bible describes the kind of man God wants to serve -- what kind of man is that? It is one who has:

SINCERE CONCERN FOR PEOPLE

We have the supreme example of this in Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd (I Pet. 5:4). We read in Mark 6:34, *And Jesus, when he came out, saw much people, and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as sheep not having a shepherd: and he began to teach them many things.* Jesus had sincere concern for people and showed that concern by seeking the lost. He had compassion for the lost while upholding the laws which they had to obey. Elders need this same compassion for the lost and conviction for the Word of God.

God's heritage (I Pet. 5:3). Some men use their position as elders to "look down" on the others and as a position from which they think they can "demand" things of people. There is a difference between "ruling" God's house (Heb. 13:17) and being a "lord" over God's children. The Bible rules and the eldership who expedites that Word then is ruling through the Word of God. These wise elders are not trying to get

the people to obey them simply because they are elders, but rather to serve God through their obedience. These elders understand that God is the

Ruler and the Giver of all good gifts and their task is help the people serve Him without seeking personal

glory on their part. The elder or elders who "lord" over the church are those who rule through their word and who seek the satisfaction of having people "under" them as do kings or other worldly rulers.

SOLID COMMITMENT TO TRUTH

Elders who promote growth are those who are solidly convicted on Truth and will not waver to the right or left. These men are to be ***vigilant and sober*** (I Tim. 3:2). This characteristic would be a state of mind which is watchful, alert and aware of what is happening. These men would be aware of current issues in the church and would not "put their heads in the sand" when dealing with them. These men would know false teachers by name and would not be avoid to warn the flock of their teachings: ***Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers*** (Tit. 1:9). These men would be aware of the flock's growth and would be willing to exhort and admonish the flock to obey the will of God.

SOBER CONVICTION ABOUT SELF

When the Bible student examines the lists of qualifications carefully, he quickly recognizes the fact that the man himself must have some strong, sober convictions about himself. He must be one ***of good behavior*** (I Tim. 3:2). This means his life must be well-ordered, balanced and respected. The Greek word used here is translated "modest" in I Timothy 2:9. There a woman was told to wear that which was appropriate and respectable. Thus an elder must conduct himself in an ordered and balanced way. He also must be ***patient*** (I Tim. 3:3). This means he must be gentle to all, pleasant and mild to approach. Certainly as one who will influence the souls of the church, an elder must be patient in his dealing with them. God is patient and longsuffering (II Pet. 3:9) and an elder must also be. He must also be ***blameless*** (I Tim. 3:2). Thus he would be a man who would not be discredited by actions or attitudes. This does not mean he is sinlessly perfect, but it does mean he would be walking in the commandments of the Lord (Luke 1:6). The original word means "not open for rebuke." This elder would also be ***not self willed*** (Tit. 1:7). This word means self-pleasing or arrogant. An elder in the Lord's church must take into consideration the

good of the flock and the views and ideas of fellow elders. When a decision is made it must be a decision based on the needs of the church, for the good of the church and the promotion of the kingdom. The decision can not be based on "feeding egos" or "self-pride." A self willed elder is one who will "lord over God's heritage." An elder must be ***just, holy and temperate*** (Tit. 1:8). He must deal honestly and fairly with the whole flock. He must be devoted and dedicated to God. He must also be in control of himself and "not soon angry." No doubt an elder will have to confront people who do not want to be confronted. They will say things and in such manners as to test his patience and temperament. An elder also may be placed in tempting situations dealing with many things from money to women. He must be able to control himself under all situations. He also must have a ***good report from those without*** (I Tim. 3:7). Brother Foy E. Wallace, Jr. commented that this meant "no evidence of evil conduct in any part of his life and in the community influence free from bad example." Thus people outside the church must have a favorable opinion of an elder based on his life and his dealings with them. Any time one stands for the Truth, there will be some who do hold him in favor. However, an elder must conduct himself in a respectable and honorable manner under all circumstances.

SUPPORTIVE COMPANION BESIDE HIM

The wife of an elder must be an exemplary person also. She needs to have a ***quiet and meek spirit*** (I Pet. 3:4). She needs to be someone who is ***equally interested in the church as is the husband***. Imagine what problems would be created in the home if she were not committed to the work as was her husband. When a husband and wife are religiously divided there are problems and when an elder and wife are not as interested in the work there will be problems. There needs to be unity in the home as to purpose and goal. The Christian life can not be separated from the home. They must be the same and thus if an elder is to be effective, he needs the support of his companion. Some times that may seem to be the only support he has! What if he did not have that?

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

Elders are essential to true growth and stability within the church. May we endeavor to comply with Scripture and may we pray to this end. God expects elders to be certain kind of men. Let's search our hearts and see if we are trying to be this kind of man. May the women also prepare themselves to be elders' wives. Whatever we can do to contribute to growth, may God help us to do.