

Ecclesiastical Government (12th)

(The study for today continues looking at the officers in the congregation that the Lord Jesus Christ appointed and their particular function. This session continues studying the word for elder.)

Today we will continue our study of the word for elder (πρεσβύτερος) that we began in our last session by looking at Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23. This chapter is generally referred to as the “Jerusalem conference.” It is often believed that this conference was an assembly composed by apostles and elders and that it established a ruling by them separate from the congregation. However, as noted previous podcasts, the reason for this meeting was because “certain men” from Judea went to Antioch in Syria and said, “Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved,” (Acts 15:1) and Paul and Barnabas opposed them and they “had no small dissension and disputation with them” (Acts 15:2). Then the congregation at Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas, and certain others of the congregation to Jerusalem “about this question.” In other words, this was an issue between the assembly at Antioch and the congregation at Jerusalem. Acts 15:4 says that the messengers from Antioch were received by the congregation and the apostles and elders within the congregation. The meeting was not composed of only apostles and elders, but included the whole assembly, Acts 15:22. Furthermore, it appears that James, the elder or pastor at Jerusalem, had the final word and summation of the meeting with the recommendation of the letter of explanation. (It is believed by many that this James, the brother of the Lord, was not an apostle and was the pastor at Jerusalem at this time. See Acts 12:17; 21:18; Galatians 1:19; James 1:1.) Therefore, this meeting was not some council separate from the congregation and that it was performed within and under the authority of the entire congregation at Jerusalem. Even the letter sent out was not only by the apostles and elders, but included the “brethren” (Acts 15:23) or congregation and it was sent to the assemblies (brethren) “in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.”

Acts 16:4 is the next passage under consideration and it cannot be interpreted separate and apart from the context of Acts chapter fifteen. In other words, the “decrees” “ordained of the apostles and elders” were not something determined without the authority of the congregation at Jerusalem. Also, it must be noted that the Greek word translated “ordained” is κρίνω and has the idea of judgment. This word is used one hundred and fourteen times in the New Testament and is only translated ordained in this passage. It is translated as “judge” eighty-eight times. However, regardless of the action and conclusion of the meeting at Jerusalem, we must never conclude that it was a function of a ruling body of elders, with the apostles, outside or separate from the whole congregation, Acts 15:22.

The next passage that has the word “elder” in connection with an officer is found in Acts 20:17. When we previously reviewed the term bishop we found the word for it is translated “overseer” in verse twenty-eight. Therefore, since the “elders” (as found in verse seventeen) are designated “overseers” in verse twenty eight, the two words simply refer to the same office. Obviously, these elders or overseers were to lead and guide the congregation, but only according to the principles as given by the Holy Scriptures. They did not have any authority to rule over the assembly and set up denominational guidelines or rules as to how the body or assembly is to be governed.

Again we see the term “elder” mentioned in Acts in chapter twenty-one, verse eighteen. Verse seventeen declares that the “brethren” (a term used throughout the New Testament to designate a congregation or assembly) at Jerusalem received Paul and his company gladly. Then verse eighteen tells us that Paul and others went to see James and the other elders with him. During the meeting, they discussed how Paul might bring some unity and peace among some of the believing Jews by taking a Jewish vow. Though Paul followed their advice, this meeting could in no way be considered as a ruling body separate from the congregation that instituted some regulation or bylaw to be observed by the congregation.

Next we find the Greek word for elder (πρεσβύτερος) in I Timothy 5:1. It appears from the context that it is used here simply to refer to older men since the feminine form (πρεσβύτερα) is used in verse two designating older women. (This should satisfy any Bible believer that women are not ordained by the Lord to fill the office of elder.) The word for elder (as used in verses seventeen and nineteen) does refer to the office as suggested by the context; therefore, let us see what can be learned about the office from the context.

First, from the context of the epistle of I Timothy overall, we see that the apostle Paul had Timothy to abide at Ephesus for the purpose of instructing the congregation there concerning various doctrinal issues and practical matters regarding genuine faith. (Remember that Paul requested the elders/bishops from this congregation to meet with him at Miletus as recorded in Acts chapter twenty.) As previously noted, chapter three teaches specifically about the offices of bishop and deacon. In I Timothy 3:15, Paul says that the things he told Timothy to teach were for the purpose of knowing how a minister is to behave “in the house of God” which is the congregation of the Lord, “the pillar and ground of the truth.”

Second, the context of our verses in chapter five gives some specific insights regarding the work of the ministry and how such are to be thought of by the congregation. They are to (1) rule well; (2) labor in word and doctrine. Regarding such officers, the congregation is to (1) give honor to them; (2) give double honor to those that labor well; (3) not to listen to gossip and false accusations against the elders without substantial proof; (4) publicly rebuke those who live sinfully; and, (5) not to quickly ordain one to the ministry.

The Greek word for ruling well is προϊστημι (pro-is'-tay-mee) and means “to stand before, i.e. (in rank) to preside, or (by implication) to practice.” It is translated *maintain, be over, rule*, and is only used eight times in the New Testament with four times in I Timothy 3:4, 5, 12; 5:17 and all related to officers within the assembly of God. It is also used in I Thessalonians 5:12 where it, too, is associated with officers in the New Testament congregation. Likewise, by implication, Romans 12:8 speaks of those that “ruleth,” which may refer to officers within the congregation as well. It is translated *maintain* in Titus 3:8, 14, which likely refers not only having a good and lawful trade, but also, as John Gill says, “every good work, every branch of duty, moral, civil, and religious.” Obviously, the elders are to rule, oversee, supervise, and manage the assembly, but not as a separate ruling body outside the authority of the congregation. Just as a loving father does not rule over his house in a domineering and dictatorial way that would separate him from the fellowship and companionship of the family, so likewise, an officer or elder (or a deacon, see I Timothy 3:12) does not govern in the house of God in a superior or haughty fashion. Equally, by studying all the passages where this word for rule is used, we find that it describes one who is functioning among and within the congregation and not in some special council or synod separate from the assembly. Also it does not include some office in a denominational headquarter officiating over a group of congregations.

When I Timothy 5:17 speaks of ministers or elders who “labor in the word and doctrine” being honored, it is not referring to elevating them to some exalted position above the other members. It is simply speaking of the support and maintenance given to them. Obviously, godly ministers and deacons should be respected and treated with admiration and high esteem. While in some cases the officers within the house of God are elevated beyond the proper place, too often in our day they are not respected or honored as they should. I well remember as a child when the minister was highly esteemed and admired. This may be because ministers in days of the past conducted themselves with sobriety and gravity and arrayed themselves in clothes that manifested one that occupied a position as an ambassador of the Lord of glory. Today the general décor of men professing to be an elder or bishop in the house of the God is that of the casual man on the street. Too many ministers are so occupied with the activities and entertainment of the world that they have no time for laboring in the word or doctrine. It is true that dress does not make the man, but even the ambassadors and politicians of the governments of the world outwardly show more reverence and respect for their office than most ministers do for the office in the

house of God. Sadly, this, too, is fading so much that there is a general lack of respect in every area of society. It is feared that the world has more influence among professing Christianity than the house of God does in the world. May we never forget that the congregation is the house of God and not some man-made society or organization. We are to have as much reverence in midweek worship services or on Sunday evening as the Sunday morning worship. It is the same God we are worshiping and He deserves the same reverence and respect in every worship service.

However, our time is up for today and, the Lord willing, we will continue this study in our next publication.