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## Authority and Tenure of Elders

Everett Ferguson

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## Authority and Tenure of Elders

EVERETT FERGUSON

Abilene, Texas

The New Testament presents a close interrelationship of three items: abilities, service, and leadership. Within this New Testament perspective a proper understanding of the authority and tenure of elders may be attained.

### *Qualifications*

The gifts which God through Christ bestows on men are the foundation of ministry. "Gifts" is the biblical word; we are more accustomed to speak of "abilities" or qualifications. God's gifts pertain no less to natural abilities than to supernatural endowments by the Spirit. The same word "gift" (*charisma*) is applied to both. On the subject of gifts modern Christians often look no further than 1 Corinthians 12 and the varieties of gifts from the Spirit listed there. Even in this chapter, however, it should be observed that among those appointed by God in the church are "helpers" and "administrators." Christians should also look at Paul's list of gifts (*charismata*) in Romans 12:6,7—prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contributing, giving aid, and doing acts of mercy. Of these, only prophecy requires a special inspiration by the Spirit. The other activities we regard as "natural." They are nonetheless gifts, and God does not bestow them on everyone. A special talent or ability is involved in being a teacher or an exhorter, in having money to give, and in being able effectively to perform acts of benevolence. In I Peter 4:10-11 the gifts received from God's grace are summarized in two categories—those of speaking God's word and those of rendering service. God is the source of one's special aptitudes—of whatever kind.

The keynote of New Testament teaching about human abilities is 1 Corinthians 4:7: "What have you that you did not receive? If

then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" This thrust at the Corinthians' pride in their spectacular gifts from the Spirit cuts the ground from under all human boasting. A natural talent such as musical ability may illustrate the point. My parents gave me violin lessons and later cornet lessons. I spent many hours practicing. Finally, my last year in high school I became second chair cornet in the school band—after everyone else but one had graduated. My lack of musical ability is evident to all who have to sit beside me in church or the college chapel. My friends on the faculty are those who are still willing to sit with me during chapel singing! I do not have the "gift," and no amount of human effort would make me a concert performer. Those who have the talent have the prerequisite for their attainments apart from anything for which they can take credit. Of course, on the other hand, one must train, use, and develop his talent. No amount of talent will make one an outstanding musician without his effort. As the concert pianist explained: "If I do not practice for one day, I can tell the difference; if I do not practice for two days, the critics can tell the difference; if I do not practice for three days, everyone can tell the difference." Abilities given by God, as they are developed, become qualifications for a given activity.

### *Service*

God's gifts are given to be used. This introduces the second point—service. The New Testament teaches that abilities or gifts are to be employed for the common good: 1 Corinthians 12:7, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." 1 Peter 4:10, "As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace." Ephesians 4:7-12 explains that Christ's gifts to the church of "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers" are for "the equipment of the saints . . . for building up the body of Christ." And Romans 12:6 says, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." Thus "qualifications" are for the sake of service.

### *Leadership*

Service or ministry in the use of one's gifts brings one to a position of leadership in the church. This is the third item in the New Testament teaching. Leadership in the New Testament is based on service. Hebrews 13:17: "Obey your leaders and submit

to them." Because of the office they hold? Because of authority given to them? Not at all, but because of the ministry they perform—"For they are keeping watch over your souls." First Thessalonians 5:12: "We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love." Why? "Because of their work." Then 1 Corinthians 16:15f.: "Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer." Paul says, "Be subject to such as devote themselves to the service of the saints." Who are the natural leaders in a congregation? They are those who do work, those who are active in service, doing things for others. This is how potential elders are identified. One emerges as a leader because of his doing things that need to be done.

Out of this principle specific offices arise. The nature of the service determines the office, whether of evangelist, deacon, teacher, or elder. To summarize, gifts lead to service and service results in leadership. Preaching is necessary to make one an evangelist, caring for needs to make one a deacon, teaching a teacher, and pastoral care an elder. Prerequisite for filling an office, therefore, are three things: necessary qualifications (abilities), the use of these which shows that one can and will do the work (service), and recognition (or acknowledgement) of the leadership by the members of the congregation among whom the work is done.

#### *Authority*

The above perspective brings the subject of an elder's "authority" into sharper focus. An elder's service or ministry is that of "pastoring" (a shepherd), of oversight (a bishop), of management (a steward), of judgment and example (an elder on the pattern of Jewish elders). The church, in order to be a community and in order to function smoothly, has need of such leadership.

Jesus' principle concerning leadership among his followers is stated in Matthew 20:25-28: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus uses the same word that Peter uses in 1 Peter 5:3 in

admonishing elders to lead by example and not to domineer or "lord it over" the flock.

The kind of authority which is denied to the elder may be seen from the use of this word in other contexts. It refers to man's dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28); Israel's rule over Palestine (Num. 21:24); dominion of sin over man (Ps. 19:13; cf. Rom. 6:14); death's rule over man (Ps. 49:14; cf. Rom. 6:9); the rule of a king (Ps. 72:8); the authority of the law over a person (Rom. 7:1). Paul renounced the position of lording it over the faith of his converts (2 Cor. 1:24). Jesus' "exercise authority" expresses the rule of Solomon over other kingdoms (1 Kings 4:21); the authority of governors over the people (Neh. 5:15); the authority of kings (Eccl. 8:4; Neh. 9:37); a man's control over his earthly goods (Eccl. 2:19; 6:2); and one man lording it over another (Eccl. 8:9). Thus Paul declares, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by [brought under the authority of] anything" (1 Cor. 6:12).

Jesus' illustration pertained to government officials. Elders do not have coercive authority—political, military, or legal. This is demonstrated by the fact that words expressive of such authority are absent from New Testament texts about elders. They do not have controlling authority (*exousia*), power (*dynamis*); their position is not that of a master (*despotes*) or ruling official (*archon*).

The words that are used of elders and of the congregation's responsibility to them give a different picture from this type of authority. Hebrews 13:17 refers to "leaders." There may be some doubt whether elders specifically are meant, but the teaching of the verse presumably would include them (cf. vs. 24). The word is used in the literature of the time for military commanders and high officials (cf. Luke 22:26), but the basic meaning of the word is "leader" or "guide," and it is in this capacity that such officers are so termed. Its basic meaning may be seen in Acts 14:12 of Paul as the "chief speaker" and in Acts 15:22 of Barsabbas and Silas as "leading men" among the brethren. It indeed appears to have been used by Christians especially of prophets and teachers, because those who spoke the word of the Lord were the men who were the primary leaders in the church (cf. Heb. 13:7). Hebrews 13:17, accordingly, refers to a leadership in the word.

First Thessalonians 5:12 refers to "those over you in the Lord." It seems most unlikely that the church at Thessalonica already had

elders at this time, but once more we may consider the principle applicable to elders, for the same word is used explicitly of them in 1 Timothy 5:17, "rule" well. The translations "be over" and "rule" seem particularly unfortunate. The word literally means "to be out front," "to be at the head of," and so "to manage." Thus it is used of a father managing his household (1 Tim. 3:4, 5, 12), but even here in parallel with "caring for." The word was used especially in the sense "to care for" or "give aid to," as it is translated in Romans 12:8. The development in this direction is emphasized by the sense "to be concerned about, to be engaged in," in Titus 3:8, 14. The surrounding terms in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, "labor" and "admonish," definitely suggest the meaning "care for"; and the parallel description in 1 Timothy 5:17, "preaching and teaching," indicates a ministry of the word and pastoral care rather than rule. A derived noun, translated "helper," is used of Phoebe in Romans 16:2. This word referred to a patroness or protector of others. I do not presume anyone wants to claim that Phoebe was the ruler or had the authority in the church at Cenchreae which is claimed for elders. The conclusion, therefore, is that 1 Thessalonians 5:12 and 1 Timothy 5:17 refer to those who are "out in front" in their care for the spiritual needs of the church. Once more, leadership and service are intertwined, and the leadership is that of service.

When the words for the congregation's responsibility are examined, once more there is little indication of the kind of obedience which one gives to governmental authorities. The word translated "obey" in Hebrews 13:17 is literally "be persuaded by," "take the advice of," or "to follow." Note Acts 5:36, "who followed him"; 18:4, "persuaded"; 23:21, "yield to"; 27:11, "paid more attention to." The word "submit" occurs only in Hebrews 13:17 in the New Testament and means "yield" or "give way to." The word translated "be subject to" in 1 Corinthians 16:17 and 1 Peter 5:5 literally means "to rank oneself under." It is a stronger word, used of subordination of a child to parents (Luke 2:51) and a wife to her husband (Ephesians 5:22; 1 Peter 3:1, 5; Titus 2:5), but also of subjection to rulers (Rom. 13:1; Titus 3:1).

What authority, then, does an elder have? The most important kind possible in the Christian system. It is the "moral authority" of service, of example, of spiritual knowledge and experience, of spiritual maturity. When such qualities are pooled in the collective judgment of the eldership, it carries great weight with Christian

people. Christians voluntarily subject themselves to mature leaders. They readily follow the example of a concerned eldership which has proved its leadership by unselfish devotion to the cause of Christ, by sound spiritual insight, and by good judgment. As children follow a father who cares well for them, so church members follow their shepherds (1 Timothy 3:4f.).

The position of elder is a ministry in the church—a way to serve God and build up the church. This ministry of oversight (supervision) extends to all areas of the church's life—worship, preaching and teaching, benevolence, and discipline.

Christians should not select or approve a man as elder unless they are willing to yield to him in matters of judgment. They should appoint only one whom they respect as a spiritual leader and whom they are willing to follow. After the man is appointed is the wrong time to express reservations or declare misgivings. Recognition of a man as an elder is a declaration that he is a spiritual guide and that one defers to him in matters of opinion. Decisions have to be made. The elders are the ones to make those decisions. It is not "bossism" to expect the congregation to follow those decisions. Even as there is no justification for an eldership exercising arbitrary authority, there is no place for a congregation being rebellious at a whim or considering the eldership as an executive to carry out its wishes and to be dismissed if it does not.

### *Appointment*

The congregation does have a crucial role in the appointment of elders. Simply possessing the qualifications does not make a person an elder. Nor does one become an elder, even though he has been doing much of the work of an elder, until he receives congregational recognition.

There is a principle of joint participation evident in New Testament accounts of appointment to functions in the church. No matter who took the lead in the selection, the ultimate decision was one in which all interested parties concurred. Thus the selection of the Seven in Acts 6 was made by the church in Jerusalem but was confirmed by the twelve apostles (Acts 6:6). The choice of Barsabbas and Silas in Acts 15:22 was made by "the apostles, and the elders, with the whole church." Even when choices were made by the Holy Spirit, the church gave its confirmation and blessing. So the church at Antioch laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them forth after the Holy Spirit had

called them to missionary work (Acts 13:1-3), and the presbytery laid hands on Timothy and commissioned him to his work as an evangelist after prophetic utterances had designated him for this work (1 Tim. 4:14; cf. 1:18). Accordingly, even Holy Spirit made elders (Acts 20:28), that is, elders appointed in accord with Spirit-inspired revelations, would not have become elders until they received the authorization and blessing of the church. The approval of the congregation is implied in 1 Timothy 3:10 when it says of deacons, after discussing bishops, that these "also" must be tested before being appointed. The first century practice is summarized by Clement of Rome in A.D. 96 when he refers to "men who have been appointed by the apostles and afterward by other eminent men with the consent of the whole church" (1 Clement 44).

The congregation among whom a man has lived his Christian life knows best his qualifications, and those whom he will lead must indicate their willingness to follow or his ministry will be ineffectual. If the congregation does not recognize the authority of a man's Christian character and leadership, the elder has no other to appeal to. He may be admirably qualified and the congregation too unspiritual to recognize it; but if no one will follow, he cannot lead.

### *Tenure*

An elder's term of service is determined by the same things which made him an elder in the first place. If a man loses his qualifications, ceases to serve, or no longer has the support of the congregation, he can no longer be an elder. "Once an elder, always an elder" has no biblical support. It is proper to admit charges against an elder and rebuke him, provided appropriate procedures are followed (1 Tim. 5:19f.). As the approval is given by all, so the rebuke is "in the presence of all." That implies that the congregation which gave its approval may also withdraw that approval. Obviously this must be for a good cause. On the other hand, as long as a man is qualified, continues to serve, and is a recognized leader, he should continue to function as an elder.

This brings up the question, about which there is some interest at the present time, of assigning stipulated terms (in the manner of political offices) to elders. The interest in such a practice is perhaps the result of bad experiences with the exercise of arbitrary authority or the feeling of being "stuck" with men who showed promise but then did not develop as anticipated. On the other

side, elders themselves whose energies have been drained are sometimes interested in an orderly method of retirement. I know of no biblical or early historical precedent for such a procedure, nor do I recognize any biblical principle which would be violated in such an arrangement. I am open to further instruction in the matter. At the present I would consider it a matter of judgment, if a mutually satisfactory understanding is reached in advance by both the congregation and the prospective elders.

As a matter of personal judgment, I would offer this opinion. If a man is still growing spiritually and doing a good job, he should be a better elder the longer he serves. The increased experience and the added time for spiritual development should make the man a more valuable spiritual guide. Since the work of an elder is not an exercise of power, safeguards are not needed in this regard. Neither does one become too old to be an elder, provided he maintains his mental alertness. In a collective leadership burdens can be distributed according to needs at given times. We might think of the eldership on the analogy of the Roman Senate under the Republic, or a modern judicial board, where the reservoir of wisdom and experience is one of the chief assets of a collective leadership. It is not necessary that every elder remain physically vigorous; each may bring certain special talents to the council of the whole.

### *Conclusion*

The ancient world was familiar with at least three kinds of organizational structure and three different conceptions of the nature of office. Three kinds of constitution of which ancient theorists spoke were these: the monarchic (exemplified by the Roman empire), the democratic (represented by certain Greek city-states), and the oligarchic (rule by a few). The church in its earthly organization does not seem to fit any of these. There was another conception, known among the Jews and other peoples, which best fits the working of the early church. This sees the body made up of unequal members but with each given his place and all functioning as a unit.

The Roman pattern of office was to elect or appoint officials and then turn authority over to them. The Greeks, on the other hand, viewed authority as remaining in the will of the people, so officials were elected to carry out the decisions of the people. The Jewish conception was that officials were honored men whose wisdom was respected and with whom the people cooperated and

to whom they voluntarily submitted. It seems to me that this last, as might be expected from the Jewish origins of the church, best corresponds to the New Testament injunctions to the people to follow their leaders and to the leaders not to lord it over the people. Although I have exaggerated the characteristics, I think the presentation of alternatives in this form helps to sharpen our thinking about the organizational nature of the church and particularly the authority of leaders in the church.