

Introduction:

1. We have spent the past couple weeks dealing with the topic of elders in the church.
 - a. We have determined that elders are members of the local congregation who fulfill a specific role within the church (that of leadership).
 - b. We have determined some of the responsibilities and attributes of elders based on the three words used for them (shepherd, elder, and bishop/overseer).
 - c. Today we are going to look at the topic of the authority of the elders within the local congregation.
2. If the actions and practices of some congregations are to be believed, elders of a local congregation have absolutely no authority whatsoever.
 - a. Instead, the elders are reduced to figureheads, only having a title attached to their name.
 - b. Nothing they say or think matters to the congregation.
 - c. Because of this, in some congregations, the God-ordained office of an elder is reduced to nothing.
3. If the actions and practices of other congregations are to be believed, elders of a local congregation are the absolute authority in everything the members do.
 - a. Some elderships go so far as to say who the single members are allowed to date.
 - b. Some elderships go so far as to tell the members where they are allowed to work, what restaurants they are allowed to eat in, etc...
 - c. Because of this, in some congregations, the God-ordained office of an elder is elevated to a place of equality with God Himself!
 - d. This is blasphemy!
4. What does the Bible say about the authority of elders in the local congregation?
 - I. Do elders have any authority whatsoever?
 - A. Some people say "no."
 1. Some congregations (as already stated) believe that the elders are only figureheads who have no say in the lives of the members.
 2. These same congregations also do not think that the elders have any authority to make decisions for the local congregation.
 - a. Instead, it is assumed that majority rules, and they will decide matters by a men's business meeting or by a congregational meeting.
 - b. Neither one of these setups is sinful in and of themselves, but when they usurp the role of an elder, they become sinful.
 - 1) A congregation with no elders can allow the men to make the decisions.
 - 2) Sometimes it is good to have a congregational meeting to gather input from all the members about a specific project.
 - 3) But these cannot be allowed to usurp the authority of the elders in the congregation.
 3. So, if the elders have no authority, what purpose do they serve?
 - a. According to those who believe the elders have no authority over the local congregation, the elders' role is as follows:
 - 1) They are to teach classes (since the elder must be "apt to teach" – I Timothy 3:2).
 - 2) They are the ones who you call on for prayers when you are sick (James 5:14).

- 3) The only “leading” they are allowed to do is by example (I Peter 5:3).
 - i. They are not permitted to tell someone he needs to repent.
 - ii. They are not permitted to make decisions regarding the direction of the congregation.
 - b. Of course, not all congregations fit simply into a certain category, and there are various shades of demands placed on the elders.
 - 1) Sometimes, a congregation only has elders so they can have someone to blame if something goes wrong.
 - 2) They want to grant them no authority, but act as if anything that goes wrong is the elders’ fault because they didn’t fix it.
 4. Congregations who fit this mold are rarely sound in the faith, and are unscriptural in their approach to the eldership.
- B. The Bible says that the elders DO have authority in the local congregation.
1. I Timothy 5:17 – elders are to “rule well.”
 - a. According to the inspired apostle Paul, those elders who “rule” well have the right to be financially supported, should they desire such.
 - b. What does he mean by “rule”?
 - 1) The word used means “preside, maintain, oversee, and rule” (Strong’s).
 - 2) It is the same word used in I Timothy 3:4 regarding the role of a father.
 - i. An elder must be one who rules his own household, having his children in subjection to him.
 - 3) Could a man rule his house by only his example and nothing else?
 - i. Obviously this is not the meaning of “rule.”
 - 4) The elders have the responsibility (thus the authority) in the local congregation to preside over matters within the congregation.
 - 5) They have the responsibility (thus the authority) in the local congregation to oversee the congregation.
 - 6) Just as with children, the elders are to initiate correction when it is needed.
 2. The congregation is to “obey” those who “rule” in the congregation (Hebrews 13:17).
 - a. Since God directs that the congregation is to “obey” those (plural) who have the “rule” over them, these “rulers” must have some God-given authority.
 - b. It is clear that God is speaking of elders in this passage (see 13:7).
 - 1) Remember those (plural) who have rule over you.
 - 2) These men have spoken unto them the word of God.
 - c. Why would God command the congregation to obey someone who had no authority?
 - 1) If they have no authority, there is nothing to obey, because they could not tell you to do anything.

- 2) Since God said to obey them, however, that means absolutely that elders have some authority in the local congregation.
- C. We can see that the elders do have authority in the local congregation, but the question now is: what authority, and how much authority has been given to the elders by God?
- II. What authority do the elders have?
 - A. Are the elders the absolute authority in every section of the members' lives?
 1. Some say "yes."
 - a. The "Boston Movement" or "Crossroads Movement" within the church which came to a head 30 years ago taught this very thing.
 - 1) They taught that elders could control who you were allowed to date, what job you could have, where you spent your money.
 - 2) In effect, the elders became all-controlling and ran every facet of the members' lives.
 - 3) Since the inception of this, they have since split from the church and call themselves the "International Church of Christ."
 - i. They now have a hierarchy similar to the Catholic Church.
 - b. There are other, usually smaller, congregations wherein the elders run the lives of the members.
 - 1) Usually it is one elder more than the others who spearheads this.
 - 2) It becomes a power grab for them.
 - 3) When this occurs, the congregation becomes very close to being a cult.
 2. Are the elders the absolute authority in every section of the members' lives?

The Bible says "no."

 - a. The elders' responsibilities all revolve around this: "they watch for your souls" (Hebrews 13:17).
 - 1) If someone began to date a non-Christian who showed no interest in the Bible, it would be right for the elders to approach that member and express their concerns.
 - i. They could point out that it is very unwise to yoke yourself with a non-believer (II Corinthians 6:14).
 - ii. They could point out what happens to people who marry someone who is not trying to please God (I Kings 11:1ff).
 - iii. They could point out that Christians are to put God first in all things, making their first priority getting to heaven (Matthew 6:33).
 - iv. But could they tell the member "stop dating that person or you will be kicked out of the church"?
 1. Of course not.
 2. After all, Paul specifically addresses Christians who are married to non-Christians (I Corinthians 7:12-16), saying they might just convert their unbelieving spouses.
 - 2) The elders have full responsibility to inform the members if their job selection is in opposition to God.

- i. If one of the members here got a job at the casino down the street, shouldn't the elders approach that member?
 - ii. That job is something that could affect the member's soul, therefore the elders have that authority to act.
 - 3) Anything in your life that could affect your soul (choice of spouse, choice of job, choice of entertainment) falls under the authority of the eldership.
 - 4) The authority of the elders ends with the spiritual matters.
 - i. The elders have no Scriptural authority to tell you what time to go to sleep.
 - ii. The elders have no Scriptural authority to tell you where to get gas.
 - iii. The elders have no Scriptural authority to tell you where you can eat.
 - iv. The elders have no Scriptural authority to tell you what kind of car you can drive.
 - v. If you think these are far-fetched, I assure you that these are things which some elderships have tried to bind on the local congregations before.
 - 5) If it is something that affects your soul, the elders have authority to deal with it.
 - 6) If it is something that affects your soul, you have the responsibility to obey the elders in that matter (Hebrews 13:17).
 - B. Do elders have **absolute** authority in matters of doctrine in the local church?
 1. Many congregations more and more frequently are saying "yes."
 - a. I have lost count of how many times I have read letters from elderships announcing that they (as an eldership) have decided that it is okay to have women preachers or instrumental music.
 - b. What this inherently means is that whatever the elders decide is what the congregation will do, REGARDLESS of what the Bible says on the subject.
 - 1) This is where the Catholic Church really began to drift further and further from the truth.
 - 2) This means that if the elders decide it is okay to have a choir, that the congregation must follow.
 - 3) This means that if the elders decide that they will now have the Lord's Supper on Thursdays, it is perfectly acceptable.
 - 4) This means that if the elders decide instrumental music with worship would be permissible, then God has to be satisfied with it.
 - c. This makes MAN the authority in all matters of faith and practice instead of letting GOD be the authority!
 - d. This idea of the elders having the absolute authority in all spiritual matters means that one congregation could say "from now on, all of our elders will be women," while another congregation says "all elders must be men" and BOTH would be perfectly acceptable to God!
 - e. Could this POSSIBLY be correct?!?!?!?

2. Do elders have absolute authority in matters of doctrine in the local church? The Bible says “no.”
 - a. If the apostles did not have absolute authority in the church (which they did not), elders cannot either.
 - 1) Paul did not say “follow me,” he said “follow me as I follow Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1).
 - 2) If Paul did not follow Jesus Christ’s teachings, the Corinthian church should not follow him!
 - b. The elders who “rule well” were ones who also labored in THE WORD and in doctrine.
 - 1) This holds the elders to following what God’s word has to say on every subject.
 - 2) No Christian, not even an elder, has the authority to change what has been laid out in God’s word.
 - c. To all Christians (which would include elders), Paul wrote “whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord” (Colossians 3:17).
 - 1) This means that everything we do must be done by the authority of Jesus Christ.
 - 2) It is interesting that this verse comes right after the verse which authorizes only singing for our music in worship to God (Colossians 3:16).
 - 3) If Jesus did not authorize it, we cannot do it!
 - 4) To transgress (literally go beyond) what is authorized is sin (I John 3:4).
 - d. The elders’ authority is NOT absolute!
 - 1) The elders cannot change doctrines or practices.
 - 2) The absolute authority in the church is Jesus Christ and His revealed word (II Timothy 3:16-17).
- C. What authority do the elders have then?
 1. The elders have the authority to teach the word of God (I Timothy 5:17).
 - a. They do not have authority to teach their opinions on matters of doctrine or practice.
 - b. They only have the authority to teach God’s revealed word.
 2. The elders have the authority to oversee the work of the local congregation.
 - a. This is inherent in the word “bishop” or “overseer” (Acts 20:28, I Peter 5:1-4).
 - b. They have the authority to determine which members fulfill specific roles within the congregation.
 - c. They have the authority to determine what material will be used in classrooms.
 - d. They have the authority to determine the times of worship, the order of worship, the leaders in worship, and the place of worship.
 - e. They have the authority to determine which works the local congregation will be involved in.
 3. The elders have the authority to watch for the souls of the congregation (Hebrews 13:17).
 - a. This means the elders are fulfilling their God-given task by going to each member and correcting them if necessary.

- b. If you are doing something which could endanger your soul, the elders have the authority to approach you about it and try to help you.
- c. Your soul is worth more than the entire world (Matthew 16:26)!
- d. Though some people feel like it is prying, the elders can lose their own soul if they do not try to help you save yours!

Conclusion:

1. As always, it is important to let the Bible speak on all matters.
2. Men say elders have no authority whatsoever, the Bible disagrees.
3. Men say elders have absolute authority in all matters, the Bible disagrees.
4. Men say elders have absolute authority in all matters of faith and practice, the Bible disagrees.
5. The Bible lays out the authority of elders quite plainly:
 - a) Follow the word of God.
 - b) Help the congregation do the same thing.
 - c) Oversee the work of the local congregation.
 - d) Correct those who need correcting (more on church discipline in a later sermon).
6. It is important that we not take away from the authority of the elders, but also that we do not give them more authority than permitted by God.
7. This is because it is always important to follow what has been commanded by God.
 - a) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must hear the gospel which leads to faith (Romans 10:17).
 - b) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must believe (John 3:16).
 - c) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must confess Christ (Romans 10:10).
 - d) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must repent (Acts 2:38).
 - e) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must be baptized (I Peter 3:21).
 - f) God commanded that in order to be saved, you must live faithfully (I John 1:7).
 - g) It is damnable heresy if we try to remove anything that God has commanded or add to it with commandments of men.