

Churches of Christ and Preachers

In Acts 13 Luke records that the Holy Spirit chose Barnabus and Saul (the apostle Paul) for the important mission of spreading the gospel throughout Asia Minor. Near the end of that tour, he mentions a return trip through several cities in that region. They were "*strengthening*" and "*exhorting*" the disciples " *to continue in the faith.*" The next verse states that Paul and Barnabus "*appointed elders in every church*" (Ac 14:21-23). Notice they did not appoint a single man to oversee a local church, but a group or plurality of men. These men were selected based on meeting certain criteria in their lives, certain qualifications if you will. Those you will find in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus (*c.f. 1Ti 3:1-7; Ti 1:7-9*).

There are three words used interchangeably in the New Testament in reference to these men and their work. We read of "*elders*" (i.e., older men of wisdom and experience), "*bishops*" (i.e., men who oversee or superintend), and "*pastors*" (i.e., caretakers of a flock). They are by their very nature men capable of teaching, guiding and protecting the church from false teachers and other forms of spiritual harm (*c.f. Ac 20:28; Ep 4:11; 1Pe 5:1-3*). They are men, for they are to be "*the husband of one wife.*" They are not a board of directors, but shepherds of souls, and accountable to Christ, the "*Chief Shepherd,*" for their work. The apostle Peter charges them to "*shepherd the flock of God which is among you*" (1Pe 5:2a). This means they have no responsibility to oversee the members of other congregations in other regions. They will have their hands full tending to the needs of their local congregation.

The Lord's apostles directed evangelists like *Timothy* and *Titus* to assist the local church in appointing qualified men to shepherd their souls. Elders are not regional administrators, but teachers and counselors of exemplary conduct within a local body of saints. Correspondingly, the office or service of "*deacons*" is also local (*Ph 1:1*). They, too, after meeting certain criteria, are appointed by a local church to work within a local church. However, by New Testament design, they are special servants appointed to meet the physical needs of the church (*c.f. Ac 6:1-6; 1Ti 3:8-13*).

Paul writes that an elder must be "*apt to teach,*" meaning able or well equipped to instruct from the word of God. He further states that he must be "*one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?)*" Elders are the official caretakers of the Lord's church in a local sense. They have no authority beyond their divine charge. Last week's article emphasized the Holy Spirit's charge to the elders of a local church. The apostle Peter instructed them to "*shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock*" (1Pe 5:2-3). Paul issued the same order to the elders of the church in Ephesus: "*take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood*" (Ac 20:28).

Conceivably, the elders could do all the teaching within their respective congregations. However, most often they share the load of that responsibility with teachers and evangelists (*c.f. Ep 4:11*). It is perfectly within the rights of elders to delegate a portion of their teaching duties to other capable teachers who are not or may never be qualified to serve as overseers. In

delegating those duties, elders are nonetheless responsible in making sure the congregation receives sound doctrine.

Paul directed the evangelist **Titus** to exhort "**older women**" to be "*teachers of good things*—that they **admonish the young women** to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" (*Ti 2:3-5*). Likewise, Paul commanded **Timothy** to teach "**faithful men**" to become teachers of others (*2Ti 2:2*). An evangelist, then, will help direct the teaching program within a local church; and yet all that he does, in that capacity, should be under the oversight of the elders of that church.

Evangelists differ from elders in at least two ways. First, while they may be equipped to carry out the marching orders found in *Timothy* and *Titus*, they may not meet the qualifications for elders (*cf. 1Ti 3; Ti 1*). Secondly, since they are not charged with the oversight of a local congregation, they generally move more freely within the body of Christ. Paul, who was both an apostle and an evangelist, was never in one place for long. His mission was to build up a local church to stand on its own. This is not to say that an evangelist cannot have a home congregation, but that he works in view of helping other congregations develop into a fully functioning body of saints. This is, by the way, an ongoing consideration within every local church.

Most local churches of Christ secure the services of an evangelist by means of a simple network of churches. The elders and members of the churches where I have preached did not contact a seminary, college or special training agency to locate a preacher. In New Testament times, evangelists received their teaching and training directly from the apostles, evangelists, elders and other teachers. We can do that very same thing today. The local church is truly the only authorized "training agency" for evangelism.

-- C. Boyd Jennings