
Acts 14:23 -- 15:5

Elders -- The Return to Antioch -- The Judaizers

Ministry Reading -- January 2, 2008

Opening Reading -- Acts 14:23-15:5

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And when they had ordained them elders in every assembly, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed. And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. When they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, and thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled. And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles. There they abode long time with the disciples. And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

Elders in Every Assembly -- and in Every City

Acts 14:23 says they ordained elders in every assembly. Titus 1:5 says: 'For this cause I left thee in Crete, that thou mightest set right what remained unordered, and establish elders in each city, as I have ordered thee.' In one place it is every assembly; in another, every city. The Spirit of God has a reason for varying those expressions. What they illuminate together is that, in the New Testament pattern,

there was one assembly in a city. The assembly is one, just as the body is one. A large city might have believers meeting in many different homes and locations, as Romans 16 suggests for Rome -- where Priscilla and Aquila's house contained one meeting among several mentioned -- yet the assembly as such was one.

The development in church history from this biblical pattern is easily traced. Elders were equal and local. Then came the presiding elder -- a particular elder given prominence over the others. Then the metropolitan bishop, with authority over the whole city. Then the archbishop, over a whole region. And at the end of that progression, the Pope -- with authority over all of Christendom. Every step of that development was man's doing. God never established a presiding elder. He never established a metropolitan bishop. Man always goes beyond Scripture, and the result is visible in what Christendom has become.

Apostolic Authority Required: Why We Have No Official Elders

There is a significant question about why, among those who seek to walk in the truth of the assembly, there are no officially appointed elders in the manner of the open brethren. The answer is in the words of Titus 1:5 itself, where the 'I' in 'as I have ordered thee' is emphatic. It took apostolic authority to ordain elders -- or the authority of an apostolic delegate carrying explicit apostolic instruction, as Titus did when he went to Crete with Paul's letter in hand. Paul's own signature mark was in that letter, as he mentions at the end of 2 Thessalonians 3.

Since the apostles are no longer here, that apostolic authority is no longer available. Those who want to establish 'New Testament churches' in the usual sense must either acknowledge this or manufacture some far-fetched reason why another kind of authority -- say, the authority of evangelists -- can substitute for apostolic authority. Neither approach is honest with Scripture. What remains is the moral principle: where the qualifications for oversight set out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are seen to be fulfilled in a person, that gives moral weight without

official appointment. Moral power without official power is what the present state of things calls for.

Office and Gift: The Distinction That Matters

There is widespread confusion in Christendom between eldership as office and pastoral gift as something given by the Spirit. They are not the same thing. Eldership was an office, local in character -- an elder in one city was not automatically an elder in the next. But a gift -- whether teaching, prophesying, pastoring, or evangelizing -- is not an office tied to a locality. It belongs to the person, and wherever that person goes, the gift goes with them.

Darby, in connection with the question of the pastoral office in France and Geneva in the 1840s, wrote to those who clung to their position: if you give up your office as pastor, I will recognize you as a pastor. They could not comprehend the distinction. The system was so ingrained that they were unable to separate the gift from the office they had wrapped around it. But there is no office of pastor in Scripture. There are pastors -- men given by the ascended Christ to His church for its feeding and care. 1 Timothy 5:17 clarifies this further: those elders who labored in word and teaching were elders who also happened to have a gift of public utterance. Not all elders had that. But all had to be 'apt to teach' -- meaning some competence in the Scriptures sufficient to instruct privately, even if not in public ministry. These are two separate things.

1 Peter 5: The Flock of God Which Is Among You

1 Peter 5:1-4

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but

of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.

There are several things to notice here. The Greek word translated 'heritage' in verse 3 is kleros -- the very word from which the English word clergy is derived. The apostle is forbidding elders from lording it over the kleros -- God's heritage -- and yet the clerical system adopted this same word to describe itself. The clergyman said, in effect: this is my kleros. But Peter says precisely the opposite: it is the flock of God which is among you, not yours.

The expression 'among you' is also significant. It implies that the flock of God is one, and that particular elders have responsibility for that part of it which is among them. It does not leave room for 'my flock,' as if each overseer had a separate flock. There is one flock and one Shepherd -- the Lord Jesus said as much in John 10. The elders are undershepherds caring for part of the one flock.

Peter also connects the exercise of oversight with partnership in Christ's sufferings. The work of caring for souls is that kind of work -- patient, often unrewarding in the short term, requiring constant repetition, as any parent knows. But the reward is kept. When the chief Shepherd appears, the crown of glory that does not fade will be received. The training school is here; the reward is there.

Accusations Against Elders and the Principle of Witnesses

1 Timothy 5:19 says: 'Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses.' This principle has not become obsolete because we live in a day of ruin when there are no officially appointed elders. The moral principle is unchanged: the natural man chafes under authority -- official or moral. The sin of Adam was insubjection, self-will, which is the very essence of sin. That disposition remains in every fallen heart, and it will express itself in whispered stories and circulated accusations against anyone who stands in a place of

responsibility. God has provided for this in His word, and the provision does not expire.

Where there is cause, the next verse instructs: bring conviction. Not a tongue-lashing, but the bringing of the word of God to bear upon the conscience, as Paul did when he withstood Peter to the face -- demonstrating from Scripture the inconsistency of Peter's behavior. The object is recovery, whether for an elder or any member of God's flock. And the public character of such conviction -- 'that others also may fear' -- speaks of godly fear, not fright; the reverence that a faithful dealing with sin is meant to produce in the whole assembly.

The Return to Antioch: God's Work Rehearsed

Having confirmed the churches and ordained elders through the region, Paul and Barnabas completed the full circuit and returned to Antioch -- from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work they had now fulfilled. They gathered the whole assembly together and rehearsed all that God had done with them -- not what they had done, but what God had done with them -- and how He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.

This was not the establishing of them as clergymen in a permanent station. They had gone out; they had returned; they would go out again. The laying on of hands at the beginning was the fellowship of the assembly with what the Spirit had called them to -- not an ordination to office. And there was no mission board. The mission was the Spirit's call, and the assembly's fellowship with it. That is both simpler and more wonderful than any institutional structure man has devised.

The Judaizers Arrive

After they had stayed no little time at Antioch -- which is the Acts way of saying a considerable period -- the trouble came. Certain men came down from Judea

and taught the brethren: 'Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.' This was a direct attack on the free gospel that Paul and Barnabas had been preaching among the Gentiles. It made circumcision and the keeping of the law of Moses a condition of salvation.

The question was far-reaching: the whole character of Christianity was at stake. Was a Gentile to become a Jewish proselyte in order to be a Christian? Were the Gentile converts -- the very ones who had been confirmed in the faith, in whose assemblies elders had just been appointed, upon whom God had poured out His Spirit -- to be told that all of this was insufficient without circumcision? The whole Epistle to the Galatians would be written to address this same spirit. There was no small dissension and disputation. The matter would have to go to Jerusalem.

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Lord willing.