



Where Are the Elders Who Guard the Flock?

By Bob DeWaay

This past weekend I received a call not unlike many dozens of previous communications from Christians concerned about unbiblical practices being introduced into their local churches. This particular one expressed a committed Christian's concern that their large evangelical church was introducing mysticism and eastern practices under the guise of youth ministry. This church had even created a shrine of sorts in the church basement for young people to practice this mysticism.

The caller had researched this subject for several months, documented her church's new practices and described why the practices were dangerous and unbiblical. Confident that her findings would help correct the church's direction, she brought her research to the church leadership, only to be mollified and warned about having a bad attitude. In response she asked the leaders to compare these practices to Scripture, but to no avail. The story is all too common; why does it continue to happen?

Most evangelical churches have elders; these elders are responsible for the Lord's flock. My interviews with people who have witnessed their churches being infiltrated by unbiblical teachings and practices have opened my eyes to a serious problem in our evangelical movement: elders who do not think that what is being taught and practiced in their church is important enough to judge biblically. This is serious. In many cases, these elders consider their primary job to be—support the senior pastor and his reputation at all costs. Their secondary job—watch over the financial well being of the church as a corporation. Their tertiary job—make sure no one rocks the boat. Thus, in these elders' interpretation of their job description, the problem in the church becomes those concerned members who care about the integrity of the gospel message.

Most evangelical churches take seriously most of the qualifications of elders as listed in passages like 1 Timothy 3. This means that they look for good family men who are faithful to their wives, have a good reputation, and are not guilty of scandalous behavior. And they do well to follow these guidelines. But these qualifications are not the end of the story. As a matter of fact, many unconverted people meet most of these guidelines. But a more important matter has been pushed aside: the requirement that elders guard the Lord's flock from the wolves.

Let us consider Acts 20 where Paul gathered the elders in Ephesus and gave them instructions. Here is what Paul said:

Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)

Paul is telling us that elders MUST guard the flock against wolves who bring false teaching. In this most important role, many are failing.

For example, someone recently told me of his frustrations with the elders of his church. The church, traditionally very conservative and solid biblically, began promoting

Theophostic ministry—a ministry that involves teachings and processes that are not Biblical.^[i] So he appealed to the elders, giving them evidence of serious error in this movement’s teachings and of the harmful consequences of allowing it. Rather than searching the Scripture and comparing the teachings of Theophostics with the Bible and making a decision, they referred the member to the counseling pastor who was promoting the ministry. The elders had no desire to concern themselves with this matter. If the reports I have received from dozens of people are true, this is too common.

Many elders are successful businessmen, but being a successful businessman neither qualifies nor disqualifies a man from being an elder. Churches seem to lean toward selecting such people because churches want to be successful businesses. But did Paul tell Titus to select businessmen-elders when he said: “*holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict*” (**Titus 1:9**)? No. If a man has no willingness to study and learn sound doctrine, is content to have only a superficial knowledge of the Bible, and is unwilling to correct false doctrine—that person is NOT QUALIFIED to be an elder. So a remedy for many of our church ills would be for our churches to select biblically qualified elders who are truly ‘apt to teach’ (**1Timothy 3:2; 2Timothy 2:24 KJV**). If we required this of all elders, we would not have all the false doctrine coming into the church that we see today. We would have elders with backbone who would even stand against the senior pastor if necessary should that pastor depart from the truth. A pastor who loves the truth and desires integrity in the church would earnestly desire to have elders like that around him, not merely people who are committed to whatever program he wants to promote.

Paul’s warning to the elders in Ephesus came true. Studying 1 and 2 Timothy, we find that false teachers did arise “from their own midst.” So Paul instructed Timothy about how to deal with the situation. He wrote: “*As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines*” (**1Timothy 1:3**).

The Greek word translated “doctrine” or “teaching” is found 15 times in Timothy and Titus out of 21 total references in the New Testament. The so-called “pastoral epistles” emphasize the importance of doctrine. Paul said that elders who “work hard in word and doctrine” should be given special honor. Elders must be “apt to teach.” Those who go astray in doctrine are to be corrected and if they refuse to repent they are to be rejected (**Titus 3:10**).

Combining what we know about elders from Acts 20, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus, it is clear that guarding the flock from false doctrine and teaching true doctrine is the elders’ most important role. Churches endanger the flock when they choose elders based on their business acumen, that they seem to be moral men and “nice guys,” or are likely to support the senior pastor at any cost while ignoring the importance of doctrine. Pastors who do not teach sound doctrine from the pulpit exacerbate the problem by making it unlikely that a pool of men qualified to teach the truth and correct error will ever arise in that church.

The answer is simple: we need to teach sound doctrine from the pulpit and as God raises up men trained in sound doctrine who love the truth and are willing to defend the truth against the wolves (and who meet the other qualifications) should be appointed elders. Paul’s words emphatically summarize this:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; (2Timothy 3:16 – 4:3)

Pray that God will raise up people in our evangelical churches who will do what Paul instructs and that local churches would have godly elders who will guard the well being of the Lord's flock.

[i] <http://cicministry.org/commentary/issue79.htm> explains the issues and shows how far off base it is.

Critical Issues Commentary

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