

The Elders of the Church (1) – Elders in the Bible

Introduction

1. Any group, organization, or institution with a mission is going to require some form of leadership.
 2. Usually, leadership comes with age and experience, and those without it are ill equipped to lead effectively – **Isaiah 3:1-5** – Judah had been unfaithful to God, and a part of their judgment included the removal of the elders as leaders, and the oppressive rule of children.
 3. According to God's will, the apostles directed the appointment of **"elders in every church" (Acts 14:23)**.
 4. This structure of governance with aged and experienced men at the helm is a part of God's eternal will for His people, and needs to be understood, appreciated, sought, and embraced.
 5. What does the Bible say about elders?
- I. The Need for Leadership
- A. **"God is not the author of confusion but of peace" (1 Corinthians 14:33)**.
 - a. Paul's letter is an example of the need for leadership in the church.
 - i. **"as in all the churches of the saints" (v. 33)**
 - ii. **(v. 36-38); 1 Corinthians 4:17** – Paul writing to get them in proper order.
 - b. **Confusion** – *akatastasia* – "opposition to established authority, disorder, unruliness" (BDAG)
 - i. **(vv. 31-32)** – the structure of spiritual gifts for the edification of the church which came from God involves order.
 1. **"subject"** – *hypotassō* – "to submit to one's control" (THAYER)
 - c. **Peace** – *eirēnē* – "security, safety, prosperity, felicity" (THAYER)
 - i. Rather than merely the opposite of disorder/confusion, the aim and purpose of order.
 - d. This general principle about God in this context demonstrates that God's purposes involve authority, submission, and resultant order which corresponds to peace, or well-being.
 - B. The eternal purpose of God includes the church – **Ephesians 3:10-11**
 - C. The church is under authority for its well-being in fulfilling God's purposes – **Ephesians 1:22-23**
 - D. Christ left the church with leadership for its well-being in fulfilling God's purposes – **Ephesians 4:11-13** – pastors

- E. Pastors are also called Elders – *presbyteros* – older, denoting age.
 - a. Used in an official capacity to denote one who holds a certain position of authority in the church.
 - b. In His determination to leave the church with sufficient leadership to promote order and peace, God provided the church with men of age.
 - c. They **“appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23).**
 - F. Age is a key component to biblical leadership – **Job 12:12; Proverbs 16:31; Leviticus 19:32**
 - a. Other people groups had elders in positions of official leadership – **Genesis 50:7** (elders of Egypt); **Numbers 22:7** (elders of Moab and Midian)
 - G. The church is given direction in fulfilling their purpose, which includes leadership of aged men – **“elders of the church” (Acts 20:17).**
 - a. This has precedent in the nation belonging to God – **“elders of Israel” (Exodus 3:16).**
 - b. The church, **“the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16),** would also be governed by elders according to God’s will.
- II. The Elders of Israel
- A. The elders of Israel are present in many settings of great significance and are given important roles of leadership throughout Israelite history.
 - a. The urgency and emphasis on appointing elders in the church which is the fulfillment of God’s plans for Israel is unsurprising.
 - B. Elders as Representatives
 - a. The first appearance of the elders of Israel notes them as significant representatives of the people:
 - i. Moses was commissioned by God, but he questioned the reception of the people – **Exodus 3:11-13; 2:13-14**
 - ii. The elders were experienced men of spiritual maturity which the people respected and trusted – **Exodus 3:14-18a** – God instructed Moses to appeal to them.
 - 1. They would represent Moses to the people.
 - 2. They would represent the people to Moses.
 - 3. **“Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me” (v. 16, LSB)** – this important relationship and accompanying covenants would have been known and treasured by these men, and taught to the people throughout the years in Egyptian captivity.

- b. The elders would act as representatives of the nation to Pharaoh alongside Moses – **Exodus 3:18; 5:1**
- c. They were provided experience to equip them to lead the people in conviction and faith:
 - i. **Exodus 4:28-31** – signs in the sight of the people, but elders specified as playing an integral role – what if the elders had not believed?
 - ii. **Exodus 17:5-6** – present to witness signs of God's provision.
 - iii. **Exodus 24:1, 9-16** – present in close proximity to Mount Sinai at the giving of the law, participating in eating covenant meal (representing the people).
- d. Where the elders represented the people in the fellowship of the covenant, they also represented the people in their need for atonement to continue fellowship with God – **Leviticus 4:13-15, 20**
 - i. ***"they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account."***
(Hebrews 13:17)
- e. Their position and authority were not for their own advantage, but as representatives of God to the people, and the people to God, they were to take into consideration the people's thoughts and needs – **1 Kings 12:3-8, 13**
 - i. The response of the elders after hearing the request of the people was not dismissive, nor merely heard as a formality, but sincerely considered, and their counsel to Rehoboam was in the interest of the people.
 - ii. **(vv. 10-11)** – the young men who advised manifested character opposite of the elders and demonstrated by their abusive behavior why leadership of elders is so important to the congregation of Israel.

C. Elders and the Law

- a. After God instructed Moses and Aaron concerning the Passover at the 10th plague, Moses called the elders and instructed them – **Exodus 12:21, 28** – Elders part of leading the people to keep the Passover.
 - i. **Hebrews 11:28** – Moses kept Passover by faith, but the elders were involved.
- b. After Moses was instructed to relay the introduction of the covenant to the people, he called the elders and laid God's words before them – **Exodus 19:3-8** – Moses communicated what God told Him to the people through the elders, and the people responded to God's stipulations.

- c. The elders were involved with Moses in the renewing of the covenant and law, and the utterances of the blessings and curses of the law – **Deuteronomy 27:1; 31:9-11, 24-29** – enjoined upon them the responsibility of reading the law to the people and instructing them in it.
 - i. **(v. 28)** – heaven and earth called as witness against the elders.
 - ii. They had great responsibility in leading the people according to the words of God – **“as those who must give account.” (Hebrews 13:17)**

D. Elders in Judgment and Discipline

- a. Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, advised him to delegate judgement regarding matters of the people to other capable men – **Exodus 18**
 - i. **(vv. 13-16)** – judging disputes between people concerning God’s law all day.
 - 1. Jethro said this is not good – you will wear yourself and the people out.
 - ii. **(vv. 19-23)** – advised him to teach the people God’s law and appoint able men with qualifications to judge in the small matters each day.
 - 1. Moses did as Jethro advised.
- iii. At least some elders were of those who Moses appointed as judges for Israel in this capacity:
 - 1. **Exodus 18:12** – already involved as representatives.
 - 2. **Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25** – on another occasion, 70 of the elders were given a place of judgment and given a portion of the Spirit for a limited time to equip them in this.
 - a. **(v. 16)** – **“officers”** included right alongside the elders.
 - b. **Deuteronomy 1:15** – Moses reminds the people of his appointment of these judges, referring to some of them as **“officers.”**
 - c. The context is parallel to **Exodus 18** and **Numbers 11**, showing that, although all elders were not judges in this capacity, and all the judges were not elders, there was a function of the elders as judges among the people.
 - 3. **Deuteronomy 1:16-18** – they were to judge righteously, and without partiality.

- b. The elders are depicted throughout the Israelite history as those who were to rule in this way among the people, sitting in judgment on various matters among the people.
- c. The elders were to sit in judgment, and then carry out disciplinary measures:
 - i. Delivering justice in murder – **Deuteronomy 19:11-13**
 - ii. Delivering justice regarding rebellious children – **Deuteronomy 21:18-21**
 - iii. Delivering justice in matters of sexual immorality – **Deuteronomy 22:13-21**
 - iv. Handling disputes regarding the law of levirate marriage – **Deuteronomy 25:7-10**
 - v. *“so you shall put away the evil from among you...”* (cf. **1 Corinthians 5:12-13**)
- E. Elders in Conflict and Crisis
 - a. The prominent role of the elders included their involvement in matters of national conflict and crisis. Such times require strong and stable men of nobility and conviction to lead in what is right in the sight of God.
 - b. The elders wept with Joshua when they were defeated by Ai – **Joshua 7:6**
 - c. When the Lord began to carry out His judgment on the house of Eli, the elders led in response to defeat by the Philistines by seeking the Lord’s aid – **1 Samuel 4:3**
 - d. When Josiah discovered the book of the Law, and the failure of the people in serving God, the elders were included in restoring true worship – **2 Kings 23:1-3**
 - e. During captivity, the elders went to Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord on behalf of the people – **Ezekiel 14:1-3; 20:1-4**
 - f. The elders were a part of the leadership in calling the people to repentance in Joel’s prophecy – **Joel 1:2-3, 13-14; 2:15-17**
- F. Elders and the Way of the Nation
 - a. In all that can be considered with the *“elders of Israel,”* it is apparent that their leadership, for better or worse, played a great role in shaping the way of the nation.
 - b. Joshua charged the elders with what God charged him, and they led the people in faithfulness as long as they lived – **Joshua 23:1-3, 6; 24:31; Judges 2:7**
 - c. Isaiah’s prophecy noted that the conduct of the elders was a great part of the reason for God’s judgment – **Isaiah 3:13-15**

- d. In captivity, Ezekiel was given a vision showing the corruption of the leadership of the elders which corresponded to the nation's predicament – **Ezekiel 8:1, 3, 9-12, 17-18**
- e. Elders held an important role of leadership among God's people in Israel, and God would not depart from this use of qualified, older men when He established His eternal kingdom.

III. The Elders of the Israel of God

- A. Though Israel had been God's nation, their purpose was to bring about the Christ by Whom there would be a **"remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5).**
 - a. The church, including Jews and Gentiles, is the spiritual Israel, **"the Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16).**
 - b. Like the physical nation of Israel, spiritual Israel needed leadership according to God's wisdom, and He provided them elders.
- B. **"they had appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23)**
 - a. At the end of Paul's first missionary journey, he and Barnabas retraced their steps and visited the newly founded congregations – **Acts 14:21-22**
 - b. They did not leave them to themselves, but strengthened them, and one urgent need they had was leadership, which they appointed.
- C. **"set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5)**
 - a. At some point, churches had been established on the Isle of Crete, and Titus was left there by Paul
 - b. Though there was cause for much rejoicing, the churches without elders were severely lacking. The need was urgent.
- D. **Acts 20:17-18, 25, 28** – Paul, knowing he would not see the Ephesians anymore, called the elders and reminded them of their great responsibility, and the church which God had entrusted to them.
 - a. Elders are an indispensable part of a sound, strong, and fortified church.
 - b. Paul's last efforts in person for the Ephesians involved his encouragement to these men in this important position of leadership.

Conclusion

1. God has always implemented older, experienced, and wise men to be leaders of His people.
2. This was true during God's use of the nation of Israel, and it is true today of His eternal kingdom, the Israel of God.
3. We are in great need of elders now, and always will be in the future, and it is important we understand what God has revealed about them in His word.