

Spiritual Gifts, Part 5

Church Governor or Ruling Elder

Brian Schwertley

Another office that is crucial to the well-being of the church is the office of ruling elder. A ruling elder has the gift of leadership, government or administration in the church.

This designation first appears as a New Testament office in Acts 11:30 where the money raised for the brethren in Judea is sent to the elders. Later Luke informs us that Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church” (Ac. 14:23). That the term elder is a distinct office in the New Testament church is evident in the following passages. Paul says in Romans 12:8 (when discussing gifts in the church) “he who leads, [must lead] with diligence.” In 1 Corinthians 12:28 the apostle says, “And God has appointed these in the church...administrations” (1 Cor. 12:28). In 1 Timothy 5:17 we read, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor...” In 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 Paul urges the brethren, “to recognize those who labor among you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake.”

One can learn a lot about the ruling elder by the title and denominations assigned to the office. The term administrations (*kuberneseis*) translated as “governments” (KJV) was used in ancient Greek literature of political governors.¹ The related cognate personal noun of this word is used in Scripture to describe men responsible to steer a ship (i.e., a “steersman” or “pilot,” cf. Ac. 27:11; Rev. 18:17).² “[T]his noun occurs three times in the LXX [Prov. 1:5; 11:14; 24:6], where it carries the verbal idea of giving ‘guidance’ to someone.”³

The term ruler (*proesis*—1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Th. 5:12; Rom. 12:8 “He that rules” – *ho proistamenos*) refers to “the one standing in front,”⁴ that is one who leads. This term was also used by ancient Greek authors to describe the governors of cities, the heads of armies and rulers over kingdoms.⁵ The church ruler is one who exercises authority in the congregation.

The word elder or presbyter (*presbuteros*, cf. Acts 14:23; 15:2-4; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:51; 1 Pet. 5:1) refers to men who are spiritually mature who rule or render judgment in the church. This term is carried over from the Old Testament where it referred to mature (i.e., older, the Hebrew word for elder is related to the word for beard) adult men “who gathered in popular assembly, or a kind of council in every city.” Regarding the Old Testament elder, F. B. Huey, Jr., writes,

¹ See The Ministries of Sion College, London, *The Divine Right of Church Government* (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1995 [1654]), 178.

² See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 622.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d. [1931]), 6:404.

⁵ See *The Divine Right of Church Government*, 177.

The elders served in various capacities. A principal function was to serve as judges in disputes or to dispense justice as they sat in the gates of the city (Deut. 22:15). The prophets demanded that respect for justice at the gate be shown (Amos 5:10-12; Zech. 8:16) and charged that the elders had become corrupt in their administrations of justice. As members of what amounted to a popular court, the elders were not to bear false witness, accept gifts, nor follow the majority in defiance of justice. Their responsibility was to condemn the guilty and acquit the innocent. Each town had its own elders (Deut. 19:12) who determined if a man should be turned over to the avenger to die, thus depriving him of the protection of the cities of refuge. They determined whether a rebellious son should be stoned to death and they participated in the execution of the sentence (21:18-21). They also adjudged the validity of a husband's charge that his bride was not a virgin (22:15). They settled cases concerning Levirate marriage where a man did not want to take his deceased brother's wife (25:7-10), and served as witnesses to commercial transactions (Ruth 4:4). The elders also served as military leaders (Josh. 8:10; 1 Sam. 4:3). They were involved in the selection of kings of the nation. They demanded that Samuel appoint for them their first king (8:4, 5) and participated in the anointing of David as king over all Israel after the death of Saul (2 Sam. 3:17; 5:3). It is most likely that it was the elders who gathered at Shechem after the death of Solomon to receive certain assurances from Rehoboam before recognizing him as king. They apparently did not acknowledge the right of automatic succession by inheritance (1 Kings 12). When Jezebel plotted the death of Naboth, she wrote the elders and nobles of Jezreel to provide false witnesses in order that Naboth might be stoned to death (1 Kings 21:8-11). Through the wise counsel of the elders Jeremiah's life was saved by remembering the prophecies of Micah (Jer. 26:16-19). They were included among those carried into exile (29:1; Ezek. 8:1).⁶

New Testament elders differ from Old Testament elders at the gate in that New Covenant elders form a strictly *ecclesiastical* court. They can only render judgment over members in the church and they can only impose spiritual sanctions (e.g., barring from the Lord's supper, excommunication). If someone in the church is guilty of a serious crime, the elders would be obligated to turn such a person over to the civil magistrate for punishment.

Elders are also designated as "overseers" (*episkopoi*; e.g., see Phil. 1:1, *sun episkopois*—"with the overseers"). The word refers to a crucial aspect of the elders' work which is to look after the spiritual affairs of the congregation. Regarding the ancient use of this word Peter T. O'Brien writes, "*Episkopos* in classical and Septuagint Greek (from Homer on) meant an 'overseer,' and was used to describe a deity (cf. Job 20:29) as the one who keeps watch over a country or people. The title was also given to men who held responsible positions in the state, including those with judicial functions, councillors, treasurers, and military strategists, or who were overseers of religious communities, such as temple officials (cf. Nu. 4:16; 31:14; Jdg. 29:8, etc.). This one word described a variety of offices and functions, although the notion of 'oversight' appears to have been common to all of them. At Qumran the 'overseer' or 'supervisor' (*mebaqqer*) was regarded as the shepherd and spiritual father of the community.

⁶ Ibid, 2:268-269.

Although not a priest, he knew the law and was responsible for all decisions about ‘the camp’ and the full members.”⁷ Like the previous terms examined, the word overseer conveys leadership, rule, oversight, governance and supervision.

There are a number of things that need to be noted regarding this office. First, church elders rule in manifold ways. They lead by godly example, by counsel (e.g., words of wisdom, warning, rebuke, encouragement, etc.), and by meeting and making rulings as an ecclesiastical court.

Second, the elders, along with the pastor, make important decisions regarding discipline when they meet as a court. When our Lord discussed church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20, He alluded to the two-witnesses rule of Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15 and referred to the binding and loosing authority of the church court (v. 18). “The ‘two or three’ gathered together in Christ’s name to judge of an offense would, in Jewish usage, most naturally be elders. What matters were brought for judgment to the ‘assembly,’ they would be determined not by popular vote, but by a session of elders of the people, carrying out judgment before God and the people (e.g., Deut. 19:17).”⁸ In 1 Corinthians 6:1-6 Paul teaches that disputes within the church between brethren must be handled within the church. Indeed, he says, that it is shameful to take matters before the heathen. “He assumes that saints can be chosen to judge these matters.”⁹ “Is...there not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren” (1 Cor. 6:5)! The elders (like their Old Testament counterparts) are to sit as judges. They rule by applying God’s law-word to particular situations.

Third, the eldership always function judicially as a plurality (Mt. 18:29; Ac. 15:6; 1 Tim. 4:14; etc.). Why does Scripture require a plurality of church governors instead of the rule of one man (e.g., the Episcopalian Bishop or the Baptist pastor)? The answer is simple, yet profound. Because of a believer’s remaining sin and finite knowledge, one man alone cannot be entrusted with such an important task. There is great wisdom in a plurality of godly men. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Pr. 11:14). Having a plurality of mature godly men helps protect the church against sinful egotism, arbitrariness, and dictatorial tendencies among the leadership. With a plurality of elders a great deal of knowledge and wisdom can be brought to bear upon a situation. What one man may not know, may be known by another. Thus, with a plurality of elders, errors in judgment and wrong interpretations and applications of Scripture can often be discerned and avoided. Further, a plurality of elders brings together the varied personal experiences of a number of men. What may be new and baffling to one elder may have already been dealt with extensively by another. While any system of church government can be abused by sinful men, the Presbyterian or Reformed system of rule by a plurality of elders is the least liable to abuse because of its biblical checks and balances.

Fourth, ruling elders are representatives of the people in the church. As representatives they must act on behalf of others. Obviously, everyone who is a Christian and a member of a

⁷ Peter T. O’Brien, *Commentary on Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 47.

⁸ Edmund Clowney, “A Brief for Church Governors,” in Mark Brown, editor, *Order in the Offices*, 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*

local church is not qualified to deal with complex judicial cases and weighty doctrinal controversies. Therefore, qualified men are to be chosen by the congregation to exercise authority for the whole church. Hodge writes, “The very fact that these duties and powers are committed to a certain class of officers, proves that they are not to be exercised by the people themselves. But while the Scriptures plainly teach that these powers are granted to a class of officers distinct from the people, they also teach that the people have a right to determine who they shall be, and to take part with them in the government of the church. And this right they exercise partly in person, as in the election of their church rulers, and partly by their representatives, who appear in their name in all church courts, to deliberate and vote on all questions which may come before them.”¹⁰ The Presbyterian ministers of London concur:

How vainly is that power *equally* given as to the officers, so to the whole multitude, when the whole do not have equal gifts and abilities to execute the same? If *unequally*, then this power is derived to the church-guides, either *more or less* than to the multitude of the faithful. If *less*, then how improperly were all those names of *Rule and Government* imposed upon officers, which nowhere are given by Scripture to the multitude: [such] as Pastors (Eph. 4:8, 11), Elders (1 Tim. 5:17), Over-seers (Acts 20:28), Guides (Heb. 13:7, 17, 22). In this last verse they are contra-distinguished from the Saints. *Church-guides* and *Saints guided* make up a visible organic church. Rulers in the Lord (1 Thess. 5:12; Rom. 12:8) and well-ruling elders (1 Tim.5:17), Governments (1 Cor. 12:28) and Stewards (1 Cor. 4:1-2)—all these titles have power and rule engraven in their very fore-heads.¹¹

There are the men who lead or rule for the sake of the whole church and there are those who are to submit to that leadership in the Lord.

Fifth, church governors (as well as pastor-teachers) derive their authority from Jesus Christ and His Word—the Bible. As men under Christ, their authority is purely ministerial and declarative. Every bit of counsel, teaching, advice, and governance (i.e., church discipline) must be rooted in God’s word. In other words elders do not have intrinsic authority. They do not have the biblical right to impose their own ideas, thoughts or philosophies upon the worship, doctrine or rule of the church.

There have been two great abuses of this office throughout history. There have been many church leaders who have expected blind obedience from congregants as if their own words were law. This view rests on an unscriptural understanding of church authority; that is, the view that the elders must be obeyed simply because of their position and not because their directions are rooted in the Bible (e.g., There have been Charismatic churches where elders were ordering church members to marry a certain person, or to work at a certain job, or to give cars away, etc.). This type of abuse is at bottom Romanist and tyrannical. “Now, taking advantage of office, the rulers of the church have perpetrated unutterable horrors in enslaving the souls of men. Men have fought for domination in the church far more greedily than dictators are content to rule over

¹⁰ Charles Hodge, “Warrant and Theory of Ruling Eldership,” in Mark R. Brown, editor, *Order in the Offices*, 72.

¹¹ Sundry Ministers of London, *The Divine Right of Church Government*, 105.

men's bodies and fortunes; but these church leaders wished to rule over men's souls as well."¹² Sadly, today many Presbyterian courts are guilty of tyrannical rule when they deal with court cases pragmatically instead of biblically. In other words, church governors make decisions based on what they believe will best serve the church instead of what biblical justice requires.

The other great abuse of this office has been a laxness or refusal to fulfill one's responsibility as a church governor. In many churches there is no family visitation or effective personal counseling by the session (i.e., the body of elders). It is also very common for church governors today to ignore needed cases of church discipline. In many churches people even seek counseling from para-church organizations (for marital problems, etc.) because the elders are either unwilling or unable to give effective counsel.

The sinful tendency to be lax in the duty of church governance is likely a major reason why Paul says that church governors must lead *with diligence* (Rom. 12:8). They must continually watch over the people who are under their care (Heb. 13:17). Barnhouse writes,

This word translated 'diligence,' originally contained the idea of haste. Hence the idea of earnestness came into the meaning: earnestness in accomplishing, promoting or striving. In our context it means that if a man has the gift of leadership, he is to throw himself into it and give of his utmost to the work to be done or to the people who are to be led. One of the first laws of the military command is that an officer must protect his men as a mother cares for her children. This principle is to be applied to Christian leadership. The leader is to be alive every moment to the needs of those who follow him."¹³

Instead of being disengaged and careless, "[t]he government of the church, in correcting abuses, preventing disorders, and in the administration of discipline, calls for constant vigilance and fidelity."¹⁴

Copyright © 2004 Brian Schwertley, Haslett, MI

[HOME PAGE](#)

¹² Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), Vol. 4, part 2, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Romans*, 393. Thomas R. Schreiner makes an important observation regarding church leaders. He writes, "Leaders are more prone to laziness than others simply because there may be no one exercising oversight. Thus they may be able to skate by with less than a zealous effort" (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 660). Another problem common today regarding ruling elders is that men are frequently chosen and placed in the eldership who are not qualified. Men become elders who do not know their Bibles, who do not know theology, who do not have the ability to give effective counsel. Men are often chosen because they are good business men who faithfully attend church. The importance of the eldership should not be underestimated. Men who make important decisions regarding doctrine, worship and discipline need to be knowledgeable in these areas. When elders are incompetent, churches usually follow the path of pragmatism and sentimentalism. When good biblical practices are retained in such situations it is usually out of love of tradition, rather than a knowledgeable commitment to the Bible and sound exegesis underlying biblical practices. This explains how and why some denomination can deeply backslide so quickly.

