

God Provides Overseers to Equip the Saints for Service.

“It was he (Jesus) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Eph. 4:11-13

We will deal with the elders in two mini messages. Let us begin with an example: **As you converse with another person, and you wish to understand them, it is imperative that you understand their words the way that they mean them.** While shopping in the toy store, little Johnny pointed to the shelf and said, “I want to be a fireman when I grow up.” Dad scanned the shelf that Johnny was pointing to, and said, “I don’t see a fireman here.” Johnny replied, “Why can’t you see it, daddy? It is right there.” After a few minutes of frustrated searching, daddy finally lifted little Johnny up to touch the item he to which he was referring. Johnny reached out and touched a toy from the Fantastic Four collection called Johnny Flame. He is a character that could turn into fire and fly. This to little Johnny was a fireman. In order to understand God’s word, we must understand what He means by what He says.

The following words all refer to the same person but a different description of the work they do. **Elder, Shepherd, Pastor, Bishop and Overseer all describe a different aspect of the same person.** The term Elder is the most general term and obviously refers to a person’s maturity. The terms Shepherd and Pastor are the same. In other words, there is one word in Greek for the two English words: Shepherd and Pastor. The same is true for Bishop and Overseer.

God has always supplied leadership for His people. These were called elders or shepherds. **Jeremiah 23: 1-6 tell how God’s elders/shepherds had scattered God’s people and were not faithful to their responsibilities. God states that He will place elders/shepherds over His people who will tend His flock. For the fulfillment of His promise we turn to Acts 20: 28.** Here we see that the apostle Paul telling the elders/shepherds of the church at Ephesus, *“Keep watch over yourselves and the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the Church of God, which He bought with His own blood.”*

Praise God!!! He keeps His promises!!! **God has made specific men to be elder/shepherds over His people.** He has given to them their credentials, responsibilities and (if I can coin a new term) their accountabilities.

The credentials of an elder/shepherd are found in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Here Paul tells these two young Evangelists how to recognize the one’s that the Holy Spirit has made elder/shepherds for the Church of God. There are credentials positively stated and some negatively stated. These are men that God has matured into men of conviction, integrity and example.

Men of Conviction are convinced of the TRUTH. They desire to accomplish the truth. They are able to teach the truth. They live according to what is truth. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6 As Men of Integrity, they are men who live according to what is TRUE. They are above reproach. They live a life of faithfulness to God and in their family. They are men of Example. They are not drunkards. They are self controlled and hospitable. These are the men that God has matured into leaders of the 1st quality. As with all of us, God supplies our needs to make us what He wants us to become. No one is born completely mature. Growth must take place. God leads men to be shepherds of His church. These men were not always fully credentialed in their life. Yet with time and maturity, God changed them from what they were into what He would have for them.

The Evangelist is given the task of recognizing who the Holy Spirit has made into an elder/shepherd. Neither the church nor the other elders/shepherds have been given the responsibility of ordaining elders/shepherds. We must be careful in giving ourselves responsibilities that the Bible has not. I am speaking of churches that give voting rights to people that God has not. My friends; think Biblically on these things! When a man is ordained to serve as an elder/shepherd, he is to have the credentials.

I Peter 5:1-4 gives a synopsis of an elder/shepherd's responsibilities. *"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you; but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."*

Eldership is neither an office nor a position. It is a work to be accomplished. To think differently leads too many good men down a destructive path, both for themselves and the flock of God. A bishop/overseer is to be observant of the congregation. He is to know what God desires for His people and see that it is accomplished. Each member of the body has their own talents and/or abilities that God uses for the benefit of the body as a whole. The bishop/overseer is to work in such a way that all can mature in the faith and accomplish the will of God in their life and in the church as a whole. In a nutshell, they are to assist in the equipping of the saints for every good work. More will be said in the next discussion on pastors/shepherds.

The elders of God's people are to hold themselves and the church accountable. The elders of Israel got into trouble when they stopped holding themselves accountable for work they were given to do. They considered themselves greater than those for which they were responsible. This self righteous attitude led to the destruction of Israel. God's people were abused by their leadership, and therefore the spiritual church of God became battered and scattered. This happens in the church today when leadership does not hold itself accountable to God first!!! Here are some examples wherein leadership forgets their work and considers themselves more than what God has made them.

Some church leaders have given themselves authority to 'dis-fellowship' other whole congregations. There is no Biblical authority for such action, and the result is that God's people are scattered. Another example is when church leaders call in a member to rebuke them and never once get down on their knees in humble, submissive prayer before God with hearts raging in pain because a Christian has fallen into sin. Instead of an attitude of healing and restoration, an angry judgmental attitude prevails. God's people become battered by these abusive people that call themselves shepherds of God's people. God will hold them accountable for how they hold His church accountable.

It is a tough job, but God calls WILLING men of conviction, integrity and example to help equip God's people for works of service. Why? *"To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."* Eph. 4:11-13