

24-11
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Deacon/Elder Lecture Outlines

Lecture 8

The Duties and Responsibilities of a Local Church Elder (Part I)

I. Introduction

- A. "We're looking for a few good men." That catchy phrase is a recruiting slogan for the United States Marine Corps. It has been used on television, on radio and on compelling posters by the Corps to lure young and talented men into that armed service of the United States of America.
- B. One reason for the success of this slogan is that it implies not everyone can be a Marine. It implies that only a few men are good enough to meet the standard of leadership they desire in the Marines. And it also implies that a large and powerful work can be accomplished by only a few men if they indeed are good ones.
- C. Whatever the merits of this slogan as a promotional tool for the Marines, one thing is certain: God's Church has looked for and has found a "few good men" in the persons of the local church elders who serve Christ's Church.
- D. It is also abundantly clear that only a few of the billions of men alive today have been called to the job. Those who have must indeed be "good men" in every sense of the term.
- E. The record of service thus far tallied by the local church elders has been very distinguished indeed. Their service has been a pillar of strength to God's Church and the pastors they serve. Indeed, no lesser a figure than Pastor General Joseph W. Tkach started his ministry as a local church elder.
- F. As is true in the case of any good soldier, whether it be in the well-intentioned but ill-fated military machines of man, or in the service of God's ministry, the servant always asks: "What is my job? What are my responsibilities? What are my duties? What are the limits of my authority? In short, just what is expected of me?"

II. SPS

To answer these and other vital questions, Mr. Tkach has directed that this lecture describe the duties of the office of local church elder.

III. Need

Most local church elders probably would not for an instant question the desirability of having a complete job description. They would know and feel the value of such a lecture without being told how it will help them. But we in God's Church desire not to merely know what is required of us, but also desire to know why we should know, and from God's point of view. His reasons may be different than ours.

Here are some of the reasons we need a job description such as this:

- A. The welfare of God's people depends in part upon the elders being fully instructed in their responsibilities. Quite clearly, all elders of whatever rank are to be "helpers" of the "joy" of the people of God (II Corinthians 1:24).
- B. The unity of the Church as a whole hinges in large part on the need for all to have sameness of approach in key matters. See I Corinthians 1:10. Clear guidelines of responsibility help all to have such sameness of approach.
- C. Each elder must answer to God for his effectiveness. To be effective we must be instructed in our responsibilities.

Hebrews 13:17 -- All elders must give account to God.

I Corinthians 3:9-15 -- Local church elders are held responsible by God to help build a Church of solid members.

II Timothy 4:5 -- We are instructed to make full proof of our ministry.

- D. Finally, and obviously, we all want to fulfill our responsibilities properly.

IV. Background of the Office of Local Church Elder

The concept of a class of ministers who fulfill the functions of our local church elders is clearly found in the Bible.

- A. Paul commanded both Timothy and Titus -- ministers of higher responsibility -- to ordain elders in the local areas under their jurisdiction. Read carefully Titus 1:5 and II Timothy 2:1-2 coupled with I Timothy 3:1-7.
- B. Obviously some of these elders were "local" in the sense that they were in a certain limited area. See Titus 1:5. They were not traveling elders like Paul or most of the other apostles.
- C. It is obvious that at least some of these elders were not "salaried" but unsalaried. In fact, until a church reached a certain size it would not have been practical or necessary to fully support a local man from the finances of the brethren. Of course, in time some would be supported by the Church. But the point here is that the idea of an elder who obtains his living from another occupation is biblically sound.
- D. Finally, it is also obvious that these elders in many cases had a lesser authority and responsibility. Ephesians 4:11 shows a brief hierarchy of Church offices. This shows that not all elders had the same authority, and thus that the concept of having certain elders with limited authority is biblical.
- E. In conclusion, it can be seen that the Bible supports the concept of having elders who are local in responsibility, not salaried and under the authority of the pastor.

The Church has such a rank of minister, and has chosen to call it local church elder to distinguish it from other types of elders.

V. Definition of the Office and Job

The above points describe from where the Church derives the office, but is not really a definition of the job. One possible definition is as follows:

A local church elder is the first-rung level of the ministry of the Church, comprised of qualified men who have been ordained to the office. They are by definition non-salaried, having primarily responsibility within their local church, under the directorship of the pastor and headquarters, and have some but not all duties of an ordained minister.

This lecture describes the duties of a local church elder.

VI. Place Within the Government of God

One of the most important things that every local church elder must understand is his proper place in the government of God. To not understand this may result in his taking his role too lightly and neglecting his duties, or, on the other hand, being presumptuous of duties that are not his.

Therefore, here is a description of his proper role in the government of God -- God's Family as it is now within God's Church.

A. Relationship to Headquarters

All members are of course under the authority of Church headquarters and its leaders. The local ministers are not a law unto themselves but are under the authority of the apostles. See I Corinthians 12:28.

Today, we have but one apostle, Mr. Tkach, and he leads the Work under Christ from headquarters. When a man is ordained, it is with the understanding that he is under authority of the Church's spiritual and physical head. The very act of the laying on of hands shows this submission to authority.

The concept some churches of the world have that once a minister or elder is ordained he is autonomous or just under the directorship of the local pastor is unbiblical. Christ is the Head of the entire Church -- the vine with all its branches extending from the trunk (John 15:1-7).

An elder's loyalties must be first to Christ and headquarters from which the pastor's authority flows. Thus, there may be a rare occasion of disagreement in which the local church elder must appeal to headquarters for a judgment. Such a step is not to be taken lightly, however. Please review your notes from the lecture on Church government for detailed examples about when and how to go over the head of the local pastor if necessary.

B. Relationship to Pastor

The local elders, within the overall loyalty to the leadership of Christ and His apostle, have a definite responsibility to follow the lead of the local pastor. The local pastor has been placed in the Church by headquarters and is not to be ignored or circumvented without cause.

In the past some few elders have not understood this. They have felt that once they were ordained they were equal with their pastor and could take or leave his leadership as long as they saw themselves loyal to headquarters in the overall sense. This is untrue.

Pasadena expects the pastor to be in authority in the local congregation, and to direct the actions of the elders within his church. No elder may circumvent his pastor for any administrative or spiritual reason unless it falls within the guidelines stated in the lecture on Church government, or is strictly personal in nature. (An example of such a personal thing would be to write Pasadena about not receiving one's personal literature.)

C. Relationship to Other Salaried Ministers in the Local Area

In addition to the pastor, the local church elder will come into contact and work with other salaried ministers locally, such as associate or assistant pastors.

Since a local church elder is of the first rung of the ministry, he is subordinate in authority to a pastor's salaried and ordained associate or assistant (in that order). A local pastor should make plain to a local church elder in what areas he expects his elder to report to him and in what areas, if any, he expects him to report to the assistant or associate. At all times, however, an elder should cooperate with these other men as ministers of higher rank, which they indeed are.

Salaried but unordained assistants, such as ministerial trainees, are a special case. While strictly speaking not yet ministers themselves, they nonetheless are in actuality assigned to special responsibilities which require them to have the cooperation of a local church elder. An elder should recognize this fact and give the assistant his cooperation. In reality, he is merely cooperating with headquarters or the pastor as the pastor implements his responsibilities through the trainee.

D. Relationship to Other Local Church Elders in His Own Church Area

No local church elder outranks any other local church elder. Nonetheless, a pastor has the prerogative to give different responsibilities and degrees of authority to different men as circumstances dictate to be best. For organizational purposes, an elder may

occasionally be given a responsibility which would give him temporary line authority over other local church elders. We should all submit ourselves one to the other (I Peter 5:5).

E. Relationship of Local Church Elders to Elders and Members in Outside Church Areas

From time to time, an elder will visit another church area or deal with other ministers and members during the Feast.

An elder's responsibilities are primarily local. He should therefore not exercise authority in matters or toward people outside his church area unless specifically authorized by someone with the right to do so.

Of course, he can and should always be a big brother to any needy member but even then must be careful not to even unintentionally take someone else's role. The local ministers in any given area have the right to advise their own people and you must not usurp that right. Know when to advise someone to speak with his local minister rather than you. Remember that a minister is forbidden to extend his authority beyond its rightful boundaries or to build on another's foundation, no matter how good his motives. Read II Corinthians 10:14-16 and Romans 15:20.

F. Relationship to Deacons

The deacons and deaconesses are not ordained to the ministry and are not in positions of authority over the elders. Nonetheless, all elders must be careful to treat the deacons with great love, respect and humility as brothers in the faith.

Exercising lordship has no place in Christ's ministry nor among His elders. Read Matthew 20:25-27. Also, every elder must realize that the fact that he outranks a deacon does not give him the automatic right to direct the deacon's actions, especially his spiritual state and personal affairs. An elder should not be placed in the role of spiritually supervising the growth of deacons and deaconesses. This is so important that a special section is devoted to it below.

On the other hand, a pastor will often place an elder over a certain duty and assign a deacon to assist him. In the course of fulfilling the physical duties required for church services and activities, an elder may serve with line authority over deacons. But this

must not become a permanent configuration. For example, in the planning of a major church activity like a dance, within a large YOU group outing or set-up for Sabbath services, within the strict limits of the specific matter at hand, the elder has primary responsibility.

G. Relationship to Lay Members

Lay members should show respect to the elders and should be in subjection to them within the pastor's overall leadership. However, this does not entitle the local church elder to exercise lordship, or interfere without invitation in members' private affairs or spiritual growth unless directed to do so by the pastor. Even then an elder's approach must be one of meekness and humility. This will be dealt with in more detail later.

VII. Proper Attitude of Service

Read Matthew 20:24-28. Christ stated that leaders in His Church would have service as the foundation of their ministry. There is no room for lordship among the elders who serve God's people.

One who serves focuses his attention upon how he can help others grow in grace, knowledge and happiness, and not upon his own position or career. Christ's comments cited above were in the context of correcting the sons of Zebedee for concentrating on their own position in the Kingdom.

Therefore, an elder who serves well will be constantly asking himself two questions: 1) How can I better serve those above me in the chain of government? and 2) How can I better serve God's people in general?

Clearly, the attitude of service requires one to concentrate his thinking upon the needs of others and not upon his own needs. Read Philippians 2:4.

VIII. Proper Methods of Service

The very purpose of this lecture series is to upgrade the already high competency of leaders in God's Church. But there are dangers here. It is possible to make the mistake of trying to do God's Work man's way! That is not what is wanted from our leaders. Some points therefore need to be borne in mind:

A. The Bible must be our sourcebook.

We as elders are to use God's Word as the underlying foundation of our ministry. We should be well read, of course, but should not and must not forsake God's truth for men's psychology, etc. We are to preach the "Word" (II Timothy 4:1-2).

B. We are servants, not lords.

This point was focused on above but is very important and bears repeating. The proper role for an elder is to be a helper of joy toward the members (II Corinthians 1:24).

C. We are part of a larger government.

We are not independent practitioners out on our own to build a following for ourselves. We need to stay plugged into Christ's government and help the members to understand it and relate to it more as well. Ephesians 4:11 shows we are part of a structure of offices.

D. The true values are our goals.

We are not here to teach people how to make more money through real estate or the stock market, but to teach them about God's way of life that leads to true happiness (Matthew 6:19-21, 24).

E. We are not authorities on subjects outside our calling.

Our responsibility is to serve God's people in our areas of training. We are not there to handle other areas and should not engage in legal advice, health diets, tax planning, etc. When an elder acts in this capacity, he creates potential liability for the Church. The Church should not have to defend itself in court because an elder has given poor advice on taxes or health practice.

F. We carry authority.

Counselors in this world pride themselves on maintaining a nonjudgmental attitude. While we are not to be harsh or self-righteous, we must implement God's government and deal with evil according to God's Word. Of course, disciplinary actions, if needed, should be taken by the pastor and not by an elder on his own (Hebrews 13:17).

G. We should not live people's lives for them.

Elders are brothers in the faith and helpers of joy and not policemen or messiahs. While circumstances sometimes demand our intervention, most times our role is one of teacher and advisor. We must allow people to make minor mistakes as a parent does his children, and allow them to grow at their own rate (I Thessalonians 2:11).

Difficult Scriptures

I. Scripture: Romans 3:28

II. How This Verse Is Misused By Some

This verse is used by some to try to prove that the law has been done away, or at least that we don't have to keep the law, since we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law.

III. True Explanation

- A. Remember that although people say you don't have to keep the law, they really don't mean this literally. Do they mean you can kill or steal or murder with impunity? No, of course not. What they do mean is that you can break the Sabbath, not tithe and not keep the Holy Days, etc. Remember this when you explain such verses so, if need be, you can point out this inconsistent and hypocritical stance toward the law.
- B. The verse does not say the "deeds of the law" are not necessary. The subject under discussion is "justification" and whether the "deeds of the law" can "justify" a person. Being justified in the biblical sense means being made just or right before God, which means having your sins forgiven and completely blotted out. The question being settled is not "Should we keep the law?" but, rather, "Does present obedience to the law somehow bring a person into a right standing before God and make up for his past sins?"
- C. If a man commits a crime, his obedience to the law in the future does not make him any less guilty of his past offense. This is also true of us spiritually. Paul showed in verse 20 that the "deeds of the law" do not justify anyone, and he went on to explain in verses 24-27 that justification (forgiveness of sins that are past -- verse 25) can come only by grace, through Christ's sacrifice.
- D. The conclusion is (verse 28) that we are justified by faith without the deeds of the law. "Without" (in the Authorized Version) could be more clearly translated "apart from" or "outside of."