

Definite Laws And General Principles

The interpretation of God's message in the Scriptures is not an exact science. In view of the countless variations in convictions which have divided us, that point seems evident. Devoted students throughout history have searched for the simple route to proper understanding. Has their quest been in vain?

I can only hope to pick up some of the pieces they have left behind and fit them together in my search. Unless I find a practical application of the message, I am still short of my goal. This writing will deal with one problem which has beset us in our quest.

The most obvious hindrance to my understanding has been my orientation concerning "the law of Christ." I was schooled to think that a code of law given by Jesus and inspired writers replaced the fulfilled code given through Moses. So I looked for laws to be detected in commands, examples, and necessary inferences. However, the writers pointed us to principles to govern our actions rather than legal specifics to follow.

You are invited to consider this matter with me as I illustrate it by asking questions about elders. A similar method of questioning may be used in exploring various other topics. So, let me propose some inquiries to see if our answers come from law or principle.

When should a group appoint elders? Who is to determine when? Must a group select elders in order to please God? What if they do not? How are all in the group affected if they mistakenly appoint an unqualified man? *Where is the law that specifies these details?*

How are men to be chosen? Should it be by evangelists like Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy of Biblical precedent? Is the paid minister an evangelist with that responsibility? May a committee select them? If the congregation is to do it, what method is to be followed, and must there be 100% approval, a simple majority, or something in between? Should it be by nomination with lack of valid objections? Who would nominate them and who would rule upon the objections? Are they selected by an open vote or a secret ballot by all men, women, and youthful disciples? *Quote me the law pertaining to these questions.*

What method of initiation must be followed? Are they presented in ceremony after fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands, or by a simple announcement?

Are they appointed for open-ended, lifetime tenure, or for specified terms, perhaps with staggered terms of service. Who has authority to rule on this?

How many should be selected? Who determines how many? Is a plurality of them necessary?

The bishop must not be a recent convert, but how recent is recent? As *elder* signifies, he is older, but how old? Is age relevant, or is that just terminology? *Where's the determining law?*

How many people must he invite into his home in order to be judged hospitable? In being apt to teach, able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and able to confute those who contradict it, how much ability must he demonstrate? Who is to grade him?

What is the capacity of their service? Are they chosen as teachers and spiritual counselors? Are they authoritative as enforcers of conformity? Do they determine who is or is not in fellowship? Are they supervisors of all congregational activities? Do they control all resources? May they make rules about such things as dress, versions of the Bible to use, and frequency of assembling? Does each elder exercise those prerogatives individually, or only corporately?

Surely, if we are following laws, there must be clauses that clarify these questions so we will not have to depend upon human wisdom.

Will having only one child disqualify a man? Suppose he has two, and one or both die after his appointment? If he has two believing children and one disbelieving child, does he qualify? If a man's children are adults, do they still count as children under his subjection? If his children are daughters who are married and submissive to their husbands, are they in subjection to their father also? If so, then would their reprobate children disqualify him? If a man's unbelieving children were married before his own conversion, could he ever qualify? If his children were believers serving devotedly in another religious group, could he qualify? Who is to determine how submissive his children must be? *Surely, the fine print of a legal code will explain all these things.*

An elder must be the husband of one wife. If he is divorced and remarried, he has only one wife. Is he qualified? After his appointment, would

the death of the elder's wife disqualify him? Or what if she became mentally incapable or had to be put in a care facility?

He is to be blameless, without reproach. Who judges this---the congregation, the general public, his business associates, or his wife's kinfolk? Do rumors of misconduct disqualify him? Would a traffic violation, kicking his dog, drinking a beer with his dinner, or employing no women in his business be sufficient to keep him from being without blame?

In view of the above, surely we can agree that any effort to measure elders by a code of law raises endless questions. Sincere effort to find definitive regulations has led to inconsistency in emphasizing some qualities while ignoring others, and it lends itself to political manipulations.

We would expect a system of law to specify all details so that no explanations would be needed. That, however, is not true of any code of law, else we would need no lawyers or courts. It was not true of the Law of Moses. In the generations following Moses, spiritual leaders made judgments on how the law applied in current situations. The accumulation of those decisions came to be known as the *Traditions of the Fathers*; these had authenticity equal to law. In like manner rulings of the Catholic hierarchy compiled as Canon Law are considered to be God's laws. In the Churches of Christ, we have no official spokespersons, but we have our unwritten judgments based mostly on precedents inherited from generations before us. While we declare that our clarifications do not have the weight of law, we insist that they are the intent of the written directives, and they almost become unchangeable.

We must redirect our thinking to look for general principles instead of definite laws. As an example, we are told to honor the king. In a definite manner, that can be

done only in one way, that is, by living under a king and

honoring him. But fulfilling the intent of the general principle, we will not make Christianity revolutionary against civil government.

Whether it be a Scriptural directive, teaching, warning, correction, or exhortation, we should look for the intent of the message. The general principle to be implemented is wider in its application than a definite law would be.

Let's apply this to matters about elders. What was Paul's intent? Was he giving a definite check list? No, for the men are described differently to Timothy and Titus. However, both Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus could discern the kind of person Paul was calling for. Since a bishop would be seen by the public as a representative of the group, he would need to be an honorable man. His role as a spiritual leader would demand that he be judged as having qualities of spiritual leadership. In their culture, a woman would not ordinarily fill the role of a public teacher and leader, so the bishop is spoken of in masculine terms. When mention is made of a man, there is a general assumption that he has a family. The defining of required relationships seems not to be Paul's intent so much as how he relates to others.

As long as we try to define laws to follow in choosing elders, we will continue to disagree over our interpretations. But in applying the principles, I think even the teenagers in the congregation could point out the kind of men that Paul was writing about.

Although I have used the selection of elders to illustrate my point, I am convinced that it is only when we look for general principles instead of definite laws that we will ever be at ease with conclusions about the purpose of assemblies, the role of women, marriage and divorce questions, and most all of the issues over which we have divided.

We will give further application. "Thou shalt not kill" was not always violated by one who caused a death. *Love for our fellowman* was the underlying principle of this legal tenet. That law was broken only when its intent was violated by loveless action. The prohibition of taking God's name in vain did not forbid certain vocabulary, but its principle was violated by any attitude of disrespect for God. The Sabbath regulation called for a sense of holiness and dedication more than a defining of certain forbidden acts. In matters relating to marriage and divorce, even though men never agree on definitive stipulations, we can more generally discern the principles which uphold the sanctity of marriage and the security of the home.

One mindset looks for arbitrary specifics of law; the other discerns the principle of action which best fulfills the intent of the message. The former is based on the concept of law; the latter accepts grace whose principle of action is love. All principles are applied through individual judgment, and they cannot be fulfilled through rote obedience. []

