

Women Elders

Is the title above as fictional as if it were “*Loch Ness Monsters*,” or “*Goblins and Dragons*”? Should an essay on women elders be only one sentence: “There ain’t none”? You know we preachers cannot dismiss any subject so briefly. So for the fun of it let’s wander a few minutes through this fantasy land. The fantasy may become more a reality if we restudy the meanings of certain words and terms. So I refer you back to FR 108, “*Women Ministers Common in Our Churches*.”

The great congregation here in Beaverton, Oregon, with which I have been associated for seven years, recognizes its roots in the past but is not frozen in the past. There is constant restudy and adaptation to fresh concepts all along. Nine men serve harmoniously as elders. One of them, Ron Stump, has served as a supported elder for perhaps a decade. He is a great man working in the same capacity as the other elders but is enabled to give himself more fully to that ministry. Though they are all servants-ministers (deacons) of the congregation, as we discussed previously, they are called elders, pastors (Latin for shepherds), presbyters, bishops, and overseers. These are descriptions of functions rather than of authoritative offices of rule. Their “rule” is by leadership, a guiding by persuasion and example rather than by bare authority. The only decision-making authority elders have is that assigned them by the congregation, and it can be rescinded by the group at any time.

Using Ron as an example for them all, what does an elder do? He looks over (oversees) the congregation as a shepherd looks over the flock of sheep. He feeds them. He observes their individual needs so that he lifts up the fallen, encourages the spiritually weak, prays with them, treats their wounds, teaches them, observes and cares for their material needs, serves the sick, counsels those with various problems and burdens, warns and protects the people from dangers, and works to keep the flock together.

All of these services are functions rather than the administration of an office. The person to be appointed should be functioning in these areas already, for appointment to an office does not make a functioning person of him. Appointment is to let the congregation know whom they may look to for help and guidance while he represents the aims and purposes of the group in serving them.

Now, let us pose a question. Which of the services or functions mentioned above can a woman do, and which activities are forbidden for her? What good work can Ron do that Kay, his wife, is forbidden to do? Devout women have been functioning in these capacities through the centuries though they were seldom appointed to an office. Are we still hung up on the concept of a status office in a system of organized religion? Or, are we more concerned with the working of a body of people to accomplish God’s purposes?

Traditionally, we have appointed women to operational tasks more than to leadership roles. In other words, she has been thought of more as a traditional deacon than a traditional elder. If she serves in the functions mentioned above, is she not a minister-servant-deacon-elder even though

she has not been appointed by a congregation? Undeniably, she can serve God in her private ministry in those functions though she may not have been appointed for those ministries by the congregation. If she can function in those areas of ministry without appointment, what would make it wrong for the church to recognize her good works, give their approval, and to appoint her to them?

Yes, I failed to mention one other thing that Ron does. At various times he stands in the pulpit and delivers a lesson, and he does it with such grace as to qualify him for the pulpit in any of our churches. So, because you are not ready to concede that a woman can fill the pulpit, she cannot be an elder. Right?

A greater number of the elders I have known in the last seventy-five years did not (most could not) ever stand in the pulpit and instruct the congregation. If we have no problem in appointing men as elders who do not “preach,” why would it be a problem for a woman to be an elder who does not “preach”? Am I being illogical? It is time for honesty.

Here is the “clincher” that forever forbids appointment of a woman as an elder: “*Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife..*” (1 Tim. 3:2). A woman cannot be the husband of a wife! That settles it. Or, does it?

Phoebe was a recognized minister-servant-deacon in the church in Rome (Rom. 16:1). Paul, after listing qualities of men to function as elders-bishops, also points out the kind of men to select for servants-ministers-deacons. Then he qualifies “*women likewise*” (v. 11). This is not referring to deacons’ wives. Why qualify deacons’ wives and not a word about elders’ wives? Just as men were appointed, so women “likewise” could be appointed. After many centuries, this is being recognized more widely now.

What is the point? Simply this: Just as Paul specified that elders should be husbands of one wife, he also wrote, “*Let deacons be the husband of one wife*” (v. 12). If Phoebe and other women could be deacons without being husbands of one wife, then cannot a woman be an elder without being a husband of one wife?

Beginning with Exodus 3:16, the term elder (old, aged, bearded) is the term consistently applied to a family-tribal leader. They are mentioned throughout the Old Testament writings and on through the gospels, Acts, and Revelation. These men were heads of extended families and were respected in their communities. Some of them were converted in Jerusalem and very early were recognized as elders in a new relationship. There is no evidence that they were appointed or given authority. (Read more about them in FR 41, “*Patriarchs: Past and Present.*”)

It was only when the gospel was preached beyond Jewish culture that appointment of elders is mentioned. Many years after Pentecost, Titus, a Greek, and Timothy, of Greek and Jewish parentage, working among converted people unfamiliar with Jewish elders, were instructed to select men of the same quality of those Jewish heads of families. Paul described those men, not in a check list of legal terms, but in somewhat general and relative terms. The descriptions sent to the two evangelists were not identical as a legal description would necessarily have been.

Such terms as “temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, and apt to teach” are relative and subject to man’s judgment. Rather than making a rigid requirement that only a man, and he being married with a family, could function in these areas, it was taken for granted from Jewish culture that this leader would be the head of an extended family. But in more transient societies, that social structure no longer exists. In ancient times, few women were educated and became leaders in their communities, but now it is different. Although we have contended traditionally that Paul gave a dogmatic list of legal qualifications, at the same time we have interpreted some of the specifications on which we are less hung-up as relative and elastic. (See 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1.)

Are you appalled that I am dealing so lightly with the essential nature of each point of Paul’s description? Are you ready to stone me? Please hold your rock -- even fondle it -- for a moment of further consideration. Elders and deacons are expedients, not essentials! A person or a group may serve Christ faithfully while never having seen an elder. Many -- maybe most -- of our congregations have no elders. Undeniably, disciples can serve Christ without elders. Elders are meant to be a help, but not a necessity.

Through the years, I have been somewhat amused by one contention of the Baptists. They do not consider baptism as essential to salvation but, if a person accepts baptism, they consider it essential that it be immersion instead of sprinkling. How can it be non-essential and essential at the same time? How can a detail of a non-essential become a life-or-death essential?

We have followed that same illogic in regard to elders. We all admit that disciples can serve faithfully in congregations that have no elders. By that we admit that elders are not essential. Then we contend that if we appoint them, certain qualifications are essential lest the church sin in appointing them! Now, try to explain that sensibly. If that be the case, wouldn’t it be wiser not to appoint them than to risk sin by our lack of good judgment in our selections?

It is taking me a lifetime to become aware that I have placed greater importance on our traditionalized (yes, even fictional!) forms, rituals, offices, and organization than on the functions that accomplish God’s purposes. I tended to make the goal to be achieved less important than correctness of the method of achieving it. For example, though I would have denied it, I made it preferable that a man remain untaught than to be taught by a woman. Now I am realizing that God is more concerned with the function that accomplishes his purpose than with the office, rank, gender, or social correctness claimed by those involved.

(Cecil Hook; February 2002) []