

ELDERS Indeed!

If we could identify that factor in our Organizational Culture which explains the continuing tendency to divide, what might it be? Are we missing a component in our organizational structure that would make a significant difference?

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Many remain perplexed with the phenomenon that we see continuing in our various church groups since the appropriate separation with the so called ‘parent organization’ in the mid-1990’s. We ‘separated’ from that administration over a number of important doctrinal issues that were imposed by the replacement leadership, which not only didn’t believe what we once held to be the Truth, but sought to repudiate most of the teachings that we had accepted and had proved and proved again.

Generic Elders

Now, the ministry itself was known by the term ‘Elders’, despite what a person’s age might have been. Freshly graduated young men, appointed to the ministry right out of college, were referred to as Elders. Their actual age made little difference. With little to no real life experience, they were ‘sent out’ to represent the organization, and to instruct a membership who in fact might have been their ‘superiors’ in experiences, and in some cases, even in the Faith. But no matter!

These youthful ‘elders’ were shown the deference required in reflection of their position, and the church body ‘worked with’ the situation. As these ‘Elders’ got older, they gained the experience they needed. In some cases, they learned by their mistakes, in other cases, they remained the novices that they were from the beginning. What mattered, but which wasn’t addressed for the most part, was the damage done in certain situations, and the resulting attrition. That ‘damage’ at times was both emotional and spiritual.

The membership (which in the early years) was itself ‘novice’, grew along with their leaders as conditions allowed, becoming more ‘elderly’ in a spiritual sense along with their leadership. But there was another downside to the situation, one which served to inhibit the maturation of the

membership. As the appointed ‘elders’ gained experience, they became more protective of their domain. Their interest wasn’t so much the maturity of the membership as it was preserving their own personal prestige and authority.

There was good precedent for that, seen in the headquarters leadership, which epitomized that approach to service. Not only was it exhibited in the ‘upper ranks’, it was required of those they’d sent out into the ‘field’. Headquarters backed-up their appointees, as the appointees backed-up headquarters. Complaints against bad ministering were usually passed right back to the minister who was being complained about for him to deal with. We can predict how that played-out! There’s nothing that would discourage ‘reporting’ on a minister than that.

Watching Each Others’ Backs!

Headquarters backed their men, and their men backed headquarters. A symbiotic mutual-interest relationship existed among the ministry to support one another against any form of criticism or correction rising from ‘below’. It was the rare exception where concerns of the members were dealt with as they should have been. It was the first assumption that it was the member that was out of line. Not that they weren’t at times, but the membership ‘stuffed-it-in’ a lot for sake of not becoming a target of a backwash that would have been unexpected in a better administered situation.

The Oft Heard “D” Word!

A word often heard in the early years was that an attending person had become ***‘disillusioned’***! It was rather common. That speaks to a number of things: Primarily, it shows that a person’s perception of how things ought to be didn’t align with how things actually were. To become disillusioned, one must have had ‘illusions’ to

some degree. This too speaks to the issue of cognitive maturity. A sense of reality, in other words. Both in the member and in the minister.

Root of Bitterness

Then, of course, that disillusionment would inevitably develop into a bitterness. This is where the more seasoned members could have helped the situation, the kind of people we might identify as ‘true elders in the faith’. But did we have that operational mechanism? Not generally. It was largely left to the ‘professionals’ if at all, usually with negative results. ‘Brotherly love’, which would have been the needed response (from the brethren) was suspect, with the ministry wanting these seasoned members to ‘stand clear’!

It’s here that we can begin to see one of the benefits of having true ‘elders’ in the congregations. Not Elders in the sense of duly ordained ministers, but regular members who had, by experience, developed a better sense of the Faith than average.

Mis-Aimed Objective

What we saw happening was the placement of a main focus on preserving ministerial authority, not so much enhancing member maturity. The game revolved around elevating the minister class first and foremost. That left the members subject to whatever was imposed upon them, both operationally and doctrinally. No dissent, right or wrong, was given space!

What was missing was an advocacy that served to mediate in these situations. The minister class was set apart from the general members. Not only were the members discouraged from mediating in situations where a person might have been struggling, the members were purposely ‘left out’ of any oversight of what was being decided or being done administratively. Such is the dynamic that resulted from the adopted approach to ‘government’ that became increasingly important as the Church administration itself took on a more assertive posture over whom they regarded as the lowly members.

But, the important question is, was all of this Biblically correct? What do we see in scripture that would give us a better assessment of just what

an ‘elder’ is or should be? Are there scriptures that show that the ministers are the only ‘elders’ there are or should be?

Elders of the People

Going back to the time of the emerging nationhood of Israel, we see that there were elders among the people. Not elders in the sense of being ministers or priests per se, but certainly people of stature and influence in the community.

In Exodus 3:16 we read: “*Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me, saying, I have surely visited you, and seen that which is done to you in Egypt...*” Exodus 4:29 reads: “*And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel...*” Our question is, how did Moses and Aaron know who these elders were? The nation at this time was in excess of two millions. The only logical thing is that the individual clans had an awareness of and some input in who they held in respect to be their representatives. These, no doubt, were individuals who were respected for their age and their demeanor among them. Moses and Aaron themselves could not have known and appointed all of these men! If one in a hundred, it might have been 6 to 7 thousand individuals (excluding the young and the women). (see Numbers 1:46)

From among these perhaps thousands, seventy were selected to represent the others. (Num. 11:16, “*And the LORD said unto Moses, Gather unto me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom thou knowest to be the elders of the people, and officers over them...*”) These were the elders of Israel, and as it shows, had some official capacity. Out of this greater number, seventy were singled-out!

Note: IF there were only seventy elders, then each would have represented some 28,600 people! No, Moses in Exodus 18:21 was instructed to delegate responsibilities to selected men: “*...thou shalt provide out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them, to be rulers of thousands, and rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens:...*” From this we may deduce that there was at least 600 rulers of thousands, (if we base it on

the 600,000 military capable men¹) and 6,000 rulers of hundreds, and 12,000 rulers of fifties with 60,000 rulers of tens: making the total of at least 78,600 appointed to this task. (More than that if the whole population was the basis!) Obviously, the rulers of 1000 would have been recognized for a greater discerning ability than the rulers of 50.

It appears that the seventy men selected of the elders of Israel represented about 1 of 1,000 elders!

Jewish Leadership

But, as we come to the first century priesthood, we see that something along this line was maintained. There were ‘elders of the people’ looked up to then also. In Matthew 21:23 we read: “*And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?*” We can see here that the priests were not the only authorities in matters of consequence. Their entire body was oriented to ‘matters of authority’. We see them involved in numerous instances. The expression used to identify them suggests they were of and functioned as direct representatives of the common peoples.

Mark 15:1 shows us that these elders offered opinions of consequence. “*And straightway in the morning the chief priests held a consultation with the elders and scribes and the whole council, and bound Jesus, and carried him away, and delivered him to Pilate.*” The chief priests apparently did not see themselves as the overarching authorities in matters that warranted consultation. The elders are listed first, which speaks to their status, providing opinions having gravity among their peers. These elders were not the priests, not the High Priest, not scribes nor of the Sanhedrin. They were men of high regard nevertheless!

A Good Thing Carried Over

So, who were they? We need to keep in mind these were the represented pattern from which the early Church drew its operational model. It had solid precedent for doing so. In keeping with what the converts had known in their previous religious

experience, the early Church was similarly administered.² Where the apostles and prophets and evangelists were looked-up to for their high calling of God, there were local pastors and teachers as well, with the latter being the local in-place servants to the congregations. But as we see, in later years especially, there developed a class of members who had demonstrated experience in discernment, who were also referred to as ‘elders’. These were NOT the ministry, per se. Though some of the ministers might have also been of elder status, that was not their actual designation.

Where do we find just the formal ministry being referred to as Elders in the New Testament?

In Acts 14:23 we see the first mention of actual elders in the Church of God. “*And when they had ordained³ them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.*” However, from Acts 11:30 we see that the situation of there being elders was already known among them. “*Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.*” Acts 15:2 shows the same. “*When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.*” The Elders there were apparently important figures in the decision-making in matters of consequence, along with the apostles.

Very likely, it was from among these elders that the seven, who had already built a reputation, were selected by the brethren to become the ‘stand-ins’ for the Apostles, whose involvement locally were being kept from their otherwise official duties. These seven are typically regarded as ‘deacons’, but that term is nowhere mentioned in that regard in the first few verses of Acts 6.⁴

WHO Are the Elders?

Where are the ministers (the servants “*deaconos*”

² Converts during the first two decades were nearly all of former Jewish persuasion or proselytes.

³ The term ‘ordained’ here is from Strong’s #5500, which means to choose by the raising of hands! The true sense of what was done is lost in translation.

⁴ The chapter “*DEACONS Indeed*” addresses this matter.

¹ Numbers 1:46 = 603,550 of military capability.

of the congregations) referred to as “Elders” to the exclusion of the members? Though we today generally identify the use of that term with the ministry, it isn’t totally correct. In fact, it may be more inappropriate that we realize. Further, the Greek word that’s usually translated ‘minister’ is “*deaconos*” which poses its own considerations. The original Greek word for elder is ‘*presbuteros*’. Are ‘deacons’ higher or lower than ‘elders’? When we leave those two original Greek words in place, a number of ‘interesting’ questions arise.⁵

What is a Presbetyr?

From the Greek ‘*presbuteros*’ we get the word presbetyr, which is a transliteration much like happened with the source for the term deacon. Where we find ‘elder’ in the New Testament, it is nearly always translated from ‘*presbuteros*’.

Though the term is defined under modern usage as: “In the New Testament, a presbyter is a leader of a local Christian congregation. The word derives from the Greek *presbyteros*, which means elder or senior.” [source: Wikipedia] One can see how the term ‘elder’ would then become associated with the ministry or at least preeminent ‘seniors’ functioning in some administrative or advisory capacity. Such is not inconsistent with the Jewish or early New Testament usage.

So, from the usage in the New Testament Church, and seeing them mentioned as being distinct from ‘apostles’ and brethren, (such as in Acts 15:23) it would be logical to recognize that these men are, seniors in the Faith at the least, not necessarily functioning in any official ministerial capacity, though they are an asset to the functional and doctrinal stability of the Churches’ administration.

Elders in Heaven?

It should be no surprise to a student of the Bible that there are counterparts to these in Heaven. In Revelation 4:4 we see that: “...round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty *elders* sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold.” Verse 10 repeats: “The four and

⁵ Jesus Christ and the Apostle Paul were identified as ‘deacons’. (Romans 8:15 & Ephesians 3:7) “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but *deacons* by whom ye believed...” (1st Cor. 3:5 with the original word retained.)

twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, ...” The word for ‘elders’ in Revelation is the same Greek word: Strong’s #4245 ‘*presbuteros*’.

Elders in Our Time

From all of this, it would be hard to justify the idea that there are no ‘elders’ in the Church of God today as there was in the early Church. When we insist it refers to the ‘ordained’ ministry only, then we can make such an assertion. But when we realize the important role senior individuals (men and women no doubt) have in providing stability in the congregations, to dismiss their contributions is seriously counterproductive to the health and welfare of all.

The ROLE of Elders

Paul identified the brethren (particularly the seasoned among them) as “*Pillars and Grounds of the Truth*”. (1st Tim. 3:15) In other words, they are a stabilizing influence. He said that in contrast to Timothy’s relative youth, admonishing him to, at the same time to, “*let no man despise his youth*”. (1st Tim. 4:12) Timothy wasn’t walking among an assembly of ministers. These were the steadfast brethren there that Paul was referring to. It shows the task that was their rightful assignment.

Where it involves us is this: WE are expected to function in like manner, irrespective of whether or not we are ‘ordained’ into any nominal function. Just in the fact that we are ‘in the Church’ for any length of time, we are expected to have developed an ability to teach. Hebrews 5:12-14 addresses those with longevity: “*For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*” This is what’s expected of all of us! Growth in the experience of exercising our spiritual senses.

It’s when we degraded the function of the senior

members of congregations from having any useful function – leaving all to the ministry – that we lost the stabilizing structure that should have been in place all along. I recall distinctly in the early ‘70’s the congregations being seriously admonished to NOT try to answer any brethren’s questions, but to direct them to the minister. That might have made sense among complete novices, which many of us were at the time, but as it played out, it wasn’t for just the early years. It was understood as policy, and we then never gained the experience in addressing matters of concern. That set up the situations mentioned in the opening paragraphs.

But it followed a larger pattern. We were told that only the ordained ministry was to be regarded as ‘Elders’. That’s what we called them. A person’s age had little to do with it. Having senior people within the congregations wasn’t considered an important factor. We didn’t have, or we didn’t allow, the embedded ‘pillars and grounds’ to function as they should have. What should’ve been the stabilizing factor was rendered defunct, leaving us with nothing really to counter the doctrinal drift into apostasy when it came.

Ministerial Dysfunction

Did the official ministry stand strong against the apostasy? Did they counter the forces of division? Were any of these detrimental developments a result of the actions of the members? As the record now shows, most of the ‘problems’ resulted from of the actions of the ‘ordained’ ministers.

But a lot of the residual effect remains in those remnant groups that were taught in that way. The definition of who or what an elder is still defies the obvious. A true elder is one who is seasoned in the Faith, well informed in the Word, having his or her senses developed through exercise. These logically would be the older ‘well-seasoned’ ones among us. Why is that definition not logical?

Regarding Ordination

It might be appropriate here to address the matter of ‘ordination’. This is a term rarely used in the New Testament reflecting the sense that it’s usually taken to mean. Though ‘ordain’ appears some 21 times, in the New Testament, it’s actually translated from 13 different Greek words! Those few

places where we might associate it being an actual ordination in the usual sense, the Greek word is Strong’s #5500. However, the definition of that word ‘*cheirotoneō*’, is: “**to create or appoint by vote by stretching out the hand**: one to have charge of some office or duty or, to elect, create, appoint.”⁶ This of course differs from the usual take in that it strongly indicates them having taken a consensus among a gathering of believers, taking a vote by a show of hands. This is quite different from the usual approach.

Would such an approach (having members weigh in with their opinions) have produced better long-term results than the methods employed? But, of course, this is way too ‘democratic’ for too many peoples’ acceptance level!

We have two considerations to factor-in here: **One**, that such a selection is made by the congre-gation, and **two**, that such a selection is to be made from among those known to have been reliably serving, likely from among those already recognized as ‘elders of the congregation’. This is reinforced by what we read of in Acts 6, where the brethren were called-upon to select out from among themselves individuals known for their reputations. “*Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.*” This was not a unique situation! It became precedent for the actions spoken of in places such as Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:23.

Appoint in this place in Acts 6 is Strong’s #2525, *kathistēmi*, which doesn’t necessarily indicate an ordination.⁷ The brethren nominated those whom they deemed as meeting the requirements stated, and the apostles gave confirmation to their choices. It set precedent for other similar situations back in that day. It is unfortunate that this is not how it’s done today. *Kathistēmi* is a word translated ‘ordain’ only in two other places: Hebrews 5:1 & 8:3, referring to those appointed to serve among the priesthood.

⁶ from <http://www.eliyah.com/lexicon.html>

⁷ The KJV translates #2525 as: make (8x), make ruler (6x), ordain (3x), be (2x), appoint (1x), conduct (1x), set (1x).

So, why didn't the apostles make these selections themselves? They were there among these people after all, and likely would have known of possible candidates. One possibility is that the apostles respected the preferences of the ones being served, not wanting to cut them out of the process. They respected the preferences and knowledge of the brethren in that assembly, unlike what we see in the modern Church! Allowing the brethren to have input provided a greater satisfaction level than had the people been left entirely out of the process! It also served to reduce any complaints against the choices that were made.

The Importance of Elders

But, moving beyond the 'ordination' consideration, We're drawn back to the 'elder' question. The Hebrew nation had what are referred to as 'elders of Israel' (not necessarily religious leadership – only certain Levites were that element!); the Jewish religion was known to have 'Elders of the people'; the early Church had elders as well as does God's Throne in Heaven. It's the 'elders' we see being key operatives in the New Testament Church that is our interest area here. They were known to have a place in the decision-making process. But the modern Church seems reluctant to allow and to recognize the echelon of properly defined 'elders'.

Spurned Opportunity?

We're left to wonder how differently things would have worked out had those older members – those 'seasoned in the Faith' – been consulted and their opinions allowed to be taken into account.

The symbiotic relationship between field ministers and the headquarters ministry – restricting all decisions to themselves – frustrated appropriate actions from having been taken. The true 'elders' within the congregations (long-time members), who had or should have had their spiritual senses exercised, would have made better decisions than did the so-called 'ordained ministry'. There's a lot to be said for 'collective wisdom', over political expediency! Add to that the constraints put upon the field ministers by the 'paycheck consideration', and we can see another factor in this problem.

We also should ask, where did those 'elders' fall within the ranking structure of the early Church?

We know they were involved in the decision-making process,⁸ we know that they had some function within the congregations, we know they were deemed important as a stabilizing influence, being 'pillars and grounds of the truth'.

We see that some 'elders' were compensated for their services. (1st Tim. 5:17) We also see them referred to in letters sent out to other areas.⁹ We may assume that their mention gave confidence to the recipients that a consensus was taken among well-seasoned fellow brethren, and was not just something imposed by any single leader.

Appropriate Involvement

Among those who are truly called of God. It is incumbent upon each to have the level of concern for the health and welfare of the Body (the Bride of Christ after all) that He has. Situations that are detrimental to her condition should be a matter of great concern among the seasoned membership.

So, the point of this is to encourage each of us to 'grow in grace and knowledge' sufficiently to be the true pillars that we are being groomed to be, not only now, but in the Kingdom of God. (Rev. 3:12)

The True Church of God should be aware of its 'elders', recognizing their importance within the congregations, and allowing their input in matters of consequence. That being the case, each who has been in the Faith for any length of time ought to be knowledgeable enough to be able to teach, and having their senses (of discernment) sufficiently exercised to be the asset to the congregation that is appropriate to their longevity in the Faith.

In Hebrews 5:12-14, Paul makes the case for this very specifically. Obviously, not just for personal benefit, but for the greater good of the Body.

It should never be a satisfactory situation to attend year after year only for the entertainment that spiritual instruction might provide. We ought to be seeking opportunities for growth and ways to enhance the spiritual condition of the Church to the benefit of all. Elders indeed!

⁸ Acts 16:4; Acts 15:2 & 6;

⁹ Acts 15:22-23; Acts 16:4