

# God's Plan for Elders in the Church

*by Walter Pigg*

## Will God's plan work? Or, is the plan flawed? Where can we go to get the true answer?

A number of readers of *Banner of Truth* have suggested that there is a very real and urgent need to give attention to the study of elders and the part they are to play in God's plan for the church. From what I have seen in years gone by, what I am seeing today, and what I am hearing from others, I certainly concur. In fact, this appears to be one of the most important aspects of the church to which attention needs to be given. In God's plan for elders, if carried out, is the potential of the greatest thing which can be done for the well-being of the church in this present time of distress. On the other hand, if God's plan for elders is not put into action, there is bound to be a further weakening of the church as God's word is treasured and respected less and less. It is with the above in mind that we set forth the following thoughts on the subject of elders, trusting that some might be provoked to give serious attention to the matter, putting God's plan into action to the greatest extent that is possible. Due to the extent of material on elders we can do little more than scratch the surface, due to limitations of space. We do encourage a further study of this important subject.

**God's Plan for the church.** His plan was not made on the spur of the moment, nor was it made to meet some unforeseen need. God's "manifold wisdom" was (and is) evidenced by the church. "*According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Eph 3:10-11). Our omniscient God of heaven knew the church would be needed, and he knew what it needed to be in order to fulfill its divine purpose in the salvation of man, even before man appeared on the scene and committed sin.

It is with the recognition of the above, that the church was planned as God wanted it, that we discuss the highly important subject, **God's Plan for Elders in the Church.**

From what is seen within the church today, it appears that there is some doubt with some as to whether or not God's plan for elders will work. Could it be that some think God's plan is flawed? A young preacher said one time, "Church discipline doesn't always work." Perhaps he meant by this that the person disciplined is not always restored. That is true, but restoration is not the only purpose in discipline. If the individual can't be restored, then discipline serves the purpose of removing that bad influence from the congregation. Paul commanded the Corinthian brethren, "*not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat.*" Then he added, "*...put away from among yourselves that wicked person*" (1 Cor 5:11,13). Yes, discipline will always work if done according to God's plan. Evidently a majority of brethren do not believe discipline will work, since it is so seldom practiced. I have even heard people say, "I just don't believe it will work." It is virtually a forgotten command. But let us now turn our attention to our subject.

## WILL GOD'S PLAN FOR ELDERS IN THE CHURCH WORK?

Some might suggest that such a question is unfair. In one sense I would agree. Those who have a genuine, living faith "*which worketh by love*" (Gal 5:6), do not doubt that God's plan for elders will work. They do not question God's plan on any matter. However, the fact of the matter is that many brethren demonstrate by their actions that there is some doubt as to whether or not God's plan will work. Though they might not affirm this by words, their actions serve as evidence. An implicit faith in God's word is lacking. As further evidence of this we shall consider the following.

Though God has set forth by inspiration the qualifications to be met by those serving as elders (We shall note those later), there are a number of ideas relative to selecting elders which settle for less than the God-given qualifications. We shall consider four of those ideas.

**Choose the Best You Have.** In my first full-time work a well known preacher suggested to me that some brethren just select the best men in the congregation and make them elders. It is difficult to understand how brethren could do this and still claim to have respect for God's word. If this could be done with

respect to elders, then why couldn't the same principle be followed in other areas? That is, why couldn't people settle for less than God has specified in other areas? If God had intended for the above to be done, would not He have added at the end of the qualifications for elders, "Or the best you have in the congregation"? This best-you-have idea comes from the wisdom of men, not God.

**Qualifications In the Eldership.** This view is that no one elder is to possess all of the qualifications. In fact, all the elders could be lacking in one or more qualifications as long as all were found in the combined eldership. Let us suppose that three men are being considered for elders. In the **positive** qualifications one man is "*apt to teach*," another is "*given to hospitality*," yet another "*ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity*," and so on with the other positive qualifications. In the **negative** qualifications one man must "*not be given to wine*," but two of them could be. At least one of the three must NOT BE: "*a brawler*," "*covetous*," "*a novice*," "*self willed*," "*soon angry*," etc. But two of the three could be lacking in these qualifications. It is difficult to imagine people holding such an outrageous view as this, but there are many things which are difficult to imagine but they are factual nevertheless. God's word gives not credence to such a wild idea.

**Call Elders By Another Name.** In some congregations certain men are appointed as "Leaders," but they actually assume the authority of elders. They are serving as elders but under another name, since they do not qualify as elders. We are not talking about committees who serve in various ways, subject to the authority of the congregation. So far as I know, there is no scriptural authority for such an arrangement. If there is no authority for something in the New Testament, then the authority is from men.

**No One Qualifies as An Elder.** Admittedly, the qualifications for elders demand men of the highest standard in the spiritual realm. But at the same time, it must be recognized that absolute perfection is not demanded in most of the qualifications. If it were, there would be no elders. But God would not have set down requirements which would be impossible to meet. The qualifications in general involve a matter of degree. For example, does the qualification "*apt to teach*" mean that one must be perfect as a teacher? Does "*not soon angry*" demand that one have perfect control of himself with regard to anger? In these and a number of other areas, it is necessary to make a judgment as to whether or not a man meets the God-given qualifications. In some cases it appears that perfection is demanded by the congregation, and this accounts for the absence of elders. It should be pointed out, however, that since perfection cannot be expected this does not mean that qualifications can be ignored, as is sometimes done.

In each of the four cases above, the congregation involved is without elders completely, or without elders who are qualified according to God's standards. This is indeed a most serious matter since God's plan for His church does include qualified elders. Needless to say, we are presently seeing the frightening results of the lack of qualified leadership. Not only is there a real problem relative to the qualification of elders, there are serious problems with regard to other matters regarding elders.

## OTHER UNSCRIPTURAL IDEAS RELATIVE TO ELDERS

**Once an elder, always an elder.** One case about which I know, involved a man who once served as an elder. When the eldership was dissolved, he wanted to continue to exercise his authority as an elder. The man was not trustworthy and had a bad reputation in the community. He tried to interfere with the work of the congregation to the extent that it was necessary to withdraw fellowship from him, in the absence of repentance. Since it is possible for a man to become qualified to serve as an elder, it is just as possible that one can become unqualified. In this case, God's approval would be lacking.

**Elders control the number of elders.** This view maintains that the elders of a congregation have the authority to limit the number of elders. The rule which is generally followed, with which I agree, is that the congregation is to select men to serve as elders. The example in Acts 5:3, where the apostles told the brethren to, "*look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom ye may appoint over this business*," is an example of congregational selection of men to serve, in this case the serving of "tables." If elders have authority to control the number of elders, this would enable them to maintain a self-perpetuating eldership. I have not seen scriptural arguments used to uphold this idea.

**Elders are Holy Spirit appointed.** There is a sense in which this is true, but there is also a sense in which this is not true. When qualified men are selected as elders, there is Holy Spirit approval. But on the other

hand, one case comes to mind where the elders of a congregation were going to appoint a man as an elder over the stated objections of more than a dozen of the members. When these objections were made, the elders said no one would be made an elder. A preacher, speaking in defense of the elders, said the elders were "Holy Spirit appointed." The obvious implication was that the elders were right in their scheme because they were "Holy Spirit appointed." It would be a serious charge to maintain that many of those serving as elders today were appointed by the Holy Spirit! Take for example, elders of congregations in our own area who bring in rank false teachers to influence their flocks, as is happening in so many places. The Holy Spirit in no sense of the term sanctions such evil as this. The spirit behind such action as this is not Holy. The Holy Spirit is not going to uphold that which is contrary to the revealed word of God. He doesn't oppose Himself.

**Elders have no authority**. A number of years ago there was a considerable discussion of this idea. Some maintained that elders could only serve as "examples," and that they had no authority. This is an outright disregard for the teaching of the New Testament. The passage which first comes to mind as verifying the fact that elders have authority is Hebrews 13:17: "*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls as they that must give account...*" To the Thessalonians Paul writes, "*And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you*" (1Thes 5:12). Elders are to take the "oversight" over the "flock of God" (1 Pt 5:2). Paul says: "*Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honor...*" (1 Tm 5:17). The terms "bishop" and "overseers" suggest authority which has been given elders. The idea that elders have no authority came from men, not God. It should be noted that the authority of elders is limited. They cannot make laws of faith or in any way change or limit God's word. Their authority is in matters of expediency, or optional matters. But matters of expediency or optional matters must be such that God's will is not violated in carrying them out.

**Elders have dictatorial power**. The idea that elders are "bosses," as we commonly use that term, that they have authority to "dictate" is foreign to God's word. The Holy Spirit, through the apostle Peter, expressly deals with this issue. "*Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock*" (1 Pet 5:3). The desire for power constitutes a serious problem with some elders. They have the idea that they are sort of "above the law," that they are not to be questioned about anything. They have the spirit of Diotrephes. In some instances the flock is kept completely in the dark concerning the business of the church. A few years ago brethren in an Arkansas congregation went to court to force the elders to make available to the congregation the finances of the congregation. The elders maintained they had authority to keep that information from the members. When elders fail to keep the flock informed as to what is going on, they are violating Peter's instruction, not to lord it over God's heritage. Elders are not dictators.

**Elders are mere figureheads**. In some instances this is true, but God's approval is lacking. In some congregations, the shots are called by someone behind the scene. The "elders" have little to do with decision making. We have all heard the expression, "she elders." Such certainly ought not to be, but in some cases it is a fact, that the wife of an elder may actually do the decision making. My wife and I visited with a congregation several years ago where there was actually one "she elder." This lady invited us to have breakfast at her home. She let us know that she had invited us over in order to question us about a number of things. In fact, she proceeded to give me a going over for what I had preached on Sunday morning (she wasn't present). She even had the audacity to ask me if I could work with the congregation. Her husband, supposed to be one of the elders, sat there closed mouthed, not uttering a word.

**The "main" or "chief" elder**. There is no indication in the New Testament that a single elder has authority over a congregation, but rather the eldership or plurality of elders. History confirms that the apostasy in the early church, which ultimately resulted in the Roman Catholic Church, had its beginning in part when one individual elder in a congregation became the "chief" elder, exercising more authority than the others. That today in some elderships there is a "chief" elder is a matter of fact. This is contrary to God's will, and the elders who allow one man to become chief are not without guilt.

## THE QUALIFICATIONS OF ELDERS

In 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, God's qualifications for elders are set forth. To suggest that these requirements are not binding is to say that we are at liberty to disregard God's word as our complete, all sufficient guide. Yet, it should be a matter of grave concern that in the selection of elders these qualifications are often virtually ignored. Men are appointed as elders sometimes on the basis that they are successful businessmen, or that they have a

lot of money. In some cases it is a matter of kinship or friendship, or popularity. Some become elders because they electioneered for the position.

In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul says, "*This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.*" Time and again I have heard people say, "The first qualification is that one must desire the office." This is not one of the stated qualifications, but of course a desire to use one's talents in serving the Lord is implied. One must serve willingly, not because of force. When a man measures up to the stated qualifications it is understandable that he would desire to be used in this important way.

But I'm fully convinced, due to what I have seen, that this "desire" should be considered very seriously as to the nature of it. There is no question but that serving as a scriptural elder is one of the most awesome responsibilities one could accept. It is not a matter to be considered lightly. The sincere individual would likely reflect upon his qualifications for such an important task. A lesson might be learned from the appointment of Moses as the leader of the Israelites. Though he did accept that great responsibility, he was not out electioneering for it. The individual who desires to be an elder so much that he is out running for the job, may be seeking a place to exercise authority which he may have never been able to exercise before.

Due to the number of qualifications we must be very brief relative to them. We would encourage a more detailed study than we are able to do here. We begin with...

<u>Quality</u>	<u>Scripture</u>	<u>Brief Comment</u>
<b>Blameless</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2;</b> <b>Titus 1:6</b>	Above reproach. Nothing laid to one's charge.
<b>Husband of One Wife</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2;</b> <b>Titus 1:6</b>	In Greek, a "one woman man."
<b>Vigilant</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2</b>	One who is watchful, alert, on guard against danger.
<b>Sober</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2;</b> <b>Titus 1:8</b>	Of sound mind, able to make good judgments.
<b>Of good behaviour</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2</b>	Orderly, modest, well-behaved, upright.
<b>Given to hospitality</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2;</b> <b>Titus 1:8</b>	One who is friendly and generous to guests, who enjoys fellowship and association with others.
<b>Apt to Teach</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:2</b>	Skilled in teaching. Able to give instructions
<b>Not given to Wine</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3</b>	One who does not even get "one drink drunk."
<b>No striker</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3;</b> <b>Titus 1:7</b>	Not a brawler, quarrelsome, or quick tempered person.
<b>Not greedy of filthy lucre</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3;</b> <b>Titus 1:7</b>	A materialist whose goal is gain.
<b>Patient</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3</b>	Gentle, forbearing, mild, not easily disturbed.
<b>Not a brawler</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3</b>	Not abusive, quarrelsome, or looking for a fight.
<b>Not covetous</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:3</b>	Not a lover of money, who values spiritual treasures less.
<b>Ruleth well his own</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:4</b>	A man who is head of his family, having his children in

house		subjection.
<b>Faithful children; Having children that believe</b>	<b>Titus 1:6</b>	Children who are believers, as faithful Christians.
<b>Not a novice</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:6</b>	Not new in the faith. Not a new convert.
<b>Of good report by those without</b>	<b>1 Tim 3:7</b>	Of good and honorable reputation by those who are outside the church.
<b>A lover of good men</b>	<b>Titus 1:8</b>	One who loves good things, including good men.
<b>Just</b>	<b>Titus 1:8</b>	Right in character.
<b>Holy</b>	<b>Titus 1:8</b>	Not wicked or defiled by sin. A godly person.
<b>Temperate</b>	<b>Titus 1:8</b>	One who is able to exercise self-control in speech and actions.
<b>Holding fast the faithful word</b>	<b>Titus 1:9</b>	Able to keep the word when opposed. Able to "exhort and convince the gainsayers" by "sound doctrine."
<b>Not selfwilled</b>	<b>Titus 1:7</b>	One who must have his way in everything. Stubborn.
<b>Not soon angry</b>	<b>Titus 1:7</b>	Ready to "fly off the handle," Hot tempered.

## THE WORK OF ELDERS

It is very evident that there is a widespread misconception of the work of elders. It reminds me of a game children used to play, wherein when someone was tagged it was declared, "You're it!" To be an elder in the biblical sense of the term, is much more than wearing a title. It is a function, a work to be done. When one ceases to function that one has ceased to be an elder and should no longer claim to be.

In Acts 20:28-30, Paul notes some of the primary duties of elders. As "overseers," they were to "take heed" unto themselves. This would involve serious attention as to their responsibilities in this great work, making certain that they were conforming to God's will in the matter. In the second place, they were told to "feed the flock." Just as a literal flock will weaken and die without food, so will the spiritual flock, a congregation of God's people.

One of the qualifications of an elder is to be "*apt to teach*" (1 Tim 3:2). I have heard that word "apt" used in the following way: "You just can't tell about that man, he is apt to do most anything." As applied to an elder, it means to be "skilled in teaching" (*Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*). This involves the knowledge necessary to teach. One can hardly teach that which he doesn't know. Closely related to this qualification is Paul's statement to Titus, "*Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers*" (Titus 1:9). This is highly important.

To serve as "overseers" effectively it is essential that elders be knowledgeable and able to teach. Not only is this necessary in order to "feed the flock," but to be able to withstand the "gainsayers" and so protect the flock against this danger. Peter points out that the elders are to "*Feed the flock of God . . . taking the oversight thereof.*" He also says that it is not to be done by "*constraint, but willingly...*" Rather than being "*lords over God's heritage*" they are to be "*ensamples to the flock*" (1 Pt 5:2-3). It cannot be expected that the flock will rise above the example set forth by the elders.

As rulers of the congregation, the elders "*watch for your souls as they that must give account...*" (Heb 13:17). it goes without saying that if elders are to "watch" for the souls of the flock, they must know those who make up the flock. It is also true that there must be a deep concern for everyone. If signs of sickness (spiritually) occur, attention should be given as quickly as possible, in order to bring about a cure and prevent a worsening of the



condition, even to the point of spiritual death.

When the various words and terms used with regard to elders are considered, it is clear as to the high standards which they must reach, and the nature of their work can be seen. In this connection it should be pointed out that if elders are to accomplish their highly important and God-given task, it is necessary for the flock to "obey" and "submit" to the rule of the elders in the area of their authority (Heb 13:17).

If we will be honest with God and with ourselves, it will be admitted that there is a most serious problem within the church today due to the lack of qualified elders. The nature of the problem is such that it can be rightfully called...

## THE ELDERSHIP CRISIS

The lack of qualified elders is not something new, but the failure to carry out God's plan for elders in the church has become much more serious in the past two or three decades. The statement that "Elders are the greatest problem within the church today," is being heard much more often now. With this statement I agree, and will point out in the following some of the reasons why I do so.

Let me point out that churches which have true, God-approved elders, doing the work which God intended, are fortunate and blessed with one of the greatest of blessings. On the other hand, congregations which are not so blessed, and neither have competent leadership among the men, are in a very precarious state.

It would be most interesting to know just how many scriptural elderships would be found if a hundred congregations were surveyed. I would not hazard a guess as to the exact number, but it would be a frightening few. Many of our brethren would agree with this assessment. We are seeing the tragic results of this condition, in that congregations are leaving "the old paths" as never before in our lives. It is so sad that many have become denominational in so many ways and yet claim to be Christ's church.

Elders, if they function as God intended, will take their work seriously, always striving to the utmost to fulfill their duties. When this occurs, the congregations will prosper in spiritual growth and maturity, and numerical growth will result. When this is lacking, when the elders do not function properly, the devil will be successful in bringing great hurt and lack of progress upon the congregation. We shall note a few things which are happening today due to the eldership crisis. All these things are not true in every congregation, but some are in many. In some instances a number of problems are evident in a single congregation.

**Lack of proper teaching.** A primary duty of elders is to see that the flock is properly fed. But in general we are no longer "People of the Book," as we once were. It is evident that people are not studying as they should. And, much of what is being learned is not in harmony with God's word. Not only is proper feeding not being provided, in some instances elders (?) are actually bringing in false teachers. This is happening right here in Murray, Kentucky with sister congregations, but it is also happening all over the country. In some cases elders do not know what is being taught in classes. Teaching material is not examined closely. Unreliable versions of the Bible are being used more widely. Meetings with teachers, by the elders, in some cases never take place. Sometimes elders are not themselves capable of teaching.

**Church discipline is not practiced.** This is such a common problem that when it is done it is certainly the great exception and not the rule. Members can be involved in all sorts of sinful practices and elders often never do a thing about it. Elders should take the lead in discipline, and see that the members participate.

**Lost sheep are not sought.** It is not uncommon for members to drift away and elders never put forth any effort to find them and bring them back to a state of faithfulness. All members have a responsibility in this area, but elders are to take the lead, to set an example.

**Fellowship with error is allowed.** If the New Testament teaches anything (and it certainly does), it teaches that faithful Christians cannot fellowship error. Yet, members may have fellowship with very liberal congregations and have no rebuke from their elders who are supposed to "watch" for their souls. Announcements of activities of liberal congregations are sometimes made by those claiming to be sound. The elders allow this to happen.

**False teaching is allowed.** Some elders will not take issue with false teachers, seemingly thinking that if nothing is said the false teaching will simply go away. The teaching of error by preachers or teachers, or any member, should not be tolerated "not for an hour" (Gal 2:5).

**Input from the congregation is not desired.** The church is not a democracy, but people cannot be led effectively when their minds are unknown. In close relation to this is the failure to keep members informed. In some instances there is never an opportunity given for members to be informed about the work of the church and various things related to it. The work of elders is to lead, not to drive. There is a big difference.

**Elders standing for error.** Not only is error sometimes tolerated, the number of elders who outright uphold and teach error is increasing. Some of our most blatant false teachers are allowed access to congregations because the elders themselves are false teachers. The members who allow this to be are not guiltless.

**Untaught elders.** Some elders do not hold "*fast the faithful word*" because they have never been taught. They are not able to "convince" anyone by "sound doctrine." The ability to recognize truth from error is sometimes lacking. In my estimation, this has contributed greatly to the spread of error.

**Uninformed elders.** With all the error that is floating around in our brotherhood today, elders who are not informed as to what is going on are running a great risk. A false doctrine can be brought into a congregation and take root without it being known by the elders until it is too late to deal with it effectively. Elders who are too busy to keep informed, are just too busy!

**"Lord's over God's heritage."** God has given elders authority to "rule" over the flock. About this there should be no doubt. But this authority is not as a dictator. Most members of the church resent being "bossed" in their congregational relationship. Whereas it is not difficult to "submit" to elders who serve as exemplary leaders, submitting to those who rule with an "iron hand" is a different matter. If the awesomeness of the responsibilities in serving as an elder was given serious thought, the desire for assuming unauthorized power might be curbed.

**Failure to support preachers.** If a preacher is preaching and teaching the truth with the right motive, it is for the good of the congregation that the elders, at least occasionally, let it be known that they stand behind the preacher. A preacher should never be left out on a limb when the truth he presents is not accepted by some members, and the elders fail to stand by him. I've known this to happen. If the preacher is not preaching the "*whole counsel of God*" (Acts 20:27), he should be stopped immediately. Error is never deserving of more time!

**Special interest influence.** In some cases the elders may listen to certain individuals or groups while closing their ears to others. A very liberal contributor may carry more weight than the average member. Sometimes just one or two members have enough influence that they can make a big difference in the decisions made by elders. "Kin folks" can influence decisions.

**Lack of trustworthiness.** Every member of the church should be trustworthy, but with those serving as elders it is a **must**. It is a sad day when elders do not keep promises or even state things which are not true. This should never happen, but unfortunately it does. I know.

## **The Solution to Elder Problems...**

We have noted a great many problems and others could be mentioned. But these problems could be solved by submitting completely to God's word in the matter. If men were selected to serve as elders in accordance with God's qualifications, problems, for the most part, would be solved. It is that simple. Problems arise when men take the matter into their own hands and select, or allow, men to assume the position of an elder when they are clearly not what God has demanded to serve in that all important capacity.

If ever there was a time when those who love the Lord and His church should do everything within their power to improve the elderships within the church, it is **NOW!** It is already too late for many eternity-bound souls who have been led away from the way of righteousness. No doubt there are many men who could become qualified elders if only their love for God was strong enough that they would be willing to make that their goal. True spiritual growth and maturity is desperately needed.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS...**

The foregoing has not been written to discourage men from serving as qualified elders, but rather to encourage such, and to call attention to the great need for more elders. I'm convinced that godly elders constitute one of the greatest things which can be done to contribute to the well-being of the church. Men who are qualified to serve, or who could qualify themselves, should think seriously of their duty.

Over the past forty years a great many schools to train preachers have been started. Some have done great good. But I'm amazed that so little has been done to help train men to be qualified elders. Young men, early on, should be encouraged to prepare themselves to serve as elders in the Lord's church. More attention should be given to the financial support of elders who are qualified and able to devote their time to that important work. Yes, **God Plan For Elders in the Church will work!** Why not try it?

**You can send Email directly to brother Pigg by clicking [H-E-R-E](#).** Personally, I could wish that every member of the Lord's church would read and digest this article, **especially elders. [drl]**.

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