

## SABBATH THOUGHT 2022-03-05—ROLE OF ELDERS

May God bless you on His Sabbath day!

What do you personally think are the roles of an elder? My parents attended mainly Methodist churches, so my experience as a child was that of a minister appointed by some faraway grand council to run the business and religious operations of a building where people met on Sundays. The business side involved money from the weekly offerings (they did not talk about tithing) and the religious work was the weekly fifteen-minute sermon from a high and lofty pulpit and occasional hospital visitations. Of course, there was more to it than that but, to an impressionable young teen, that seemed to fairly encapsulate the main construct. I also knew it was a fairly common one because every church my parents attended in the cities where we lived had similar organizations.

When God called me and I started attending weekly Sabbath services, the role of the minister appeared to be similar to that of Protestant organizations. However, the ministers spent a lot of time referring to a luxurious and opulent headquarters from which all truth flowed as revealed by a revered leader. I am certain most of you can fill in the many blanks I left of how things worked back then.

I saw much the same structure in the subsequent organizations after the demise of that initial Church of God. The problem for me was that I came to a point in my life where I realized that I had come to rely upon ministers for the truth of God. I spent my beginning years reading booklets, magazines, and listening to sermons without much real Bible study. While the material available from the church organization was useful and valuable, delving deeply into the Bible was secondary. At one point, I put aside the church material and began to really study the Bible. That was then that things changed. Even though I proved that much of the information in the church sermons and materials was biblically correct, having direct knowledge from the Bible gave me a much greater understanding, appreciation, and confidence in the truth of God.

Something else occurred that I had not anticipated—I came to KNOW that I was begotten of God. Previously, I had “measured” my calling by the lists of things that met the “requirements” for salvation mentioned in sermons and church materials. After awhile, intense study of the Bible established a relationship with God that I did not have before. Without direct knowledge of the Bible, I was “hearing” from God “secondhand”. In other words, articles and sermons were hearing **about** God rather than **from** Him.

But, you might ask, were not the saints taught through the preaching of the gospel, especially from the apostles? Yes, of course! But things today are quite different. Most of the saints back in Paul’s time did not have a Bible (certainly not the New Testament) so preaching was the primary means for communicating the gospel of the kingdom of God. Moreover, what they preached was directly taught by Jesus Christ so their gospel was

without human misunderstanding and errors. They also had greater measures of the Holy Spirit and God inspired them with a perfect truth that was captured in their writings. No elder today can claim such credentials.

Today, the Church has a good understanding of the gospel of the kingdom and God's truth. However, **all** of us are admonished to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). Everyone knows this, but have you read the previous sentence?

PHILIPPIANS 2:12-13 So then, my beloved, even as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but **now much more in my absence**, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. 13 For **it is God Who works in you** both to will and to do according to *His* good pleasure.

Paul emphasized that the saints must work out their own salvation in the **absence** of an elder because it is GOD who works in us, not a man. This was certainly the case in my early years. I never even considered being on my own and had mistakenly come to rely upon the writings and sermons of ministers for my spiritual relationship with God.

This is **not** to say that preaching is bad or wrong or something to be avoided or despised. Quite the opposite. I would never have had the exposure to God's truth without some help because the Bible can be hard to decipher: "For precept *must be [built]* upon precept, precept *[built]* upon precept; line *[built]* upon line, line *[built]* upon line; here a little, there a little" (Isa. 28:10). For a new convert, it can be a daunting task. Paul understood this quite well, which is likely the reason he was such a prolific writer and teacher:

ROMANS 10:14-15, 17 How then shall they call on *Him in* Whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in *Him* of Whom they have not heard? And **how shall they hear without preaching?** 15 And how shall they preach, unless they be sent? Accordingly, it is written, "How beautiful *are* the feet of those who announce the gospel of peace, and those who announce the good news of good things!" ... 17 So then, faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing through *the* Word of God.

But did you notice verse 17? Faith comes by hearing but hearing comes from the **Bible**, which is the Word of God! So, preaching is first but it must be accompanied by an individual responsibility to have a personal knowledge of God's own truth because we are the children of—and our salvation comes from—God alone. So, written material and sermons are absolutely important, but knowing the Bible is more so. Having a strong biblical foundation is crucial to salvation because it is the basis for our relationship with God (along with prayer). All have read Acts 17:11 many times but read it again and notice the subsequent verse:

ACTS 17:11-12 Now *[the Bereans]* were more noble than those in Thessalonica, *for* they received the Word with all readiness of mind *and*

**examined the Scriptures** daily to see if these things were so. 12 **As a result, a great number of them believed**, including not a few of the honorable Greek women and men.

More Bereans were converted than of those in Thessalonica **because** they verified Paul's preaching in the Scriptures! So, obviously one role of an elder is to preach the gospel but examining Scripture is the only way to establish a sincere and deep relationship with God. It also prevents being us from being led into false teachings. If the preaching of an elder is God's truth, it will be in lock step with the Bible. This is a proof of an elder of God. Others are his fruits of the Holy Spirit and his good works.

It is interesting that the Bible uses two words to describe an elder's role of preaching: preach and teach. In the Greek, *preach* means evangelize, which simply means to proclaim the gospel of the coming kingdom of God. *Teach*, on the other hand, means just that—to educate or instruct. Preaching and teaching are the primary roles of a minister. This was, in fact, emphasized above all else by Jesus when He told the apostle Peter to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). Later, we find that the apostles took this to heart in Acts 6:2 where they appointed deacons to minister to the physical needs of the people so the apostles could focus on the Word of God. However, it is the responsibility of all to have their foundation in the Bible for all preaching and teaching.

Another obvious role of an elder is anointings. These can be for healing of spiritual or physical issues, baptisms, or ordinations. Marriage, too, is a function of an elder because a true marriage is founded upon vows to God where an elder is a mediator and witness of the marital covenant.

Elders also must deal with false teachers and those who cause dissensions. Anyone who preaches or teaches falsehoods or tries to use the saints for their own ends are to be confronted and properly dealt with, usually by denying them continued fellowship (at least until they truly repent). However, in the absence of an elder, mature converted men who are not elders can (and should) take up that responsibility. This was something Paul admonished the Corinthians about because they did not remove the man who committed fornication with his stepmother. He said:

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5 "*It is commonly reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—**allowing one to have his own father's wife**. 2 You are puffed up and did not grieve instead, so that **he who did this deed might be taken out of your midst**. ... 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **when you are gathered together**, and my spirit, together with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ 5 To **deliver such a one to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus."*

The roles of an elder are overseeing the spiritual needs of the saints. An elder is to zealously convince, admonish, encourage, and protect the saints in agape love, patience, and the truth of God (2 Tim. 4:2). This cannot be done by compulsion because each person is solely responsible for their own salvation. No elder can force someone to repent if they reject sound biblical doctrine. A love of truth comes only from God—it is impossible for an elder to force it upon someone.

1 PETER 5:1-3 *The elders who are among you I exhort, even as a fellow elder, and an eye witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker of the glory that is about to be revealed: 2 **Feed the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight not by compulsion, but willingly; not in fondness of dishonest gain, but with an eager attitude; 3 **Not as exercising lordship over your possessions; but by being examples to the flock of God.*****

Oversight simply means to diligently examine, be aware of, or inspect. To do this, an elder must love God and the brethren, be grounded in Scripture, a good listener, patient, and desirous that each child of God attain salvation. It also means he must be able to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14).

The above roles omit many of the things that we have become accustomed to and assumed are the sole purview of an elder. For example, is an elder required to hold Sabbath services? No! Every one of us can pray, study, sing psalms, and fellowship without one. Also, is **God's** Sabbath is “cancelled” if he is unavailable? Again, no! Is an elder required for brethren to have a Bible study? No! Why would we individually be expected to study the Bible but not allowed to study with other converted saints? Remember the Bereans? They went off and verified everything Paul taught.

While elders are responsible to God for preaching, teaching, and overseeing the saints, there are just not enough elders to go around these days but keeping the Sabbaths and holydays are still required of everyone by **God**. On the other hand, having a deep understanding of God's word from the Bible is absolutely necessary to avoid going “off course”, especially if we are isolated from God's people. So, it is good if everyone knows an elder they can contact. If not, they should call the main office and ask to talk with one. Everyone should also be comfortable talking with an elder, knowing that such discussions are kept private and no one is ever condemned (correction is not condemnation). Even elders talk to other elders and ask for prayers, discuss doctrine, or seek advice in dealing with situations. Remember, elders were once “babes” themselves.

Even though every elder is unique in how they fulfill their roles and have distinct gifts, some things are common to each one who is doing the work of God: they have a good understanding of Scripture (2 Tim. 3:14-17), are able to preach and teach (2 Tim. 2:24-25), love God and the brethren (Phil. 1:5), care for the widows and orphans (Jas. 1:27),

are available to answer questions, and desire fellowship with the brethren. In other words, elders serve the needs of God's children in humility and agape love.

May God's grace and peace be upon you!

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