**THE “RULE” OF ELDERS**

The Bible teaches that elders are to “rule” in a local church (1Tm.5:17; Hb.13:17). However, there is a great deal of misunderstanding as to the ***nature*** of their rule. Therefore, it would be wise for us to carefully consider this subject. As with many other Bible topics, there are extreme views on the rule of elders. Some believe the judgment of elders is unquestionable; hence, “to disobey the elders is to disobey God.” At the other extreme are those who would make elders subject to the will of the congregation (majority rule). Both of these extremes are wrong!

Elders certainly do not speak for God. “There is ONELawgiver” (Jm.4:12). God has not abdicated his throne. No man, or group of men, has the right to enact or repeal laws for God. Further, Peter warns elders against “being lords over” the flock (1Pt.5:3). This phrase suggests “to be master of, to subjugate, to overpower.” Elders do not make laws, nor can they “overpower” anyone to accept their judgments or personal whims.Some elders would do well to seriously consider this, for it has been a root of many evils! Rather, elders “rule” by virtue of their example. Hear Peter again: ***“nor as being lords*** over those entrusted to you, ***but being examples*** to the flock” (1Pt.5:3). Their example generates ***respect, influence, trust,*** and thus the ***submission***of the flock (v.5a). This kind of respect cannot be demanded by elders; it must be earned!

But, while elders aren’t “lords,” they also are not subject to the will of the church. God's plan calls for shepherds – qualified men of experience –to lead the sheep of the flock (1Pt.5:1-5; 1Tm.3:4-6). Sheep ***follow***shepherds; they do not lead shepherds! If elders must constantly ask the flock if certain judgments are agreeable with them, then they are not leaders, but followers. The Bible says, ***“Obey*** those who rule over you, and ***be submissive”*** (Hb.13:17). Even in 1 Peter 5:3, where Peter warns elders against “being lords over” the flock, there is, of necessity, a legitimate realm of “rule” implied. If elders have no “rule” at all, then this warning against the abuse of authority is absurd.

As previously noted, elders “rule” by virtue of the influence generated from their example (1Pt.5:3). So, it should not surprise us to find that, when selecting elders, we are told to look for exemplary men (1Tm.3:1-7; Tit.1:5-9). When a church selects men to be elders, there is an “implied understanding” to follow them. In effect, the church is saying, “We trust you with our care; please lead us.” While their decisions are not Divine decrees, if the flock appointed them to lead, then the flock should submit to their leadership! This is the Divinely-revealed method of oversight in a local church (Ac.14:23; 1Pt.5:1-5; 1Tm.5:17; Hb.13:17).

Joseph Thayer says that those who “rule over you” (Hb.13:17) do so by “leading as respects influence, controlling in counsel.” Furthermore, W.E. Vine says that the word “obey” in this passage suggests that one is “persuaded” by the counsel of these experienced men. Ruling by influence and persuasive counsel demands that elders maintain good communication with the flock*,* rather than being secretive about every aspect of their work. It may even be wise to seek input from the rest of the church – particularly for major undertakings or problems (e.g., Ac.6:1-7; Ac.15:4-29). Along with their own mature judgment, good elders will take the desires of the congregation into consideration; and then render decisions for the good of the flock, and in harmony with the Lord's will. This kind of “rule” will motivate the flock to follow. It also helps elders to avoid arbitrary rule (1Pt.5:3), which is a great temptation – especially in “matters of judgment.” *(And by the way, “matters of judgment” are the ONLY decisions elders CAN make, because “matters of the faith” have already been decided!)* That being said, there are also matters that need to be handled ***privately*** by elders (e.g., Jm.5:14-15; Ac.21:18-24)! This is not “being lords over” the flock, it is wisdom at work; and it can help keep problems to a minimum (cf. Pr.17:9; 25:8-10).

It is true that some elders have abused their “rule,” become “lords over” the church, and caused untold harm. But we simply must not allow abuses to cloud the issue of congregational government. The Bible is clear about this matter. It simply is not true that every decision that elders make without consulting the flock is tantamount to “being lords over” the flock. “Permission or lording” is a false dilemma! Of course, if elders fail to live or “rule” in harmony with God's will, they should be corrected, even removed, if necessary (1Tm.5:19-20; 2Th.3:6). The elders ***must*** be “over” the flock; but the flock ***must*** have and maintain Scriptural elders!

Greater dedication to the Lord would solve many of the ills that exist with respect to this issue. The truth lies between the extremes of arbitrary, inconsiderate rule of the elders (1Pt.5:3), and majority rule of the congregation (Hb.13:17). Let us thank God for those who understand this, and work to correct those who don’t.

--Lanny Smith