

## ELDERS IN THE ASSEMBLY (FAT)

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Whenever Paul states some doctrinal subject he always follows it with practical exhortations. In his epistles he constantly connects doctrine and practise. He had tremendous concern for the churches he founded. He had a love for those young converts and, consequently a deep desire for their well-being. He never founded a church and then went away saying, 'Now that's the end of that, I need not -be concerned any more about what goes on there. He was constantly thinking about them and when he founded a local assembly, through the power of the Holy Spirit, he also ensured that there was some government in that church. There may be some similarity, in Paul's mind, between the order in the synagogue and the arrangement for the local company of Christian believers but the New Testament order is that in every church there were to be elders and deacons. In the majority of cases Paul personally appointed them to be in charge of the church. In other cases he used his own delegates, such as Timothy, to perform that work. Whether he appointed elders in the church at Thessalonica we do not know; possibly Timothy did it on a visit there.

Paul gives full instructions to Timothy as to all the qualifications and characteristics that every elder must have and this is set out in such passages as the first epistle to Timothy and chapter 3. Paul clearly indicates the sort of men who could undertake and fulfil the work of leadership of the churches. He never regarded a Christian community as a democracy.

Democratic concepts, sadly, are followed in ecclesiastical spheres and in the political world as well. In much thinking today it is argued that all men should have a vote; all should take part in responsibility; all should have their own voice. That is quite foreign to the New Testament and Biblical teaching as a whole. God's concept is not of a democratic rule but of a theocracy and, ultimately, with Our Lord Jesus Christ as the Supreme Dictator. The church is not a democracy in which everyone has an equal voice and may say and do what he or she likes. There is government there and offices and people responsible to fulfil certain functions namely elders and deacons. Their qualifications could not be more clearly set out than they are in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1 and the passage we read from in 1 Thessalonians 5. Those who satisfy all the listed requirements are those who Paul would have appointed as elders or deacons in the local church. In some assemblies today there are the most unlikely individuals guiding and leading the local church who do not have all the scriptural qualifications and are therefore incapable of leading the church and should not be elders at all as scripturally they are not. It is vital that the right kind of leaders, elders and deacons, are leading local assemblies and no one should dare to take this responsibility upon their shoulders if they do not possess all and every qualification laid down by Scripture. Elders have a tremendous responsibility and wide field of activity. They are there primarily, of course, to feed the flock. This is one of our troubles today. We lack leadership in every area of society and certainly in local churches. This is because someone or other has thought leadership a fine thing; if he is a small man in business and has found a place in the assembly he can be a big man in a small pool. But such a man has no place there as a leader of the flock. He is neither qualified by God nor fitted by the Holy Spirit and, consequently, the whole assembly is suffering or will suffer. Ask yourself if your leaders are really fulfilling their responsibility? Do they have all the qualifications? Are they feeding the flock? I speak now to those of you who are elders; you who care for the saints. Are you feeding them, not only by public ministry but personally and privately as well? For example, do you put an arm around a young fellow and tell him the best books to read to guide him in his particular study? Is this the kind of care you have for all the flock? This is your responsibility. You are to care for them in every possible way. You will know when someone's heart is growing cold; when there is a danger of backsliding; when other things are a greater attraction than Christ Himself; when the temptations of the world are becoming too great. You will discern the spiritual condition; you will be in such close contact with the members of the local church and your heart will go out to those folk who have a need and you will come quietly with your own helping hand to raise, to restore and to inspire once again the love for Christ in the heart of that one whose love is waning — You will know

when a boy is in need of help in his secular studies; when a girl is attracted to an unconverted fellow and you will know what to do. As a leader of the church this is part of your responsibility.

For those of you who are not elders look at those men in your assembly who are. If they meet all the scriptural qualifications and are fulfilling their responsibilities, esteem them highly for their work's sake.

In 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 12, Paul says that elders are recognised if they comply with God's precise pattern. Elders labour among the local company and maintain discipline in the church. They are loving, caring, gentle and feed the flock so that no one is hungry or dissatisfied. That being so in your assembly, then give them your respect and your esteem. Do we always do this? Those who are leaders and genuinely made so by the Holy Spirit, who have all the scriptural qualifications those to whom we ought to pay our respect.

Verse 13 tells us to esteem them very highly not because of their personal attributes but for their fair and faithful work for Christ which is evidently not for their own ends. If your brethren are such godly men do you show them love or is there sometimes carping criticism?

In the section of this epistle Paul places esteem for elders first. If they are not doing their work they will not attract respect and the following of all the sheep. The whole conduct of the local assembly is consequently dependent on the elders attitude and their work. It must be said that a poor elderhood would be very detrimental to a local company of believers. I wonder whether in 99 cases out of 100 a poor or divided assembly is due to the character of the elders. Their attitude and character will inevitably be reflected in the church. The standards of the assembly will be set by the elders. Indeed this is true in every realm of life.

The question is often asked as to how an assembly selects an elder to replace one who has left if and when there is a need for a replacement. The answer is clear. A brother with all the qualifications and who is fulfilling the work is recognised by what he is doing and not by some office that he takes or is invited to take. There may be those who do not attend oversight meetings but they may be doing the work of an elder and have all the scriptural qualifications. Being an elder is not an official appointment which makes them known. It is the fact that they are doing the work being qualified to do so. Some of the best elders do not attend business meetings which are primarily concerned with the painting of the hall and things of that character. Part of the functions of the elders would be to pray together about all members of the flock; to study the Word together. If they do not do this then something vital is missing. An oversight is, in many assemblies, really composed of deacons discussing what is to be done with the money, what colour to paint the hall and that kind of thing. That is the work of the diaconate.

Paul says that the Holy Ghost makes elders (Acts 20 verse 28) and if Christ is recognised as the Head of the Church then there is no problem about the rule of God in the assembly which is what is meant by theocracy. Elders are given the abilities and qualifications from the Lord Himself as indicated in Ephesians 4. Deacons are, however, appointed by the church to serve the church.

If there are those who aspire to elders work and are neither fully qualified nor fulfilling that work then they ought to desist. If an elder, is under pressure of some sort or another, and is, through no fault of his own, unable to fulfil the work, he can stand down as an elder temporarily. Better he do that than the assembly suffer. Elders who are not qualified or fulfilling their responsibilities should desist altogether. There are some assemblies which are blighted, if that is not too strong a word; because they are led by ungifted men even though some of them may be well-intentioned. Some of us may know of cases where a man, who had a godly father and was on the oversight, aspired to be an elder too and it is expected of him. There are elders who have not had children of their own or even been married; some are not apt to teach; others have a most undiplomatic attitude. One may attempt to do the work or may enjoy the position and prestige of being an elder but such a man will hinder the progress of the company. And there will not be peace. An elder, lacking in any of these qualifications and gifts, should

not be an elder and, if he seeks to obey the Lord and has the welfare of the assembly at heart, will desist from being an elder. There will not be peace in the assembly until he does.

I have known elders who should not have ever been elders.

One elder, of whom I am aware, used to make decisions without any discussion with his fellow elders. Another elder, whose son, even when he was fifteen years of age, sat on his mother's lap in assembly meetings and his mother was a notorious gossip. I am thinking of a group of elders who used trickery to sack another elder because they were jealous of his gifts and made up all sorts of lies about him and said that he was out of step but did not explain what this meant. There was a very strict assembly in the south of England, but when an elder had grandchildren he allowed a Christmas tree in the assembly's area of worship and a young brother who was his son-in-law, to have the children and sisters sit on his knee since he was Father Christmas. An assembly in Lanarkshire, who sat in a circle for the breaking of bread, were concerned with the short skirts of the girls and young women and, instead of the elders or their wives dealing with this, the elders erected modesty screens to prevent improper views. An elder at an assembly, who felt that he was the best elder, boycotted a baptism in his assembly when he had previously promised to be there. He stayed away because the candidate elected another elder to perform the baptism and the infuriated elder and his wife sat in the congregation of another meeting. I know of an elder who interfered in three proposed remarriages and travelled the country to try to prevent these marriages taking place saying that marriage to a divorced person is not allowed. A mature elder in a meeting, who was married but had no children, used to be at the door of the assembly to welcome the members and visitors. Often he would greet the girls and young women by putting his arm around their waists and sometimes his arm was a little lower. The women complained to another elder who took the matter up at an elders meeting and was sacked!

All these men should not have been elders. They were not spiritual. They were a disgrace. They are not examples to their flock. But how can the assembly dismiss them? Will it not cause a split? There are elders who believe in autonomy that a member of their assembly who has been badly treated cannot seek help from any other assembly and who say that even if their decision is wrong it still stand and all the other members must accept this.. Some assemblies have elders or an elder who is or are empire builders, a Diotrephes and, often, there is a Mrs Diotrephes.

Paul sets out such a warning, or exhortation in verse 13, 'Be at peace among yourselves'. Is there someone striving as an elder when he is unqualified to be so? Is there disagreement? Of course, the principle also applies in a far wider sphere. The characteristics of all Christians should be a quiet tranquillity, a freedom from strife, a happiness with one another in fellowship and a love that is shown practically and spiritually to one another.

In verse 14 Paul writes, 'We beg you, brethren, warn them that are unruly.' It is not just the responsibility of elders to warn the unruly but the whole assembly. Unruly means disorderly; it is a soldier who breaks rank causing the army to be in disarray. But you can not warn such a one unless you clearly show him exactly what his error is and prove it. Just because you disagree with someone or may not like him does not mean he is unruly. Clearly, in the case here, it is someone who has got tired of working and thrown in his secular job saying that the Lord Jesus Christ is coming soon so, in waiting for Him, there is no need to be concerned about a job, or, perhaps, anything else for that matter. This is what is meant here by being out of step; one who is not pulling their weight. Such are to be warned and such responsibility lies not merely with the elders but the whole assembly. Warn and admonish people of that character; and it is to be done by the whole assembly not just the elders. Clearly the admonitions are public not privately reserved for the elders and the disorderly one.

Paul goes on to say, 'Encourage the faint-hearted'. These are they that have little courage in themselves; they are fearful of the Way and, perhaps, life itself seeing all the problems. Go to such a one and encourage them. Tell them of all that God has done and will do. Assure them of God's love and care

which He has promised and that God cannot break His promises. By your positive attitude and inspiration the faint-hearted will receive courage and stand for the Lord.

‘Support the weak’, continues Paul. These are those who see the temptations of life and resort to old practises and indulge in old desires.

‘Strengthen the weak’ is the next instruction. There may not be the same temptations today but there are many things that offend the eye such as magazines, hoardings and television. If you are not careful that weakness will blossom into a large problem and serious habit. Strengthen those faced with that situation. It takes strength to avoid every appearance of evil.

We are also told to be patient to all. Be tender, sympathetic, kind and patient. Not merely towards just those in the assembly but to people outside. There is an alarming tendency for some assemblies to be so autonomous that they avoid people and other Christians. There is never any justification for a Christian to avoid another.

When we come to verse 15 we must remember that the law of retaliation in the Old Testament is so different from the New Testament. A Christian does not recompense evil for evil. If you belong to Christ then He is your pattern. The manner in which Our Lord acted is the way we will act. Where there has been discontent or a disagreement the pattern of Christ is that the parties concerned make reconciliation. Often we are so sure that we are right and the fault is with the other person. Whoever is wrong, matters between Christians must be put right. Follow that which is good. That must be right.

‘Rejoice evermore’ says verse 16. You may ask how can I always rejoice? You are to rejoice in God. If your life is in the hands of God then you are safe and have much to rejoice in. There will be that tranquillity of soul whereby we can look, by faith, into the face of God and say, ‘Lord, it looks dark; the way is difficult; the sorrow and pain is great; things are not going my way; life is unfair but I can rejoice in that Thou art the One who is in control. I know Thy Will for me is for my good.’

In the next verse Paul says, ‘Pray without ceasing’. The trouble is that some brethren do! They even tell God things which they seem to think God does not know. Some prayers quote Scriptures and are really ministry! This expression of the apostle Paul does not refer to the length of prayer but the characteristic of life in that prayer is made in every circumstance, condition and difficulty of life. If one is a Christian one cannot live without Christ. Cultivate a sense of communion with God Himself in all the details of life. Indeed, in everything give thanks.

Another instruction is to abstain from all appearance of evil (verse 22). There are certain things the world does that the Christian does not do. The Lord Jesus trod a line of separation. Anything that hinders your Christian life is to be avoided. Separation cost the Lord a lot. He never tolerated anything that might hinder His communion with God. The path of the exemplar is the path of the follower as well.

And in all these things the elders are there to set the example and maintain the standard that the Lord has so clearly indicated in His Word. Elders are ruled by Christ and governed by Scripture. It is that which enables them to be spiritual guides to the local assembly and to be equitable in all their dealings with the flock.

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