The Oversight of Elders

(by Harry Pickup, Jr.)

The oversight of churches of Christ has been assigned to godly and mature Christians who are called in the New Testament by the names bishop, elder or presbyter. Such men are not officers in the real meaning of the word. They are simply mature Christians who by virtue of outstanding successful Christian lives are able to exercise influence and leadership over other Christians. These men are those who recognize the need for and qualifications of bishops and who prepare themselves accordingly. The New Testament lays down specific qualifications to fulfill the work, which these men are assigned by God to do. Christians recognize those who meet the divine standard and ask such men to *"watch for their souls.”*

Elders are godly men whose influence is great because of their spiritual maturity. They command our respect because of what they do. They are not entitled to submission because of an office which they hold but rather because of duties which they perform because of qualifications they possess. The Holy Spirit has enjoined upon us the necessity ***“to know them that labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them exceedingly highly in love for their work's sake”*** (**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13**). We are to acknowledge those who labor among us who are over us in the Lord and who admonish us in our duties as Christians.

Even though these men have unusually high qualification, they are not qualified to rule in matters of faith. When they attempt to do it, they attempt to do what even apostles could not do. The apostle, Paul, informed the Corinthians, ***"Not that we have lordship*** ***over your faith, but are helpers of your joy"*** (**2 Corinthians 1:24**). No one but God determines what one must believe. No one but inspired men reveal what God ordained men are to believe. No one but qualified men have the right to proclaim *"the faith"* by which we are saved. The responsibility of elders needs to be re-studied because of apparent ignorance on the subject.

**1. The fact of it.** The Holy Spirit made men overseers of a church of Christ. Elders are made overseers just as men are made Christians—by obeying the word of truth. The Holy Spirit has outlined their work and revealed their qualifications. When they meet the qualifications, Christians then have the right to ask them to assume the responsibility. Bishops oversee the working together of Christians for the furtherance of the gospel. ***“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God upon all my remembrance of you, always in every supplication of mine on behalf of you all making my supplication with joy, for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now”*** (**Philippians 1:1-5**). Whatever it is that Christians do together in fellowship as a local church, elders oversee.

**2. The what of it.** Elders watch in behalf of the souls of Christians. In the day of judgment, God shall hold them accountable for this responsibility. The fact that they will have to give an account for what they have done in this regard sobers them and points out the seriousness of their duty. Christians are admonished to obey them that have the rule over us and submit to them (**Hebrews 13:17**). Since elders do not rule in matters of faith, they are limited to oversee in matters of expediency. They apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to the given needs of Christians. Elders tend the flock of God. ***“The elders among you I exhort, who am a fellow-elder, & a witness of the sufferings of Christ, who am also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight, not of constraint, but willingly, according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock. And*** ***when the chief Shepherd shall be manifested, ye shall receive the crown of glory that fadeth not away”*** (**1 Peter 5:1-4**). They exercise their oversight ***"not of constraint but willingly according to the will of God; nor yet for filthy lucre but of a ready mind."*** They do not exercise lordship and authority as men in government do (**Matthew 20:25**). They rule over the church as a father rules over his house and lead Christians as the schoolmaster leads the pupil. The flock which they oversee is, of course, a local church. The local church is the cooperation of Christians in the God-ordained purposes of work and worship. What Christians do in this fellowship, elders oversee. When Christians sent money to be distributed among the needy of a church, it was sent to elders (**Acts 11:30**). Since elders oversee whatever the local church does and since the church was called upon to make decisions in such things as discipline (**I Corinthians 5:3f**) and selection of messengers (**1 Corinthians 16:3**) and the sending of funds to the support of gospel preachers (**Philippians 4:15**), it necessarily follows that elders must have overseen this. The New Testament authorizes elders to oversee the work of a local church. It would be unscriptural for elders to delegate oversight of such work either to a purely human institution or to another church of Christ.

It has been shown in the study of this point that elders watch for souls and therefore are primarily concerned about spiritual affairs. Elders do not oversee Christians in their secular affairs except and insofar as those affairs affect the Christians' relationship to God. For example, it is true that elders do not rule over homes and schools. But some material matters do come under the oversight of elders because such are governed by ***"the righteousness of God."*** For example, the church is *"charged"* to relieve certain widows (**1 Timothy 5:16**). Inasmuch as elders are commanded to ***"take care of the church,"*** of necessity elders would oversee the church's relieving these widows. Whatever is involved in the relief of widows indeed falls under the category of taking care of the church. It is as unscriptural for elders to delegate this phase of *"taking care of the church of God"* to a benevolent institution, as it would be for them to delegate such taking care of to a missionary institution in the matter of evangelization. A new teaching regarding the oversight of elders & benevolence has arisen in the last generation among Christians. This new teaching is that elders cannot oversee the benevolent responsibilities which are charged to the church. This teaching flies in the face of the plain revelation of God's word that elders are charged with overseeing whatever the church is authorized to do. If this teaching gains a great deal of hold, it will make the church only a subsidiary to human institutions. It might also be well to note at this juncture that the church's benevolent charge is much narrower, more restricted than many have imagined.

**3. Scope of their oversight.** Paul and Silas ***"ordained elders in every church"*** (**Acts 14:23**). Elders are to tend only the flock which is among them (**I Peter 5:2**). The scope of their oversight is prescribed and that which does not fall within this scope is proscribed. The nature of their work precludes the possibility of being able to oversee more than one church. Each church of Christ is independent from every other church of Christ on earth. Christians are in fellowship with every other Christian but the fellowship of churches is a thing unknown in the New Testament. The beginning of pyramidal authority was and is elders serving over more than one church. Man cannot improve on God's plan. In view of the Scriptures on this point, it is absolutely inconceivable that one brother who has recently produced a book designed *"to ease tensions"* could conclude, *"Elders of one church are authorized to make decisions on behalf of other churches even without their permission."* The gap of apostasy is widening. In another place, this brother speaks of elders delegating authority to other churches. He fails to understand that elders only oversee and direct those in the local church. It is unscriptural to voluntarily delegate oversight to another congregation. The only fellowship over which elders may rule is the working together of Christians in a local church. It is unscriptural for them to rule over the working together of churches. The local church must be sure that the task it performs falls within that which God has assigned.