Seek Ye First...

"...the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).

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THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

Jeff Sweeten

"Eldering" is both blessing and burden. Many have argued (correctly, I believe) that a church rarely transcends its eldership and the apostasy churches are experiencing today reflects poor leadership. Many elders do not know their Bible well enough to "feed the flock" (Acts 20:28), "pray over" the sick (James 5:14) or, especially, "convict the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9, ASV). As memberships lose their weak for lack of pursuit and invite innovations into worship for lack of knowledge, elders abdicate their leadership responsibilities to "pastors" and "youth ministers." Confidence levels in our elderships have dipped to an all-time low and many churches have begun to abandon them for the popular pastor hierarchy of community church models; and the "people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?" (Jeremiah 5:31). Faithful Christians who love the truth, however, will not accept alternatives to God's divine arrangement for church government; and there are still "seven thousand... who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal (Romans 11:4).

Finding good elders has understandably become increasingly difficult, especially when one considers the mood of the nation in regard to submission. Respect for authority is passé; the notion of subjecting oneself to any law other than self is mocked across the entire spectrum of our society from our institutions of "higher education" to our urban, gang subcultures. Little wonder that those few qualified men who courageously accept the responsibility of shepherding a flock do so with great trepidation. They recognize the signs of the times and steel themselves for resistance, rejection, and outright rebellion from egomaniacal members steeped in self-service. To be sure, this worldly "me-first" mentality is not new to God's people (cf. 1 Samuel 8:5; Isaiah 30:10) but the latest rash of this "my-way-or-the-highway" attitude has, in the manner of old times, seeped into the church from "all the nations" around us (1 Samuel 8:5) like a toxic sludge that poisons pure minds to the truth of an eldership's purpose and authority.

The Hebrew writer addressed what must have been a similar and current concern in his day, and he was explicit in chapter thirteen concerning the role an elder plays when he stated: "Remember them which have the rule over you..." (v. 7) and "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (v. 17). Peter, also an elder, calls the position one of "oversight" (1 Peter 5:2, all emphasis JDS). Obviously, these three references do not allow elders to change divinely decreed, obligatory matters, i.e., they cannot modify salvation to omit baptism or endorse "faith only." However, these scriptures do make it perfectly clear in simple language that elders have divine authority in matters of expediency. Further, we are to submit to our elders' oversight, the expression of which is specified as obedience!

The New Testament provides an example of church government and Luke records the transition from inspired apostles to authorized elderships. Official church matters were dealt with in a timely fashion with divine sanction. When physical needs arose in the church at Jerusalem, funds were "laid... at the apostles' feet" (4:37) and when Grecian widows were "neglected in the daily ministration" (6:1), "the twelve" called the church together to dispatch a solution. It was not long, however, before "dissension and disputation" was brought "unto the apostles and elders" for solution (15:2), "and the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter" (v. 6). Couriers then "delivered them (churches of Christ) the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders" (16:4, all emphasis JDS). So, the mantle of authority began to pass from apostles to elders. As persecution scattered disciples everywhere (Acts 8:4), churches planted by missionaries organized after the Jerusalem pattern and Paul's epistles not only reference "the overseers and deacons" (Philippians 1:1, ESV), but also articulate the appointing of and qualifications of those who would carry on this noble work (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). In fact, it can be forcefully argued that a church without elders is lacking (Titus 1:5).

No one has the right to "improve" on God's divine plan. "Elders in every church" (Acts 14:23) with members (including individual elders) in submission to the eldership (Hebrews 13:7, 17) is the divine pattern. Upon this, we cannot improve.

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Seek Ye First...

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Our Purpose

The editors of *Seek Ye First* produce this biblical journal to provide scriptural material dealing with the issues that are currently affecting our families, our nation and the world. Our intent is to challenge souls to return to the "old paths" (Jeremiah 6:16) for their sole source of authority in religious matters. Our policy is to speak as the oracles of God (1 Peter 4:11), encouraging people to study to show themselves approved unto God, enabling them to rightly divide the word (2 Timothy 2:15). We make every effort to deal boldly with the issues that confront Christianity, with no apology, and strive to do so "speaking the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

THE QUALIFICATIONS OF AN ELDER

Tom Moore

A very vital aspect of the eldership touches the qualifications that these men must possess. It is also important to realize that the Lord never said that an elder had to possess every one of these qualifications to perfection but must, to some extent, possess all of the qualifications. The qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-11. We will break down the qualifications for an elder into four categories.

Experiences of Life

Experience of Life is the first category we will investigate. An elder must be "apt to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). The word "apt" suggests that one is intelligent, informed, and knowledgeable. One who is apt to teach is one who is willing and able to teach. A shepherd must also hold "to the faithful word which is according to the teaching" (Titus 1:9). This qualification is perhaps a commentary on being apt to teach. The primary duty of elders, the watching over and protecting the flock of God, requires that they be students of the Scriptures, having a broad knowledge of what is and what is not sound doctrine. An overseer must be able to "exhort in the sound doctrine and to convict the gainsayers" (Titus 1:9). Elders must possess an accurate and extensive knowledge of holy truth. An eldership not having sufficient ability in the Scriptures is unequal to such a task set before him. A bishop is not to be a "novice" (1 Timothy 3:6). He is not to be a new convert, but one who is mature in the faith. The term carries the idea of age and experience.

Domestic Relations

Domestic Relations are another important category of an elder's qualifications. An elder must be "the husband of one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2). Literally in the Greek it is "a man of one woman." An elder is to be scripturally married to one wife. He is to have "children that believe" (Titus 1:6). There is some debate on this, but I believe "children" may be used in the singular or the plural. His children must be baptized believers. A pastor must "ruleth well his own house" (1 Timothy 3:4), for "if a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God" (1 Timothy 3:5)? Inspiration makes this point clear. A shepherd must have "his children in subjection with all gravity" (1 Timothy 3:4), children "who are not accused of riot or unruly" (Titus 1:6). An elder's wife must "be grave, not slanderous, temperate, faithful in all things" (1 Timothy 3:11). An elder's wife can ruin his reputation and hinder his work. Therefore she must be a faithful, self-controlled Christian wife who is not a gossip.

Habits of Life

There is certain Habits of Life that an elder must possess. He must be "temperate" (1 Timothy 3:2) or "vigilant" (KJV). The Greek word is nepho, which means to abstain from wine (or, keep sober), is used figuratively in the New Testament to mean discreet, sober, watchful and alert. Thus an elder is

to be watchful and alert, and avoid anything that will dull his senses as he shepherds the flock of God. An overseer must be "orderly" (1 Timothy 3:2) or of "good behavior (KJV). The Greek word is kosmios, from which we get our word cosmos, and means orderly – having a well-ordered demeanor, and an orderly fulfillment of all duties. An elder is not to be a "brawler" (1 Timothy 3:3) or "not given to wine" (KJV). The American Standard Version's footnote reads, "not quarrelsome over wine." A qualified elder does not drink alcohol.

Character

Finally, let us consider Character as a vitally important category in an elder's qualifications. Pastors "must have good testimony from them which are without" (1 Timothy 3:7). He must have a good reputation in the community. He must be "without reproach" (1 Timothy 3:2) or "blameless" (KJV). He must have unquestionable integrity, not sinless perfection. A bishop is to be "just" (Titus 1:8) - upright, reliable, honest, ethical, and fair. He must also be "sober-minded" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus1:8) - sound in mind, not under the control of passion. A shepherd must be "holy" (Titus 1:8) - devoted and separated to God. He must be faithful in all his duties to God. An elder must be a "lover of good" (Titus 1:9) or "of good men" (KJV). A man holding the office of an elder should love every good thing and be ever ready to promote good. An overseer must be "given to hospitality" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). He must be courteous, friendly, and enjoy having people in their home. This is a wonderful way to get to know the members and their needs.

A pastor must be "self-controlled" (Titus 1:8) or "temperate" (KJV) – having control over all his passions and desires. He is not to be "a striker" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7) - not hotheaded, contentious or quarrelsome. A bishop is not to be "greedy of filthy lucre" (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). He is not to be a lover of money, or covetous. An elder must not be "self-willed" (Titus 1:7). He should not be dominated by self-interest. A shepherd must not be "soon angry" (Titus 1:7). One who is quick to "fly off the handle" will make rash statements and judgments that will be detrimental to the church. He must not loose his temper quickly. He must also be "gentle" (1 Timothy 3:3). He must not be harsh, but gentle in nature, polite, courteous, and peaceful. An elder must not be "contentious" (1 Timothy 3:3) or a "brawler" (KJV). Inspiration considered a bad temper to be such a terrible flaw for an elder to possess that it is mentioned in three different ways in their qualifications. He must not have a factious and quarrelsome spirit.

Conclusion

These are not take it or leave it qualifications – an elder must possess all of them. An elder must have all these qualifications - not to perfection, but possessing each quality. These qualifications are not a combined group qualification – but must be possessed individually.

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Theme This Issue:

ELDERS IN THE CHURCH

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THE WORK OF ELDERS

Michael Light

Some biblical doctrines and concepts can only be fully appreciated by looking closely at what the specific words chosen by God to describe them express. For instance, baptism can only truly be understood when properly defined. The same is true when it comes to the eldership. The very words the Lord chose to employ in relation to these men convey much meaning as to the works they are expected to do.

It is a sad truth that far too many elders do not fulfill what God desires them to accomplish in their work with the local congregations over which they serve. It is our hope that this article will help express what the duties of elders are. While we cannot express every imaginable situation in which elders may find themselves, we can look at the terms the Lord used to illustrate the primary works elders are to do.

There are six English words used in the King James Version of the scripture to translate the three different Greek terms originally given. There is some variation in number of uses in variant texts – I will be working from the KJV only in this article. Regardless of version used, the meanings of the terms are the same.

The English words are: elder, bishop, presbyter, overseer, shepherd and pastor. These are all derivatives of the Greek terms, *presbuteros*, *episkopos*, and *pomein*. To get an accurate idea of what these words actually mean we will quote from, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, by Bullinger. Notice the definitions and the inherent works that are found in each.

One Greek term, *presbuteros*, from which we get the word elder, addresses the age of the men being considered. The word itself mean older, and carries the idea of possessing wisdom. The word is used in the noun form over fifty times in the New Testament. It may appear to be a small thing, but elders should be older men. The word carries that meaning. It seems to be in vogue to put young men in as elders today. These men do not meet the qualification of being mature (chronologically). The experience of life is hard to over value (elders are not to be novices).

From this same term we get the English word presbytery (group of ages men) or presbyter (an old men). While this word specifically addresses age, it is applied to the aged men that meet the qualifications of being elders in the church.

The Greek term *episkopos*, is translated bishop as well as overseer. The term bishop means, "watching over, or taking care of." We again see an aspect of the work of the bishops. They are to pay attention to the members of the local congregation. When a member of the congregation begins to grow weak in the faith the bishops should notice and take the proper actions to insure the welfare of the member. This term also carries the idea of dignity being connected to the men who hold the office - a dignity of character possessed by each man in the office.

The English word overseer has basically the same meaning. Special emphasis is placed on the watching aspect of the office. The word was used in Athens to describe an ambassador who was sent to watch over subdued territories. In the New Testament it denotes the watchful care they are to exercise in the church. Again the duties of the elders are clearly seen in the words used to define them.

The final Greek term is *pomein.* We get the English words shepherd and pastor from it. The word shepherd is a tender expression of the work of the elders; one who tends, feeds, leads, cherishes, guides and protects the flock. I pray that all elders everywhere do possess these characteristics. Members should love and appreciate elders who love and protect their souls.

The word pastor is misused in our day (usually applied to denominational preachers). But the Bible uses it to refer to the highest office in the church, servant of all. Notice Bullinger's comments on *pomein*, "a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks, not merely one who feeds, but one who tends, guides, nourishes, cherishes, and rules (Eph. 4:11)."

When we combine the different words used for the office of an elder and we note the meanings of each, we get a beautiful almost poetic picture of the men to which the Lord entrusted the church, His bride. We have a group of older wise men that possess dignity, oversee and love each member of the congregations they serve. These are men who put the well being of others ahead of their own interests. Men who will sacrifice to help every member of the Lord's church get to heaven. May each elder in the brotherhood strive to live up to everything the terms to describe them convey.

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THE ELDER-PREACHER RELATIONAHIP

David Harris

God gives us qualifying marks that a man (male) must attain BEFORE he is to be appointed to this very important shepherding role in God's divine plan of organization. Because of the tremendous responsibility associated with the oversight of the church, one should be able to comprehend that a man cannot do the work of an elder, if he does not qualify accordingly.

These men must have personality traits that would show Jesus Christ living in them. Even if a man knew all the facts of the Bible and could not show Christ in himself, in his daily walk – this man is not the man God has in mind. God's man would and must meet all the requirements of scripture. A sad commentary on the selection of many elders is that they meet some of the qualifications and memberships suppose the other qualifications will come in time. This is a mistake.

One of the greatest mistakes in the brotherhood is a failure of the congregation to carefully consider the qualifying conditions God has set forth and appoint a man anyway, just because he is a "good businessman." This is to ignore the commandments of God concerning his church and it is to invite disaster. We should learn from those "things written aforetime" (Romans 15:4). Most, if not all, of the failures of Israel were due to the ungodly leadership of God's people.

The Holy Spirit through the Hebrew writer tells us that men meeting these qualifications, who are appointed, will rule their respective congregations; "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow considering the end of their conversation" (Hebrews 13:7). They cannot be overbearing, nor abusive with this power, "Neither being lords over God's heritage" (1 Peter 5:3). Elders cannot make laws for God; they must lead where God has made our paths. The preacher must never forget that he is under this "ruling leadership."

The eldership is always spoken of in a plurality. There is no such thing as a one elder system, or a head elder, or one elder acting alone in an "outlaw fashion." The eldership is to direct the congregation within what God has authorized in scripture. When elders make decisions that are in harmony with the word and will of God, then we (preachers included) are obligated to submit to that authority. They make decisions concerning who will preach and what is preached. This should be a very important decision for an eldership because they will ultimately be responsible for the truth or error that is taught. Working under the oversight of an eldership, should also be a very important decision for a preacher to make. A preacher needs to know that the men leading God's flock are faithful, spiritual suppliers of God's bread of life.

Much blame can be thrown at the unfaithful preacher for perverting the gospel. No man has the right to alter, pervert, or fail to preach the "whole council of God," and spineless preachers will be eternally damned for doing so. But the ultimate responsibility for the unfaithful message brought to the ears of the congregation rests on the elders.

Many times it is not the preacher that is the one who is trying to promote unrighteousness, and "smooth things, and deceit" (Isaiah 30:10); it is the eldership that is demanding it, and the preacher is just feeding what the shepherds are supplying. Many elders are more concerned with the number of persons in the pew, and the number of dollars in the contribution plate, than they are with the eternal salvation of souls that have been entrusted to them. They have forgotten the qualifications of God, and their responsibility to those qualifications that put them in the leadership role. Unfaithful elders forget one of the great responsibilities of a shepherd is to guard, keeping the sheep away from the wolves (Acts 20:29-31). "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch...." Sadly, some elders are leading the sheep directly to the wolves. Any preacher that would preach for an eldership such as this is only preaching for the money, and it makes no difference how one tries to justify it, it is damnable.

In many respects, the relationship of the preacher of a local congregation, with the elders, is much like that of a marriage. The head of the wife is the husband, the head of the husband is Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:23). The whole marriage is marred if Christ is not in the picture. The head over the preacher is the eldership, and the head over the eldership is the Chief Elder Himself – Christ. The church will never flourish any other way.

Thank God everyday for good elders. Pray for them, encourage them, help them, and obey them in the Lord.

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THE ELDER-DEACON RELATIONSHIP

Michael Light

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Lord's church is its organization. Perhaps we need to stress this fact more often than we do. The manner in which God decided to govern the church is just as important as the plan of salvation and proper worship. The religious world has ignored most of the Bible's doctrines. In the area of organization they have become quite creative. They have invented synods, councils, dioceses, and districts. They have created man-made, non-biblical titles for these officers such as cardinals, archbishops, popes, priests, and on and on. Unfortunately, God's simple Divinely authorized plan has gone unnoticed by many (Jeremiah 10:23; 6:16; Hebrews 1:1-2). While other articles in this issue deal with the definitions of who and what elders are, this one will look at a single aspect of the work of the bishops of the body of Christ.

One of the most important relationships in the local congregation is that which exists between elders and deacons. There certainly seems to be a dearth in the land when it comes to good elders and deacons (qualified and properly functioning). Some congregations seem to attempt to carry out their work with deacons actually doing the job of elders while the elders do virtually nothing. Other congregations do just the opposite: the elders attempt to do everything and delegate nothing to the deacons. Neither of these situations is acceptable to the Lord of hosts.

God has spoken concerning the work of the church and what it takes to carry out in full what God desires. A working set of elders and deacons is imperative to the proper mechanism of the church. There is a vast difference between the work of the two. Elders have authority over matters of expediency. Deacons on the other hand have no authority over the congregation at all.

Sometimes well meaning, but ignorant (or perhaps just imprecise), prayer leaders say things like, "bless the elders and deacons of this congregation as they make decisions...." Deacons are not leaders of the congregation in that sense. While wise elders will (or probably should) ask the deacons views on various aspects of the work (remember, deacons are faithful men who meet a high standard of religious maturity – therefore their insights are valuable); it is the elders who must make the decisions concerning how the local congregation will carry out the obligations God has laid upon us.

Scripturally organized congregations have a plurality of elders and deacons (sadly, some congregations have a plurality of men in the eldership but one man runs the whole show - such is not scriptural). The elders oversee the work of the congregation as well as the souls of each and every individual member; the deacon's work as special servants (trusted – due to scriptural qualifications – men you can count on).

The word "deacon" in the Greek language means: minister, servant, waiter or attendant. The specific qualifications of deacons are found in 1 Timothy 3:8-13:

> Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre; Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless. Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things. Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

The work of elders and deacons is different and they must work together for a congregation to function at its best. Deacons are essential and in Acts 6, we have the first mention of deacons (not necessarily the office but the function). The deacons took care of an important work (caring for the widows) so as to allow the apostles the time to continue to teach the gospel. A parallel today would be the deacons caring for building maintenance so as to allow the elders' time to spend in teaching, preaching or planning some evangelistic program.

Elders should assign each deacon specific areas of work so as to help the deacons be as effective in the service of the Lord as possible. It should also be pointed out that deacons do not have to do all of the work of a given congregation. They may rightly delegate certain things to other faithful members. For instance, a particular deacon could be given the charge from the elders to take care of the Bible class program for a year (the deacon certainly would not teach every class). He would line up all the teachers for a certain quarter; the deacon would then be responsible for selecting teachers and perhaps materials as well (both very important jobs with eternal consequences).

I would hope that as members of the Lord's church (who do not serve as elders or deacons), we might have a greater appreciation for those who serve in an office for the congregations where we attend. Let's do our best to encourage both. And let's encourage our young men to strive to become elders and deacons when they reach maturity.

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TRAINING FUTURE ELDERS

Jeff Sweeten

Few great men became great overnight. Humorist Mark Twain once stated, "A man can seldom -- very, very, seldom -- fight a winning fight against his training; the odds are too heavy." The men of our congregations are in training – that is a fact – but whether it will be for greatness or failure in service to God, only time will tell. The future elders of churches of Christ are being developed as I write and the leadership of the Lord's body remains an open question. Who will lead us in upcoming battles for truth? Who will nurture the future family of God? Who will blaze tomorrow's trails into the church's uncharted challenges? It will be men who are trained today for leadership tomorrow.

Looking up in a panic and realizing that no one is ready to take the helm is a morale-buster for a Christian fellowship. Churches readily recognize the need for elders but rarely plan for them by training men for this office. We must adopt the approach that it is never too early to start training future elders (Proverbs 22:6).

Training should begin at a young age, cultivating positive perceptions of elders. We dangle heroes before our young people in the form of athletes, statesmen, and such like but when is the last time you remember an elder being held up as a role model? A healthy respect for and honor of elders by parents in the presence of their children will help instill a deep-seated admiration for the position of elder (Ephesians 6:2-3). When the Sunday lunch table talk centers on the shortcomings of church leadership, we cannot honestly expect children to aspire to church oversight. Christian parents need to impress upon their children the great honor due to those who serve as elders in our churches, "counted worthy of double honour" (1 Timothy 5:17).

As these adolescents mature, we must encourage Jr. High- and High School-aged boys to think beyond the present and "remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1a). Sports, scholastics, and social standing are all a part of the transition from boys to men but a healthy dose of concern for the church's future must also be a part of their well-balanced development. Choices they make today and priorities they set during these formative years are forecasts of spirituality to come. The parent- and peer-pressure to put extra curricular events in front of spiritual events can be met and mastered and serve as a proving ground for spiritual maturity. Helping them make right choices in the face of today's temptations will pay rich dividends for tomorrow's church. The position they play, the college they attend, or the car they drive will have less impact on their effectiveness as future leaders than an early development of their level of dedication to and willingness to sacrifice for the Lord's work.

Training a future elder also includes steering a young man towards a woman that will be strong, supportive, and spiritual where her husband's Christianity is concerned. The futile fantasy of landing a loose "lady" and converting her into the ideal wife is a poor plan, to say the least (Proverbs 7:7-27). Perhaps it happens occasionally but beginning a marital relationship with opposing belief systems only complicates an already difficult merger. I am sure my Grandpa meant no insult to racially mixed marriages when he said: "If you don't date an Eskimo, you'll never marry one"; he was merely observing a fact: in our culture, you marry who you date. We should encourage our young men to choose Christian companions so, when that amorous attraction begins to blossom, these future partners can push each other into greater service instead of into a godless stalemate (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Further, we must understand and teach correctly the function and intent of church offices. An appointment to serve as a deacon is not a stepping-stone to or a time-trial for advancement into an eldership. Too often, assuming that a man is a ready-made candidate for elder, having served faithfully as a deacon, simply raises a man above his qualifications; great deacons do not necessarily make great elders. Likewise, a man may qualify for leadership as an elder having never served as a deacon in his entire life; serving as a deacon is not a precursor to pastoring. The two offices are separate in form and function.

Finally, we must develop a deep sense of urgency. The deteriorating state of the church today, the conflict and controversy that continues to splinter the house of God, will prove pandemic without an immediate and comprehensive inoculation. Ten, twenty, or thirty years ago, few could have imagined the schisms, digressions, and innovations we are experiencing today in the Lord's body. This unfaithful departure from truth is due, in part, to poor leadership. Brethren, we are always and only one generation away from apostasy. Preparing elders is vital to the livelihood of churches of Christ, and if we do not plan today for tomorrow concerning elders, we will relegate the Lord's church to a footnote in the history of world religions, and the scarcity of sound congregations with scriptural governments will usher in a repeat of the Dark Ages. Pray to God and plan today that it may not be so!

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