



Sunday, September 19, 2021

WEST VALLEY CHURCH OF CHRIST

What Should Church Leadership Look Like Without Elders?

After Paul and Barnabas had brought souls to Jesus and formed them into congregations throughout Asia Minor on their first missionary tour, they returned and “appointed elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). This implies at least two things: 1) a church can exist for a period of time without elders; 2) it is God’s ultimate will for congregations to exist with elders. Without denying the importance of elders in the local church, what is God’s will for churches that for one reason or another do not have them? While the Bible does not address this issue in a single text, it does offer negative and positive guidance through helpful principles.

God does not want us to create a pseudo-eldership. A pseudo-eldership is formed when individuals within a congregation are appointed to formal positions of authority (such as elders would normally hold) on the basis of lesser/different qualifications. You can’t circumnavigate what God said an elder or “bishop must be” (1 Timothy 3:2) simply by changing the name of the position.

God does not want us to establish a democracy. God never intended for the church to operate by popular vote. The closest thing we have to such a concept is in Acts 6, where the church was involved in selecting men to serve its widows. A careful reading of the text shows that the church did not appoint these men by their own authority, but instead set them “before the apostles” so that they could give them their approval and blessing (Acts 6:6). The church was not the authority but instead operated under authority. It’s also worth noting that the Bible actively warns against deciding things by popularity (Exodus 23:2).

God does not want us to adopt the pastoral model of the denominational world. In many denominational churches, preachers are given the title “pastor” and the authority that goes with it. This title rightfully belongs to elders in the church (1 Peter 5:1-4; “pastor” means “shepherd”), and it was never God’s intention that there be only one. While preachers do have authority, that authority is only over selecting and presenting material from the Bible (Titus 2:15; it’s worth noting that “authority” in this text is derived from a word referencing delegated authority rather than inherent authority, such as in Matthew 28:18). Preachers, comparable to first century “evangelists” or “prophets,” are listed separately to leaders in descriptions of the church’s roles (Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:6-8).

God does want us to reflect on another model of congregational authority. Having an eldership over the church is not God’s only structure of authority at work in the church. Paul describes another structure when he says, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Corinthians 11:3; cf. 1 Timothy 2:8-15). Christian men take a position of headship over Christian women, children, and non-Christian visitors. It stands to reason that in the absence of an eldership, leadership should arise from this structure.

Next week we’ll discuss how Christian men can and should organize themselves so as to lead in a way that pleases God.

