

## Know Them That Rule Over You

“But we beseech you, brethren, 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 works sake. Be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

In this, the first of Paul's letters, he writes to a newly planted church — a church that could hardly have existed a year. Yet in this admonition that the brethren have proper esteem for those who were “over them in the Lord,” Paul implies that although this was a newly planted church, already it was “organized” because it had elders.

It is true that Paul does not specifically identify those who “were over the brethren” as elders; yet one would be hard pressed to regard these as someone other than elders, for what other group of men were ever so styled, aside from apostles? But assuming that these brethren were indeed elders, one has greater wonder as to how such a newly planted church could have mature men to be over them in such a brief period of time. There are two very reasonable explanations.

First, while the majority in this church were those who had formerly been pagan (1 Thess. 1:9), Luke does tell us that although the majority of the Jews in the synagogue had rejected Paul and the gospel, there were “some of them” who had been persuaded and obeyed the gospel (Acts 17:4). This would be men to whom the worship of the one true God and familiarity with His scriptures would be something they would have been accustomed to — and often the mature people in the synagogues were looking for God to fulfill His promise to send the Messiah. Such a group of people would have men, who with added instruction from Paul, could properly serve the new congregation as its overseers.

Second, Paul, being an apostle, had power to impart spiritual gifts (cp. Acts 19:6; 2 Tim. 1:6; et al.). Such gifts would enable otherwise unlearned men to be wise in God's new order of things.

One thing is certain: Paul saw both the need and the urgency to appoint men to the position of overseers, pastors, or shepherds of the flock of God. On his first journey, he, with Barnabas, traveled through Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium then doubled back to revisit those new congregations and appoint elders in each one of them (Acts 14:23). Years later Paul's concern that churches have elders had not lessened. At some point in his later years (not recorded by Luke in Acts), he visited the island of Crete with a young preacher named Titus, whom he left in the island for the express purpose to ordain elders. Paul wrote him saying, “For this cause left I thee in Crete that thou mightest set in order the things that are wanting and ordain elders in every city, as I gave thee charge” (Tit. 1:5). He gave instructions to both Titus (1:5-9) and Timothy (1 Tim. 3:1-7) which qualifications were needed by men to be chosen as elders. These qualifications still serve as a standard for churches today to use when elders are appointed.

Elders are not to be chosen just so a congregation may “run smoothly” and that all physical things be cared for in a proper manner — they are to be chosen because they are to be overseers of the well-being of the souls of those in the flock. Those in Thessalonica were to admonish “the brethren” — urge them on to greater heights and goals. The Hebrew writer identifies elders as those who watch on behalf of our souls (Heb. 13:17). No more sober or serious task could be assigned to any man than this.

God appointed that all churches have elders. They have a special work designed and assigned to them by God. When elders “elder,” the churches they serve are the better for it. God knows best and God’s people submit themselves to His will; to the mighty hand of God.

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