

# The Elders Appointed by the Apostles

by Watchman Nee

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*Elders are local men appointed by the Holy Spirit to oversee affairs in the local church, with responsibilities including leading, instructing, and shepherding the flock.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 14:23, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 5:13, 1 Corinthians 12:25, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:2-3, 2 John - 3 John

**Topics:** "Church Governance", "Eldership"

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## Description

Watchman Nee discusses the biblical foundation and significance of appointing elders in the church, emphasizing that elders are chosen from among the local believers based on their spiritual maturity rather than being sent from outside. He highlights that the apostles established elders in every church to ensure local governance and care, allowing the church to function independently while still under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Nee stresses the importance of mutual responsibility among church members and the need for elders to lead by example rather than authority, ensuring that the church operates as a unified body. He also clarifies the distinction between the roles of apostles and elders, noting that while apostles are responsible for founding churches, elders oversee local church affairs. Ultimately, the appointment of elders is a spiritual matter, requiring divine guidance and a commitment to the local community.

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## Transcript

"Elders" is a designation of Old Testament origin. We find reference made in the Old Testament to the elders of Israel and also to the elders of different cities. In the Gospels we meet the term again, but still in relation to the Israelites. Even the elders referred to in the first part of Acts are of the Old Testament order (4:5, 8, 23; 6:12).

When were elders first instituted in the Church? Acts 11:30 refers to them in connection with the church in Jerusalem, and this is the first mention of elders in connection with any church; but though their existence is mentioned, nothing is said of their origin. Not till Acts 14:23, when we read of Paul and Barnabas returning from their first missionary journey, do we discover who they were, how they were appointed, and by whom. "When they had appointed elders for them in every church and had prayed with fastings, they committed them to the Lord."

### THE APPOINTMENT

We have seen that the apostles themselves could not remain with the new believers to shepherd them and to bear the responsibility of the work locally. How then were the new converts cared for, and how was the work carried on? The apostles did not request that men be sent from Antioch to shepherd the flocks, nor did one of them remain behind to bear the burden of the local churches. What they did was simply this: "When they had appointed elders for them in every church and had prayed with fastings, they committed them to the Lord into whom they had believed" (v. 23). Wherever a church had been founded on their outward journey, they appointed elders on their return journey. They did not wait until any arbitrary standard was reached before appointing elders in a church, but "in every church" they chose a few of the more mature members to care for their fellow believers.

The apostolic procedure was quite simple. The apostles visited a place, founded a church, left that church for a while, then returned to establish it. In the interval certain developments would naturally take place. When the apostles left, some of the professing believers would leave too. Others would continue to attend the meetings, and would prove themselves to be truly the Lord's, but would make no appreciable progress. Others again would eagerly press on in the knowledge of the Lord and show real concern for His interests. Those who had more spiritual life than others would spontaneously come to the front and take responsibility for their weaker brethren. It was because they had proved themselves to be elders that the apostles appointed them to hold office as elders, and it was their business to shepherd and instruct the other believers, and to superintend and control the church affairs.

Nowhere did the apostles settle down and assume responsibility for the local church, but in every church they founded they chose from among the local believers faithful ones upon whom such responsibility could be placed. When they had chosen elders in each church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord, just as, with prayer and fasting, they themselves had been committed to the Lord by the prophets and teachers when they were sent out on their apostolic ministry. If this committal of elders to the Lord is to be of spiritual value, and no mere official ceremony, a vital knowledge of the Lord will be required on the part of the apostles. It is easy to become so occupied with the problems and needs of the situation, that one instinctively takes the burden upon oneself, even while admitting the truth that the Lord is responsible for His own Church. We need to know Christ as Head of His Church in no mere intellectual way if we are to let all its management pass out of our hands at the very outset. Only an utter distrust of themselves, and a living trust in God, could enable the early apostles to commit the affairs of every local church into the hands of local men who had but recently come to know the Lord. All who are engaged in apostolic work, and are seeking to follow the example of the first apostles in leaving the churches to the management of local elders, must be spiritually equipped for the task; for if things pass out of human hands and are not committed in faith to divine hands, the result will be disaster. Oh, how we need a living faith and a living knowledge of the living God!

The Word of God makes it clear that the oversight of a church is not the work of apostles, but of elders. Although Paul stayed in Corinth for over a year, in Rome for two years, and in Ephesus for three years, yet in none of these places did he assume responsibility for the work of the local church. In Scripture we read of the elders of Ephesus, but never of the apostles of Ephesus. We find no mention made of the apostles of Philippi, but we do find reference to the bishops of Philippi. Apostles are responsible for their own particular ministry, but not for the churches which are the fruit of their ministry. All the fruit of the apostles' work had to be handed over to the care of local elders.

In God's plan provision has been made for the building up of local churches, and in that plan pastors have a place, but it was never His thought that apostles should assume the role of pastors. He purposed that

apostles should be responsible for the work in different places, while elders were to bear responsibility in one place. The characteristic of an apostle is going; the characteristic of an elder is staying. It is not necessary that elders resign their ordinary professions and devote themselves exclusively to their duties in connection with the church. They are simply local men, following their usual pursuits and at the same time bearing special responsibilities in the church. Should local affairs increase, they may devote themselves entirely to spiritual work, but the characteristic of an elder is not that he is a "full-time Christian worker." It is merely that, as a local brother, he bears responsibility in the local church. Locality determines the boundary of a church, and it is for that reason that the elders are always chosen from among the more mature believers in any place, and not transferred from other places. Thus, the local character of the churches of God is preserved, and consequently also their independent government and spiritual unity.

According to the usual conception of things, one would think it necessary for a considerable time to elapse between the founding of a church and the appointment of elders, but that is not according to God's pattern. The first missionary tour of the apostles covered less than two years, and during that period the apostles preached the gospel, led sinners to the Lord, formed churches, and appointed elders wherever a church had been formed. The elders were chosen on the apostles'

return journey, not on their first visit to any place; but the interval between their two visits was never long, at the most a matter of months. On their return journey the apostles would naturally find some places progressing more favorably than others, but they did not reason that, because of the low state of any church, they would make an exception and appoint no elders. They appointed elders in every church. Some may ask, If all the members of a church are in a low spiritual condition, how is it possible to appoint elders among them? It may solve the problem of many if they only consider the implication of the term "elder." The existence of an elder implies the existence of a junior. The word "elder" is relative, not absolute. Among a group of men in their seventy-ninth year it takes a man in his eightieth year to be their elder; but it only takes a child of eight to be "elder" to a company of children of seven. Even among the spiritually immature there are bound to be those who, in comparison with the others, are more mature and have spiritual possibilities, which is all the qualification they require to be their elders.

A church may come far short of the ideal, but we cannot on that account deprive it of the status of a church. Our responsibility is to minister to it and so seek to bring it nearer the ideal. In the same way, even the comparatively advanced ones in a locality may not reach the ideal of elders, but we cannot for that reason deprive them of the status of elders. In comparison with the elders of other places they may seem very immature, but if they are more advanced than the other believers in the same locality, then in their own church they are elders. We must remember that the office of an elder according to Scripture is limited to a locality. Being an elder in Nanking does not qualify a man to be an elder in Shanghai; but even if his spiritual state is far from what it should be, provided he is in advance of his fellow believers in the same church, then he is qualified to be an elder there. You can only have pattern elders where you have a pattern church.

Where a church is immature, the elders will naturally be immature; where a church is mature, the elders will also be mature. The model elders of 1 Timothy 3 and of Titus 1 are to be found in model churches.

The appointing of comparatively spiritual brothers to be elders is a principle set forth in the Word of God, though it runs counter to the modern conception of things. But even while we recognize this principle, we must not seek to apply it in any legal way. That would spell death. We must force nothing, but must be continually open to the leading of the Spirit. He will indicate the right time for the appointment of elders in

any church. Should there be no leading of the Holy Spirit, and circumstances not permit an immediate appointment of elders on the second visit of the apostles, then a Titus could be left behind to see to their appointment later. This is the first subject dealt with in the book of Titus, and it is a most important one. Paul gives Titus injunctions to establish elders in every city in Crete (Titus 1:5).

In the appointment of elders the apostles did not follow their personal preferences; they only appointed those whom God had already chosen. That is why Paul could say to the elders in Ephesus, "The Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers"

(Acts 20:28). The apostles did not take the initiative in the matter. They merely established as elders those whom the Holy Spirit had already made overseers in the church. In a man-made organization the appointment of an individual to office entitles him to occupy that office; but not so in the Church of God. Everything there is on a spiritual basis, and it is only divine appointment that qualifies a man for office. If the Holy Spirit does not make men bishops, then no apostolic appointment will ever avail to do so. In the Church of God everything is under the sovereignty of the Spirit; man is ruled out. Elders are not men who think themselves capable to control church affairs, or men whom the apostles consider suitable, but men whom the Holy Spirit has set to be overseers in the Church. Those whom the Spirit chooses to be shepherds of the flock, to them He also gives grace and gifts to qualify them for spiritual leadership. It is their spiritual call and their spiritual equipment, not their official appointment, that constitutes them elders. In a spiritual sense they are already elders before they hold the position officially, and it is because they actually are elders that they are publicly appointed to be elders. In the early Church it was the Holy Spirit who first signified His choice of elders; then the apostles confirmed the choice by appointing them to office.

## APOSTLES AND ELDERS

Elders were local men appointed to oversee affairs in the local church. Their sphere of office was limited by the locality. An elder in Ephesus was not an elder in Smyrna, and an elder in Smyrna was not an elder in Ephesus. In Scripture there are no local apostles, nor are there any extra-local elders; all elders are local, and all apostles are extra-local. The Word of God nowhere speaks of apostles managing the affairs of a local church, and it nowhere speaks of elders managing the affairs of several local churches. The apostles were the ministers of all the churches, but they had control of none. The elders were confined to one church, and they controlled affairs in that one. The duty of apostles was to found churches.

Once a church was established, all responsibility was handed over to the local elders, and from that day the apostles exercised no control whatever in its affairs. All management was in the hands of the elders, and if they thought it right, they could even refuse an apostle entry into their church. Should such a thing occur, the apostle would have no authority to insist on being received, since all local authority had already passed from his hands into the hands of the elders.

How did Paul deal with the adulterous believer in Corinth? He did not just notify the church that he had excommunicated the man. The utmost he could do was to instruct its members regarding the seriousness of the situation and seek to admonish them to remove the wicked person from their midst (1 Cor. 5:13). If the church was right spiritually they would pay attention to Paul, but if they disregarded his exhortations, while they would be wrong spiritually, they would not be wrong legally. In the event of their despising his counsel, Paul could only bring his spiritual authority to bear on the situation. In the name of the Lord Jesus he could "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh" (v. 5). He had no official authority to

discipline him, but he had spiritual authority to deal with the case. He had his spiritual "rod."

The affairs of the local church are entirely independent of the apostles. Once elders have been appointed, all control passes into their hands, and while thereafter an apostle may still instruct and persuade, he can never interfere. But this did not hinder Paul from speaking authoritatively to the Corinthians. Even a casual reader will notice how authoritative his statements were in both Epistles. It was quite within his province to pass judgment where doctrinal and moral questions were concerned, and when Paul did so he was most emphatic; but the actual enforcing of such judgments was outside his province and entirely a matter for the local church.

An apostle can deal with the disorders of a church whenever his advice and counsel are sought, as was the case with Paul and the church in Corinth. It was because of their inquiries that he could say to them, "And the rest I will set in order when I come" (1 Cor. 11:34). But the point to note here is that the rest of the matters which Paul intended to set in order on his arrival in Corinth were to be attended to in the same way as those he had dealt with in his Epistle, and they were dealt with doctrinally. In like manner as he had instructed them concerning certain affairs there, so he would instruct them concerning the remaining matters on his arrival; but the Corinthians themselves, not Paul, were the ones who would have to deal with the situation.

Since Peter and John were apostles, how did it come about that they were elders of the church in Jerusalem? (1 Pet. 5:1; 2 John 1; 3 John 1). They were elders as well as apostles because they were not only responsible for the work in different places, but also for the church in their own place. When they went out, they ministered in the capacity of apostles, bearing the responsibility for the work in other parts. When they returned home, they performed the duties of elders, bearing the responsibility of the local church. (Only such apostles as are not traveling much could be elders of the church in their own locality.) When Peter and John were away from their own church, they were apostles; when they returned, they were elders. It was not on the ground of their being apostles that they were elders in Jerusalem; they were elders there solely on the ground of their being local men of greater spiritual maturity than their brethren.

There is no precedent in Scripture for a visiting apostle to settle down as elder in any church he visits; but, provided circumstances permit him to be at home frequently, he could be an elder in his own locality, on the ground of his being a local brother. If the local character of the churches of God is to be preserved, then the extra-local character of the apostles must also be preserved.

Paul was sent out from Antioch, and he founded a church in Ephesus. We know he did not hold the office of elder in any church, but it would have been possible for him to be an elder in Antioch, not in Ephesus. He spent three years in Ephesus, but he worked there in the capacity of an apostle, not an elder; that is, he assumed no responsibility and exercised no authority in local affairs, but simply devoted himself to his apostolic ministry. Let us note carefully that there are no elders in the universal Church and no apostles in the local church.

## THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES

It is the responsibility of every saved man to serve the Lord according to his capacity and in his own sphere. God did not appoint elders to do the work on behalf of their brethren. After the appointment of elders, as before, it is still the brethren's duty and privilege to serve the Lord. Elders are also called bishops (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5, 7). The term "elder" relates to their person; the term "bishop" to their work. Bishop means overseer, and an overseer is not one who works instead of others, but one who supervises

others as they work. God intended that every Christian should be a "Christian worker," and He appointed some to take the oversight of the work so that it might be carried on efficiently. It was never His thought that the majority of the believers should devote themselves exclusively to secular affairs and leave the church matters to a group of spiritual specialists. This point cannot be overemphasized. Elders are not a group of men who contract to do the church work on behalf of its members; they are only the ones who superintend affairs. It is their business to encourage the backward and restrain the forward ones, never doing the work instead of them, but simply directing them in the doing of it.

The responsibility of an elder relates to matters temporal and spiritual. They are appointed to "lead," and also to "instruct"

and "shepherd." "Let the elders who take the lead well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). "Shepherd the flock of God among you, overseeing not under compulsion but willingly, according to God; not by seeking gain through base means but eagerly; nor as lording it over your allotments but by becoming patterns of the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

The Word of God uses the term "lead" in connection with the responsibilities of an elder. The ordering of church government, the management of business affairs, and the care of material things are all under their control. But we must remember that a scriptural church does not consist of an active and a passive group of brethren, the former controlling the latter, and the latter simply submitting to their control, or the former bearing all the burden while the latter settle down in ease to enjoy the benefit of their labors. "That the members would...care for one another" is God's purpose for His Church (1 Cor. 12:25). Every church after God's own heart bears the stamp of "one another" on all its life and activity. Mutuality is its outstanding characteristic. If the elders lose sight of that, then their leading the church will soon be changed to lording it over the church. Even while the elders exercise control in church affairs, they must remember that they are only fellow members with the other believers; Christ alone is the Head. They were not appointed to be lords of their brethren, but to be their examples. What is an example? It is a pattern for others to follow. Since they were to be a pattern to the brethren, then obviously it was neither God's thought for them to do all the work and the brethren none, nor for the brethren to do the work while they simply stood by and commanded. For the elders to be a pattern to the brethren implied that the brethren worked and the elders worked as well. It also implied that the elders worked with special diligence and care, so that the brethren should have a good example to follow. They were overseers, but they were not lords of their brethren, standing aloof and commanding; and they did direct the work, but they did it more by example than by command. Such is the scriptural conception of the leading of the elders.

But their responsibility does not merely relate to the material side of church affairs. If God has equipped them with spiritual gifts, then they should also bear spiritual responsibility. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Let the elders who take the lead well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in word and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). It is the responsibility of all elders to control the affairs of the church, but such as have special gifts (as of prophecy or teaching) are free to exercise these for the spiritual edification of the church. Paul wrote to Titus that an elder should "be able both to exhort by the healthy teaching and to convict those who oppose" (Titus 1:9). The preaching and teaching in the local church is not the business of apostles but of local brethren who are in the ministry, especially if they are elders. As we have already seen, the management of a church is a matter of local responsibility; so also is teaching and preaching.

On the spiritual side of the work the elders help to build up the church not only by teaching and preaching, but by pastoral work. To shepherd the flock is particularly the work of elders. Paul said to the Ephesian

elders, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28). And Peter wrote in the same strain to the elders among the saints of the Dispersion, "Shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). The present-day conception of pastors is far removed from the thought of God. God's thought was that men chosen from among the local brethren should shepherd the flock, not that men coming from other parts should preach the gospel, found churches, and then settle down to care for those churches. A clear understanding of the respective responsibilities of apostles and elders would clear away many of the difficulties that exist in the church today.

## THE PLURALITY OF ELDERS

This work of leading, teaching, and shepherding the flock, which we have seen to be the special duty of the elders, does not devolve upon one man only in any place. To have pastors in a church is scriptural, but the present-day pastoral system is quite unscriptural; it is an invention of man.

In Scripture we see that there was always more than one elder or bishop in a local church. It is not God's will that one believer should be singled out from all the others to occupy a place of special prominence, while the others passively submit to his will. If the management of the entire church rests upon one man, how easy it is for him to become self-conceited, esteeming himself above measure and suppressing the other brethren (3 John). God has ordained that several elders together share the work of the church, so that no one individual should be able to run things according to his own pleasure, treating the church as his own special property and leaving the impress of his personality upon all its life and work. To place the responsibility in the hands of several brethren, rather than in the hands of one individual, is God's way of safeguarding His church against the evils that result from the domination of a strong personality. God has purposed that several brothers should unitedly bear responsibility in the church, so that even in controlling its affairs they have to depend one upon the other and submit one to the other. Thus, in an experimental way, they will discover the meaning of bearing the cross, and they will have opportunity to give practical expression to the truth of the Body of Christ. As they honor one another and trust one another to the leading of the Spirit, none taking the place of the Head, but each regarding the others as fellow members, the element of mutuality, which is the distinctive feature of the church, will be preserved.

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