

Can A Congregation Without Elders Be Scriptural?

Gary McDade

We'd certainly better hope it can. Or, the church was established by the power of the Holy Spirit in the Apostles of Christ in A.D. 33 at Jerusalem and congregations sprang up across the region from Jerusalem to Antioch without elders and all would, therefore, be unscriptural. When Paul and Barnabas returned to the tri-cities of Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe during their first missionary journey into that area sixteen years after the church was first established (A.D. 49-50), it was then we read that "they had ordained them elders in every church" (Acts 14:23).

The first reference to elders after the church was established is in Acts 11:30 regarding the prophecy of Agabus concerning a widespread famine that would come in the days of Claudius Caesar (full name Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, A.D. 41-54) in A.D. 46, according to historians Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius. Since in Acts 11 Luke is writing about a famine that would occur later, brother J.W. McGarvey referred to this as "the elliptical character of Luke's narrative." He said, "The manner in which the elders of the churches in Judea are here mentioned, without a previous notice of their having been appointed, shows the elliptical character of Luke's narrative, and it results from the circumstance that he wrote after the churches had been fully organized, and all of the officials and their duties had become well known. The elders, being the rulers of the congregations were the proper persons to receive the gifts, and to see to the proper distribution of them among the needy" (*New Commentary on Acts of Apostles*, Vol. 1, pp. 230-231).

I think all who discuss this topic would agree that by "Scriptural" we mean to be in harmony with the teaching of the Bible. And, by "elders" we mean a plurality of men—two or more—who are in possession of the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-4. And, by "congregation" we mean a local group of Christians who meet regularly at a designated place in the community for the worship of God and to carry out the work of the church. By answering in the affirmative the question, "Can a congregation without elders be Scriptural?" we mean that such a local congregation can carry out the worship and work of the church in a way that will be pleasing to God and cause that church to be the instrument of God's glory in that location. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:21).

Every congregation should strive to become fully organized under Christ with elders, deacons, teachers, and members (Colossians 1:18; Philippians 1:1-2). Until that day comes, members who use the excuse that the congregation does not have elders to forsake the assembly and wander about like the vagabond Jews of Acts 19:13 will have to answer to Christ for why they did not contribute their best efforts to strengthening the congregation with their time, talent, and treasure to the point where elders and deacons could indeed properly be appointed.