



The Harvester

*Preparing Souls
To Serve The Lord!*

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“Rulers of the Gentiles” Are Not the Model for Local Churches

Brian R. Kenyon

Not long ago, a preacher heard the brother leading opening prayer make a petition, “Please be with the elders as they run the church.” What the brother meant by “run the church” should probably not be taken at face value, for those of us leading public prayers realize our wording does not always come out the way we intended (due to nervousness). Regardless of what that brother actually meant, there are some members of the church who have an inaccurate view of elders and their authority in the local church. Let us examine what the Bible teaches concerning these leaders in the church.

Misunderstanding of Leadership Among the Apostles

A similar misunderstanding of authority was evident when the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus and requested, “Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom” (Mt. 20:21). As the discussion unfolded, Jesus told them to “sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father” (Mt. 20:23). Incidentally, this shows that Jesus could do nothing independent of God, the Father’s will (cf. Jn. 5:19, 30). As the other ten apostles heard this discussion, they “were greatly displeased with the two brothers” (Mt. 20:24). These apostles also desired these perceived positions of authority in Jesus’

coming kingdom, perhaps due to a misunderstanding of an earlier discussion (cf. Mt. 19:28). The “right hand” and the “left” were the highest places of honor next to the ruler. It was at this point Jesus said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. ²⁶Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. ²⁷And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Mt. 20:25-28)

The Local Church Is Not a “Kingdom of the Gentiles”

Like the mother of Zebedee, her two sons, and the rest of the apostles, there are many members of the church of Christ who see its organization as if it were a mere business, or worldly endeavor. However, such ideas could not be further from the truth. The universal church (i.e., “one body” of Christ, 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4) is headed by none other than Jesus the Christ (Eph. 1:22; 5:23; Col. 1:18). He has all authority (Mt. 28:18). Christ’s church is not a worldly realm, as Jesus plainly declared to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). A local church is a particular group of New Testament Christians. The local church can be identified by the particular people of whom it consists (e.g., “the churches

of the Gentiles,” Rom. 16:4) or where it is located (e.g., “the church in Smyrna,” Rev. 2:8). The different local “churches” in the New Testament were not denominations, but they were congregations of the same universal church over which Christ is the head!

Those who view the church as a mere worldly endeavor also view the eldership of a local church as a type of board of directors who only make business decisions, ensure the bills get paid, and otherwise “run” the church adequately. While there are some similarities between the local church and a business, the Lord’s instructions for elders of the church let Bible students know the church and its local leaders are spiritual in function, scope, and practicality. Take, for example, the God-breathed qualifications for the men who would serve as elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Those who view the church as a “kingdom of the Gentiles” focus primarily on two qualifications; namely, that a man is “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6) and that he has “faithful children” (Titus 1:6). Some even throw in another, man-made qualification that he be a successful business man. Many churches have been hindered or even split by appointing men who were Scripturally married with faithful children and successful in the business world but were highly lacking in true spirituality!

Descriptive Names Show The Spiritual Nature of Church Leaders

There are three different descriptions God uses for local church leaders that shed light on the spiritual nature of their service. First, the

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most obvious is “elder” (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1), which is translated from a Greek word (*presbuteros*, πρεσβύτερος) that generally means an elder, or older person. In the context of local church leaders, it is focusing on spiritual maturity, referring to “those who, being raised up and qualified by the work of the Holy Spirit, were appointed to have the spiritual oversight over the church” (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*). Hence, an elder must not be a “novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6).

Second, the term “bishop” and “overseer, are used to describe the specially qualified leaders of the local church (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-2; Titus 1:7). Both of these English terms come from the same Greek word (*episkopos*, ἐπίσκοπος), which means overseer, guardian, or bishop. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker’s lexicon define this word as “an overseer, a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, a curator, guardian, or superintendent.” These are spiritual superintendents; overseers of a particular flock. These men cannot (and should not) do all the work of a given congregation, but all the work done by a congregation must be done under their oversight. They operate only within the framework of God’s word (cf. 1 Thes. 5:12-13).

“Bishops” do not have absolute authority in a local church. In fact, their authority is only in expedient matters (such as effective ways to evangelize, the best way under local circumstances to help those in need, how best to edify the local congregation, times and order of services, overseeing funds, etc.). Jesus Christ, the head of the church, has already determined doctrine and matters of obligation (Mt. 28:18; Heb. 1:2; 2 Jn. 9). No church leader has authority to require more or less than what God has already required through His word (Gal. 1:8-9 cf. Mt. 18:18)!

Third, the term “pastor” (which is more accurately translated, “shepherd”) is used to describe the leaders of the local church (Eph. 4:11). This term comes from a Greek word (*poimen*, ποιμήν) that simply refers to a shepherd. The translation “pastor” is quite unfortunate. It comes to English from the Latin translation *pastour* (which, incidently, shows the weakness of transliterating from a secondary language rather than translating from the original). The Greek word occurs eighteen times and is always translated by a form of “shepherd” (Mt. 9:36;

Lk. 2:8; Jn. 10:11; Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25), except in Ephesians 4:11, where it is translated “pastor,” a term hijacked by denominationalism to refer to the local preacher who calls all the shots. Shepherding is the encompassing work of the specially qualified local church leaders, or elders (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). The verb form of this word (*poimaino*, ποιμαίνω) is what is used in Acts 20:28, where Luke records Paul instructing the elders of the church in Ephesus “to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The ESV translates this word, “to care for;” the KJV translates it, “to feed.” While feeding is part of the shepherd’s work, shepherding involves much more (such as leading, protecting, helping to heal wounds, seeking those who have gone astray, rescuing, etc.).

The best illustration for this shepherding aspect of their work is found in Jesus’ description of Himself as the “good shepherd” (Jn. 10:1-14). Shepherds in the local church must love the flock committed to their care (1 Pet. 5:2-4), protect them from harm (i.e., false teachers, Acts 20:29-32; Titus 1:9-14), and strengthen them with the bread and the water of life (Acts 20:28, KJV).

Conclusion

Too many local churches operate as if they were “kingdoms of the Gentiles.” It shows in their leadership, “business meetings,” and programs (or lack thereof). These dysfunctional local churches give fuel to opponents who claim, “The Church of Christ is just another denomination” (cf. 1 Tim. 6:1; Titus 2:5). Far from being a “kingdom of the Gentiles,” however, local churches of Christ need spiritual men, Scripturally qualified to serve as elders/overseers/shepherds. May we take seriously God’s desire for qualified leadership in each local church (cf. Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). May Christian men apply the doctrine of Christ to their lives so they may qualify to serve one day!



Expansion Project

To accommodate growth of the South Florida Avenue congregation, the eldership has agreed to expand the fellowship hall. Those familiar with our facilities know FSOP is housed in that same building. Thus, the school will need to contribute a “fair share” to these expenses. Be on the lookout for more details later and pray about this opportunity!

Florida School of Preaching



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Fall 2022 Semester Begins Aug. 8

Registration opens July 18 online at www.fsop.net. Any of these classes may be taken online for credit or to audit. Contact the office for more details.

Day	Time	Lakeland Classes	Instructor	Credit
Monday	8:30-12:00	1 and 2 Thessalonians and Galatians (137)	Bauer	3
	1:00-4:15	Old Testament History (239)	Kemp	3
Tuesday	8:30-12:00	World Religions (275)	Wheeler	3
	1:00-4:15	Between the Testaments (220)	Wheeler	3
Wednesday	8:30-12:00	English Grammar (124)	Patterson	3
	8:30-12:00	Greek I (222)	Kenyon	3
	1:00-4:15	Sermon Preparation and Delivery (203)	Patterson	3
Thursday	8:30-12:00	Hermeneutics (100)	Atnip	3
	1:00-4:15	Life of Paul (262)	Cantrell	3
Friday	8:30-12:00	Hebrews (210)	Atnip	3
	1:00-4:15	Ezekiel and Daniel (214)	Antemesaris	3
Extension Classes				
Tuesday	7:00-9:30	Restoration History (242) (Wesconnett church of Christ, Jacksonville)	Ridgeway	2.5
Thursday	6:00-8:30	Revelation (259) (Tenth Street church of Christ, Apopka)	Kenyon	2.5

Registered Students Can Take Classes In-Person or Online!