



Course Name: The Authority of Elders/Shepherds

By Tommy South

Course description:

One of the most misunderstood concepts related to elders/shepherds regards authority. This lesson focuses on how to clarify this misconception and what authority falls in line with the biblical discussion for shepherds.

Course Objectives: By the end of this class students will have...

- A. Studied the various words and definitions of the word authority in scripture.
- B. Examined what authority shepherds/elders possess in the church today.
- C. Considered the misconceptions of passages addressing the authority of elders.

Outline of the class:

- A. During the first few minutes of the class divide the class into groups of three or four. Then ask each table to take 15-20 minutes to discuss the following.
 1. Based on your current understanding, how would you describe the authority of shepherds/elders in the church?
 2. What biblical passages would you use to support your description?
- B. The New Testament never directly discusses the subject of the authority of the elders.
 1. In fact, we do not find any of the New Testament terms for “authority” used in conjunction with any of the terms used to describe elders (shepherds, overseers):
 - a. *Exousia* – controlling authority
 - b. *Dynamis* – power
 - c. *Despotes* – master
 - d. *Archon* – ruling official
 2. These terms, which express political, military, or legal authority, are never used in connection with discussions about elders, *except to say such leadership is not allowed*. Elders do not possess any kind of coercive authority.
- C. However, that elders do have some type of authority is definitely implied:
 1. They are the “under-shepherds” serving on behalf of the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:1-5).
 2. They are to “manage” the affairs of the church (1 Timothy 3:4-5, 5:17), which requires some measure of authority over those affairs.

3. Hebrews 13:17 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account.” (Note: “Elders” are not specified, but obviously included – other “leaders” are probably in view here also – 13:7) They cannot keep watch over our souls without submission from the church.
 4. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 – “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” (Again, elders are not specified, but surely are included.)
- D. Question: What *kind* of authority do elders have?
1. Matthew 20:20-25 – Not an authority of “lording it over” others; rather, of *service*.
 2. 1 Peter 5:3 – “Not domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock.”
 3. 1 Timothy 5:19-20 – “Double honor” for those who lead well, but elders are still subject to discipline, just like everyone else.
 4. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 – “Esteem them very highly in love *because of their work*.”
 5. Hebrews 13:17 – “For they are keeping watch over your souls.”
 6. “What authority, then, does an elder have? The most important kind possible in the Christian system. It is the ‘moral authority’ of service, of example, of spiritual knowledge and experience, spiritual maturity.” (Everett Ferguson, “Authority and Tenure of Elders,” *Restoration Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 3, 3rd Quarter, 1975)
- E. The usual translations of some texts may be misleading and need closer examination:
1. Hebrews 13:17
 - a. ESV: “Obey your leaders and submit to them.” (Also, KJV)
 - b. Verb translated “obey” (*peitho*) literally means “be persuaded by.” Same verb occurs in v. 18 (“we are sure”) and in Acts 26:28 (“In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?”). See also 2 Corinthians 5:11 “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.”
 - c. This verb’s stem carries the basic idea of *trust* and is related to the Greek words for “faith” and “believe.”
 - d. Literally, “to permit oneself to be persuaded.” It definitely does not mean to blindly follow orders... The authority of a Christian leader is not command authority but servant leadership” (Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews: The IVP New Testament Series* [IVP Academic, 1992] pp. 156-57).
 - e. NIV – “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority.” Note: There is no word for “authority” in the Greek of v. 17.

2. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13
 - a. “Respect” = literally, “know” (See KJV). Here it probably signifies “acknowledge the worth of,” or “appreciate.”
 - b. “Over you in the Lord” = from a verb meaning “be at the head, rule, direct, care for.” F.F. Bruce: “It combines the ideas of leading, protecting, and caring for” (*Word Biblical Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982] p. 119).
 - c. Leon Morris: “An authority exercised for the spiritual good of believers.”
3. 1 Timothy 5:17
 - a. “Let the elders who rule well” = “rule” in the sense of “manage,” not authoritarian rule. See 1 Timothy 3:4-5, and v. 12, where the same verb is used and is translated as “manage.”
 - b. Note that the “ruling” / “managing” in 5:17 includes laboring “in preaching and teaching,” so it is not simply “ruling authority.”
 - c. NIV: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well.”

Conclusion:

- A. The authority of elders is not an authority based on title or position, nor is it an absolute authority that requires blind obedience. Rather, their authority is based on the type and degree of service rendered.
- B. When men are serving the church by shepherding, teaching, preaching, and generally watching out for our souls and leading by a godly example, we should readily submit to their leadership and “esteem them very highly in love.”
- C. Continue to study through the words and passages discussed in this lesson. We want to ensure that we are all following the direction of God’s word as we examine matters of such importance.