
Words of Truth

Don't Confuse Evangelists With Elders

By: Brian A. Yeager

An evangelist, being a Christian male, has the same expectations from the Lord as does any other Christian man. There are a few things that make an evangelist different from other male members of the Lord's body. For one, a man who chooses to take on the work of teaching has chosen to accept a greater judgment on himself than there will be on others (James 3:1). An evangelist must understand how significant it is that he practices the truth that he teaches (I Timothy 4:13-16). An evangelist is also different in that he must always be ready to teach and that he is responsible for full proofing the Lord's work he is engaged in (II Timothy 4:1-5). An evangelist cannot have folded hands and sit idly aside either. He is expected to be busy in the local congregation setting things in order (Titus 1:5).

You can see, from a few of the brief points above, that there are things expected of evangelists that other men in the Lord's body do not need to be concerned about. As a good general rule, you can study I Timothy, II Timothy, and Titus to learn what sets apart the expectations of an evangelist from other men in the congregation.

An evangelist has a limited amount of authority. He is responsible for appointing elders (Titus 1:5-9). An evangelist also has authority when it comes to teaching (Titus 2:15). Sometimes these few differences between an evangelist and other men in the congregation confuses people. Unfortunately, I have seen it a lot in the years I have been doing the work of an evangelist. Countless times I have had to tell brethren, "I am not an elder". I have also had to show that I do not have the authority the Apostles had. We continue in the Apostle's doctrine (Acts 2:42). They were directly guided by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26, John 16:13, and I Corinthians 2:1-13). I am not. Even Timothy, as an evangelist, was limited to teaching what the Apostles taught (I Corinthians 4:17) and training others to do the same (II Timothy 2:2).

Since people often misunderstand the authority an evangelist has, they often treat him like he is an elder. This thinking started the denominational "Pastor" system we see in the erring world of religion amongst us. Churches of Christ without elders have often erred, though without the title of "Pastor", in the same way. Evangelists are often the lead authority in local congregations. Here locally I worked hard from the first day I got to El Paso to be sure my authority never grew beyond teaching. I still on occasion see though that some would not mind me having more authority. That would be wrong.

Evangelists Are Not Elders

Before I get any further, let me be clear about something. I am not saying a man who is an evangelist cannot be an elder. Peter was an Apostle, evangelist, and an elder (I Peter 5:1-4). Therefore, we know that there is authority for a man to hold more than one office in the local church. I am also not suggesting that since Peter was able to hold multiple offices that every evangelist ought to as well. Just because there is authority for something to be done, that doesn't mean it should be in every case (I Corinthians 10:23-33).

Having set aside that point, let's proceed in our brief study. An elder, bishop, pastor, shepherd (all those terms apply to the same office) has to meet certain qualifications. Those are listed for us in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. An evangelist/preacher is not held to those qualifications. The Apostle Paul was called a preacher (II Timothy 1:11). Yet, he choose not to be married (I Corinthians 7:6-8). To be qualified, an elder must be "the husband of one wife" (I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6). Paul did not have authority, as an unmarried man, to have children. Since he did not have children, he did not have faithful children as an elder must have (I Timothy 3:4-5 and Titus 1:6). My point is, elders have certain qualifications that preachers of the Gospel and even Apostles did not need to meet. Thus, by the fact of not even needing to meet the same qualifications, evangelists are not elders. Beyond that though, there is a difference in the work too.

A Different Job All Together

Elders are shepherds (I Peter 5:1-4). They are watching out for the souls of the flock and they will be accountable for that (Hebrews 13:17). They are proven men who have to be able to do so within their own households. Elders are able to give certain decrees to be kept (Acts 16:1-4). Elders have authority to "rule" (I Timothy 5:17). Evangelists do not have that level of authority or responsibility. Elders are the overseers of the congregation (Acts 20:28-31), including the evangelist that may be there. Evangelists are not overseers of the congregation. The authority of an evangelist begins and ends with teaching what the Scriptures say. The elders pick up the work from there and go forward. Just as a workplace has some sort of higher management. The elders are the highest management we have on earth. The evangelist is just a trainer, a teacher (for lack of better terms).

Conclusion

Here in El Paso, we are limited because we do not have elders. We, like all congregations of our Lord, need elders (Acts 14:23). There are decisions that need to be made here that I do not have the authority from Christ to make. There is no substitute for qualified shepherds of the Lord's body. I am working on this. Are you working on this? Let's make sure we don't slack off on this needed process of training up elders!