

# “MOVING UP” TO THE ELDERSHIP

[Editor’s Note: The following article first appeared in Firm Foundation 25 years ago, or earlier. Regarding some statements the writer made, we “wouldn’t have said it that way,” but all in all we think it is an article well worth your consideration. –R.P]

Our concept of the eldership in the church is often carnal or just worldly. It is really the old error, which Jesus sought to correct among his very own apostles (Cf Matt. 20:20-28).

Reuel Lemmons, in a recent Firm Foundation editorial, told of being involved in a seminar on the work of elders. One of the speakers voiced the opinion that a man ought to “serve first as a deacon and then move on up.” This brother reflects the concept that the eldership is “higher up” than the deaconship. Commenting on this attitude brother Lemmons said: “Unconsciously we betray, time after time, the fact that we think of elders as highest ranking officials rather than the humble servants the Bible pictures them to be. We make status differences between members, deacons and elders when the Bible makes none.”

Let us suppose that you hear a knock on your door some evening and, opening the door, you see me standing there. But along with me you also see three young children. I explain then my purpose in coming. The three children are homeless. They need some loving man to become a father to them; some one to provide their physical needs and give them guidance so necessary for growing children. Knowing you to be a charitable and fatherly man, I ask you to give these children a home under your roof. You ask, of course, for a little time to consider the matter. You want your wife to help make this decision, which will also demand much of her. Before God you are facing a choice that can only be made after much prayer. In the face of such a soul-searching challenge, would you think that I was placing a “promotion” before you? That I was asking you to “move up”?

The eldership is like that man who takes the responsibility to be a father to some homeless children. The elder takes on a very weighty responsibility; he is not being asked to take a step up the ecclesiastical ladder.

It is truly an honor to be selected by a congregation to be one of its elders. The elders who give of their time to “labor in word and doctrine (teaching)” are worthy of double honor; i.e. the respect of the congregation plus such financial assistance as an elder might need for his livelihood (Cf 1 Tim. 5:17-18), that just and due honor neither I nor any other should deny or diminish.

But, somehow, over the years, we have gotten the idea that it is more honorable to be an elder in the church than to be anything else. The impression is left that if a man can reach the eldership that he has “risen as high as he can go in the church.”

This carnal, worldly view of the eldership has done untold harm to the church. In some congregations it is difficult to get elders, or additional elders, appointed because of this error. How often does some brother keep other brethren from being appointed to the eldership simply because he cannot be appointed? He pretends to raise objections when the sole problem is that he does not want these others to be “higher up” in the church than he is!! If he were in position to be appointed you would see his objections to the others dissipate like the morning dew in summer.

Now, that same man does not object to others doing good works which he is not doing – leading singing, teaching a Bible class, etc. He does not hinder any who is asked to lead in these good works. But, when others are asked to be elders and he is not so asked, he may become upset and act very un-brotherly. He may even decide to leave the congregation and worship elsewhere. Why the difference?? The works or services do not arouse his envy; the “office” which symbolizes prestige and prominence gets to him!!!

The eldership is primarily a very responsible, laborious work or task, rather than an “office of prestige”. A literal translation of 1 Tim. 3:1 would be: “Faithful is the word, if anyone stretches forward to the overseership, of good work he is desirous.”

It is hard to get any conception of an ecclesiastical office of which the carnally minded would be envious out of these words. But un-inspired men have created an aura around the eldership that has made it a prize to be coveted rather than a holy work to be reverently approached.

There can be no objection to using the word “office” in connection with the eldership if by such usage we mean function or position of service. We have often spoken of the “office of the Holy Spirit” as the comforter of God’s people, the revealer and confirmer of the word of truth. The elder has his place of special oversight and spiritual

labor; he has his “office.” But, let us not so use the term to leave the idea of a hierarchy, i.e., a series of ecclesiastical positions with the eldership at the top.

The fact that elders are to be honored for their service does not mean that the work of a deacon is less honorable. I fear that some look upon being a deacon in the church as almost a matter of contempt unless the deacon is later to be asked to “move up” to the eldership. With such persons the deaconate is nearly degrading to a man except it be considered a necessary step up to the eldership.

Some men make excellent deacons who, for some good understandable reason, will never be appointed to the eldership. Are these, then, to despise the sacred office or task of the deaconate because they have no prospect of being ordained to the eldership?

We are confronted, in our brotherhood, with many inactive and lethargic deacons because of the evil I am here discussing. To men who think after the flesh and not after the Spirit, the eldership is everything and the deaconate is nothing: whereas, in the sight of God, a faithful deacon is just as honorable as a faithful elder. The deacon who absents himself from the business meetings, shirks every responsibility he can, and depreciates the sacred office both the Lord and the church have given him, because of this carnal view of the eldership-deaconship, is sorely in need of being taught the way of the Lord more perfectly.

Some of the great “heroes of faith” in the early church were deacons. Stephen, Philip, etc. – men who were gladly willing to mingle with the poorest of the poor, supplying their needs in the name of Christ – are worthy of the modern deacon’s emulation. It is a glorious work and to spiritually minded men it can never be demeaning. No deacon should ever be disgruntled because he is not made an elder. If he is not disgruntled over not being a pulpit preacher, a song leader or a Bible class teacher, pray tell me why he should be unhappy that he is not an elder? He will not be unless again he is thinking of the eldership as “a higher office” than his deaconship.

The apostle Paul spoke of himself and the eloquent Apollos as only “ministers (servants) by whom ye believed.” Really, that is what we all are. Just “ministers.” Elders, deacons, preachers, and all Christians should think of themselves as their dear apostle does, and then there will be no room for ladder-climbing in the kingdom of God.

-Hershel Dyer