

THE RELATIONSHIP OF EPHESIANS 4:11 TO A COUNCIL OF ELDERS

by James W. Garrett

Two views are held concerning the relationship of Ephesians 4:11 to a council of local elders:

1. The first view contends that Ephesians 4:11 is a description of a full-orbed local council of elders. A completed council of elders will contain at least one of each of the following: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastor/teachers. If any of these is missing from the council, there is a deficiency in local leadership.
2. The second view contends that the council of elders in a local church normally will contain only the Pastor/teachers. Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists, although providing some degree of leadership in the local church, will not be a part of the council of elders.

Both of these views find adherents among those seeking to be New Testament Churches. Both views are modeled in some of the finest churches that exist today. Because of this, we undertake this paper with apprehension. We have written this paper only because several who feel the need for such a study have pressed us to attempt an honest investigation of the question.

I. THE CONTEXTUAL SETTING OF EPHESIANS 4:11

The theme of Ephesians could be summarized by the expression, "God's Glorious Church." Reading through the epistle, one becomes aware of Paul's theme as he moves from one truth to the next. Through instruction and exhortation, Paul seeks to make certain that each individual element of the Glorious Church is of a quality to reflect the glory. He deals with relationships, function, holy conduct, and revelation.

The passage before us, Ephesians 4:7-16, is at the very heart of the theme. In order to follow an unbroken thought in this paragraph, we must omit the parenthetical sentence of vs. 9-10. This parenthesis, though containing revelation about Christ, is an aside that interrupts the flow of thought.

The building up of the Church, the Body of Christ, is the great aim and final object expressed in this paragraph. To this end, every believer must make a contribution. In order to make that possible, Our Ascended Lord did two things: (1) He gave "graces" to each believer <v.7>; (2) He gave apostles, prophets, etc., to the Church <v.11> to develop each believer in his particular graced ministry <v.12>, so that each one could be effective in building up the Church <vs.12-16>.

It is important to note that the source of the individual graces and the source of apostles, prophets, etc. is a sovereign act of the Christ. For the balance of this paper we will use the term "ascension gift men," when referring to those listed in verse 11. No church, nor any church

council, can produce these. All that the Church can do is to recognize and accept those whom the Lord has given. Tragedy, frustration, and deception have resulted when man has tried to bring such into existence.

In passing, we must note that the ascended Christ did not give offices to the Church, but He gave men. The New Testament knows of no empty office. If, for example, Our Lord has not given pastor/teachers to a local church, the office of pastor/teacher does not exist in that church.

One of the tasks of ascension gift men would be to stir up the gifts that reside in believers and to direct the individuals in the responsible use of their gifts.

Another task would be to ground the people in the truth. One of the serious problems in Charismatic Churches is the constant need to battle heresy, after the fact. Thousands of people, including preachers, seem to be "carried about with every wind of doctrine." There is an obsession with looking for "some new thing," "the cutting edge of what God is doing," etc. More often than not, this is the result of failure on the part of ascension gift men, especially the pastor/teachers. Because there has not been a steady diet of sound teaching on which the sheep might feed their spirits and their minds, error and heresy have been able to feed the craving for the exciting and new.

A frequent theme in New Testament letters is the importance of repeating to people what they already know: I Timothy 4:6; Jude 5, 17; 2 Peter 1:12; II Timothy 2:14; I Corinthians 4:7; 2 Peter 3:1,2; 2 Peter 1:13,15; Luke 22:19; Acts 11:16; 2 Thessalonians 2:5; Acts 20:35; etc.

On the other hand, it is difficult to find references urging leadership to stir people toward anything new. I John 2:7-8 uses a play on words by calling the command to love one another a "new command." Immediately, John then points out that this really is not a new command, but an old one that they had heard from the beginning.

Peter speaks of the "New Heavens and the New Earth (II Peter 3:11ff) and that this is the new thing toward which we should look (v.12).

Thus, the work of ascension gift men recorded in the New Testament consisted largely of teaching eternal truths to believers.

It is interesting to note that v. 15 is used as the basis for the expression popular among discipleship groups, "speaking into one another's lives." A contextual reading of this verse demonstrates that the verse has nothing to do with "speaking into one another's lives." The concern of this verse is the correction of false doctrine. Paul is stating that as a result of ascension gift men, the individual members will have correct doctrine in their dialogue and their relationships will be characterized by love. If false doctrine is being spoken by someone, those around him are to correct his doctrine and to do it lovingly. An example of such activity would be the correction of Apollos by Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:24-28).

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

In order to conduct a sensible study, we first must define the terms.

APOSTLE- Having written two extensive studies of apostles, we will not repeat that material here ("Apostles and Apostolic Ministry in the New Testament," 1987 Conclave; "Contemporary Apostolic Ministry in the Light of the New Testament," 1988 Conclave). Suffice it to say, "apostle," is not an easily defined term. Among the Greek terms that are translated, "send," *apostolos* has the distinctive emphasis of purpose. Its primary meaning is, "one sent with a commission." The emphasis is on the commission. Different apostles had different commissions. Therefore, when one is declared to be an apostle, the first question that must be asked is, "what is his commission?" Peter, Apollos, Paul, Barnabas, James, etc., all had different commissions. Peter and the Twelve were commissioned to be witnesses, giving testimony that Jesus had risen from the grave. Paul's commission was to be God's witness among the Gentiles and to plant churches. Apollos' commission was to visit existing churches and to build them up. James' commission was to be a (the?) primary leader of the Jewish church in Judea. The list could go on.

Sometimes the commission is stated clearly in Scripture. With others, the commission must be discerned from the record of his ministry. Our Lord sent forth various ones to fulfill the distinct commission that He had given to them. By so doing, the people of God were prepared for works of service.

Most of those designated, "apostles," were involved in translocal ministry. This especially was true as the Church expanded beyond Judea.

PROPHETS- The term, "prophet," literally means "one who speaks forth." Thayer states, "...one who, moved by the Spirit of God and hence His organ or spokesman, solemnly declares to men what he has received by inspiration" (page 553, Joseph H. Thayer, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Baker Book House, 1977). Prophets may predict the future, but this is not the main focus of the New Testament prophecy in the Church (I Corinthians 14:3).

Not everyone who prophesies is a prophet. I Corinthians 12-14 discusses the *charismata* that occur in corporate meetings of the New Testament Church. In this section, prophecy is spoken of as something that may occur through any Christian. Prophets, on the other hand, are those who have this as their calling in the Church. It would seem from New Testament examples that prophets were recognized translocally, from church to church, as being in this ministry. Agabus is an apparent example of this (Acts 11:27-28; 21:10-11).

EVANGELISTS- Literally, "a bringer of good tidings." This title is given to those proclaimers of salvation who are not apostles. Most prominently mentioned in the New Testament is Phillip, who evangelized and planted churches in Samaria, Azotus, Caesarea, and surrounding regions. Not all church planters are apostles. Some are evangelists.

PASTORS and TEACHERS- These two terms must be considered together because of a question that must be answered concerning their identity. The traditional view of the Charismatic Movement is that Ephesians 4:11 speaks of a "five-fold ministry." This view sees five different "ascension gifts:" apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers.

The Greek of this verse, however, speaks of only four. Verse 11, in the Greek, reads,

"kai autos edoken tous men apostolous, tous de prophetas, tous de euangelistas, tous de poimenas kai didaskalous."

The pattern, "*men...de*," highlighted above, is used in Greek to contrast or to set apart items. It often is translated, "on the one hand,...on the other." This pattern is used in lists, for instance, to indicate that one is speaking of separate entities. To quote Thayer, "...this happens chiefly when what has already been included in the words immediately preceding is separated into parts, so that the adversative particle contrasts that which the writer especially desires to contrast" (page 398, Joseph H. Thayer, *Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, 1977).

The term, "gifts," of verse 7, includes the elements detailed in verse 11. Verse 11 uses the *men...de* pattern to distinguish the different categories listed. The Greek term, *tous*, is used to introduce each of the categories. Most versions translate *tous* as, "some as." Note the pattern of the Greek:

Tous men apostolous

Tous de prophetas

Tous de euangilstas

Tous de poimenas kai didaskalous

The view that Ephesians 4:11 contains a description of a "five-fold ministry" could only come from a misreading of the English translation. Because the *men...de* terminology is awkward in English, the tendency is to omit these terms in the English translations. The different translations have sought, by various means, to convey the sense of the Greek, but these efforts have been misunderstood by those who speak of the "five-fold" in Ephesians 4:11.

KJV - some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.

NAS- some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers.

NIV - Some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, some to be pastors and teachers.

The Greek text clearly speaks of four gifts, not five. The fourth category describes a group of men who function as shepherds and teachers. This description fits those men who are called, "elders," "shepherds," or "overseers," elsewhere in the New Testament. Their qualifications include that of being able to teach (I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9).

This is the most obvious difference in the qualifications required of those who are overseers and the qualifications required of those who are servants. Furthermore, teaching is one of the duties of these men (I Timothy 5:17; Acts 20:28 <feeding>).

It is important to note that there are teachers in the New Testament who are not called shepherds. One doesn't have to be a shepherd to be a teacher. However, one has to be a teacher in order to be a shepherd.

Teachers who are not shepherds would not be included in this list of "ascension gift men."

We will not detail the Scriptural use of the terms, "elder," "pastor," and "overseer." We have written extensively on this subject in earlier papers ("New Testament Church Government in the Local Church" - 1987 Conclave; "The Work of Elders: A Job Description" - 1989 Conclave). We only note here that all three terms are used in the New Testament to describe a single office, rather than three different offices.

III. THE EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF THE INCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11

With this background, we turn to the question before us. Those who hold to the view that a council of elders includes all four classes of ascension gifts can point to two models in Scripture.

A. THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE INCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11.

1. The Jerusalem Church.

Throughout the Biblical record of the Jerusalem Church, there is an apostolic presence in the council of elders. During the early years, the Twelve were the ruling council. Beginning with Acts 11:30, the council included apostles and elders. The term, "apostles," in Acts 15 also includes James, an apostle, but not one of the Twelve.

With the passage of time, the Twelve either were martyred or left Jerusalem to

fulfill their commission to be Christ's witnesses throughout the world. The elders then became the ruling council in the Jerusalem Church. However, James, the half-brother of Jesus, an apostle, remained in Jerusalem as a member of the ruling council until his death (c. 62 A.D.). It is clear that apostles were a part of the ruling council of the Jerusalem Church for the first thirty years of its life.

2. Antioch.

In Antioch, there was a group of five men, described as "prophets and teachers" (Acts 13:1). The Greek structure intimates that the first three were prophets and the last two teachers, but the point is open to debate. For our purposes, it is not important for us to seek to resolve that question.

A reading of the scanty history of the Church at Antioch (Acts 11:19-30; 12:25; 13:1-6), would lead us to conclude that these five at least functioned as an eldership in Antioch. The picture of the Antioch Church, up to this time in its history, is a story of a growing number of disciples, being led and taught by prophets, exhorters, and teachers.

Barnabas is a noteworthy member of the group. It would not be incorrect to call him an "apostle" to Antioch. He had been "sent out with a commission (Acts 11:22- *ekzapostello*) to Antioch. He already was a man of maturity and leadership in Jerusalem, but at Antioch he became one of the primary leaders. He brought Saul to Antioch. The two of them spent a full year laying a foundation for the church, through encouraging and teaching (11:25-26). Of course, later the title, "apostle," is applied to both of these men. At this time, neither Barnabas nor Saul seemed to have been involved in evangelism. They were edifying the church and moving it toward maturity.

It could be said, therefore, that the circle of five prophets and teachers included at least one who functioned as an apostle - one sent with a commission from Jerusalem to Antioch.

Here then was a leadership council composed of apostles, prophets, and teachers. Although they may not have been an official council of elders, they were a primitive form of such a council. At that time in Antioch's history, this was the church government.

These two examples, Jerusalem and Antioch, display the presence of apostles, prophets, and teachers as constituents of a leadership council of a church, at least during its formative stage.

Beyond these two examples, there are no other to cite in the historical record of the early church. Certainly, it would be appropriate to assume that Paul and his apostolic delegates

(Timothy, Titus, Silas, etc.) functioned as a part of the leadership team of the churches that they planted, as long as they remained in those locations.

B. THE EXPERIENTIAL BASIS FOR THE INCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11

Experience has shown that when a church is led by a college of elders that is composed exclusively of 'shepherds,' with no input from the other three ascension gifts, various difficulties arise.

Without the input of evangelists, the church has little zeal for bringing the lost into the Kingdom.

Without the insight of prophets, the church experiences paralyzing strongholds that remain unidentified.

Without the guidance of apostles, the church has little vision and will tend to stray from Biblical patterns.

A variety of other deficiencies will plague the church that has no input from the full complement of the ascension gifts.

On the other hand, churches that have all of the ascension gifts functioning in their midst, tend to be alive and have a sense of purpose and direction.

IV. THE EVIDENCE IN FAVOR OF THE EXCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11

A. THE BIBLICAL BASIS FOR THE EXCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11

1. The first Biblical basis for the exclusive view results from an inductive study of the Scriptures that relate to the eldership.

All of the Scriptures that describe the duties of elders include the injunction for them to shepherd (pastor) the flock (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1ff).

Totally absent from the list of their function is that of prophesying and evangelizing. Neither are these giftings given as a part of their qualifications. Elders must, however, be gifted in shepherding and perform this task.

As we have shown in earlier writings ("New Testament Church Government in the Local Church," 1987 Conclave; and "The Work of Elders: a New Testament Job Description," 1989 Conclave), it is clear from Scripture that elders-pastors-

overseers are one and the same office. There is not any Scriptural authority for using these terms to describe three separate offices.

2. The second Biblical basis for the exclusive view results from an inductive of study of the Scriptures that relate to shepherding.

The terms involving shepherding are used exclusively in the New Testament for Jesus and the elders. Neither apostles, nor prophets, nor evangelists are given the injunction to shepherd. Only the elders are so instructed. Thus, Peter calls the Christ, "The Chief Shepherd," and pictures the elders as shepherding in His stead. Such terminology is used for none of the other ascension gifts.

All of the New Testament Scriptural evidence points to one conclusion - the elders are the pastors; the pastors are the elders.

3. A response to the Scriptural argument presented by inclusive view advocates

A. Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem, the apostles never were called, "elders." A distinction always was made between the two groups, even though they functioned together as a leadership council.

No other church ever had a situation exactly like of the early Jerusalem Church. It would have been strange to have had the Twelve in the church and to not have them functioning in leadership, just because they were not "elders."

B. Antioch

Since the normal titles for local church leadership (elder-pastor-overseer) were not used for the five men in Acts 13:1ff, the question must be asked, "Did they constitute an eldership?" Certainly, they were spiritual leaders in the Antioch Church.

Since there is no evidence that prophets ever were elders, we must conclude that these were not, unless some proof could be offered to the contrary. The burden of proof would be on those who advocate the view that these prophets were elders. There is no "proof" that can be offered.

The fact that teaching and the ability to teach are tied to eldership, one could put forth the argument that the teachers of Acts 13 were elders. This cannot be proven, and even if it could, it would not be relevant to the discussion here, since pastor/teachers are elders.

The only solid ground that one can take concerning the identity of the Antioch Five is that they were spiritually gifted men, being used of God to establish and to lead the Antioch Church. At this point in the church's history, the governmental structure of the Antioch Church does not seem to have been formalized. In all probability, the Five were to Antioch what the Twelve were to Jerusalem - God's anointed leadership, called forth to establish an apostolic church that would be the base for sending forth apostles to the Gentiles.

B. THE EXPERIENTIAL BASIS FOR THE EXCLUSIVE VIEW OF EPHESIANS 4:11

Although there are exceptions, prophets and evangelists often do not do well as elders. Prophets frequently are of such a temperament that even when they are trying to relate in a gentle and affirming manner, people perceive them otherwise. There are prophets of which this is not true, and they may have all of the traits to make them a shepherd. In such cases, they are not elders because they are prophets, but they are elders because they are shepherds. Their prophetic calling is not a part of their role as elder, but in addition to it. Such a person is a valuable part of a circle of elders, because he brings prophetic insight into the circle.

Very few evangelists make good elders. Evangelists' hearts are not gladdened by the work of shepherding, but by the work of witnessing and being spiritual obstetricians. Evangelists who try to shepherd, usually find it to be a chore. Most lack the patience required to spend hours with sheep who are unreasonable and ill behaved. Those who have produced the greatest harvests of souls, usually have others in their organizations who work with the newborn. The evangelists have trouble doing well at such tasks. Most evangelists do not do well in the oversight of a functioning Body. Such tasks frustrate them. Again it must be said, that there always are exceptions. In such cases, the evangelists who are called to be elders are elders because they also are shepherds, not because they are evangelists.

We must respond to the statement, "Experience has shown that when a church is led by a college of elders that is composed exclusively of 'shepherds,' with no input from the other three ascension gifts, various difficulties arise." This is a true statement. It is important for the elders to relate to the other ascension gifts that are present in the congregation. The prophets should be counselors and "resource persons" for the elders. The elders should ask the prophets for their insight into various situations concerning the Body. To fail to do so, is to rob the Body of the full advantage of the ascension gifts.

The same is true of evangelists. Evangelists should be given full opportunity to stir the evangelistic fervor of the Body. The Body should co-operate with the work of the evangelists. If a congregation does not have this gift functioning, apathy and self-centeredness tend to develop. The institution becomes more important than the mission.

Apostles, especially those whose apostleship includes the building up of congregations, may also be elders. Sometimes, however, an apostle may not have that role in his home church. When afield, he will be powerful in his anointing. Usually, an apostle will sit in council with elders, even if he is not an elder.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

1. The ultimate concern of God, as expressed in the passage before us, is the building up of the Body of Christ.
2. This will be accomplished through the perfection of each part.
3. Such perfection in the Body and its members will be achieved when each part functions fully and healthfully. When one part fails to function, all parts experience a lack and the whole Body is not built up.
4. In order to develop each member to his full potential, Christ has given to the Church specific "ascension gift men" to do specific things aimed at bringing about the full development of each individual member.
5. Apostles have the task of seeing the "big picture," how the Body fits together, and the "long view," the purposes of God. Some apostles will plant churches. Other apostles will build up existing ones. Individual congregations often will find themselves united to other individual congregations through their relationship with a particular apostle.
6. Prophets reveal the Mind of God in specific situations. They discern hidden spiritual dimensions. Often, they will be advisors to apostles. They will warn shepherds of covert wolves. Within the local church setting, prophecy will build up, exhort, and comfort the members.
7. Evangelists will bring forth an increasing number of members for the Body, by presenting the Good News to the lost. Evangelists will stir among the members of the Body an ongoing compassion for the lost.
8. Elders will have as their first priority the teaching to the members the truths of the Faith. As overseers, they are the rulers of the Body - the ones who ultimately must make all decisions concerning the life of the Body. As shepherds, they are held accountable to God for protecting the sheep from wolves. What a father is to his family, elders are to the church.

Thus, Our Lord in His Wisdom, has given these ascension gift men to the Church to develop the Church.

A LOCAL CHURCH TO WHICH GOD HAS GIVEN SOME OR ALL OF THESE ASCENSION GIFT MEN MUST ALLOW EACH OF THEM TO FULFILL THEIR EQUIPPING MINISTRY, OR ELSE THE CHURCH NEVER WILL BECOME WHAT IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO BE.