

THE SCOPE OF THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

Marc Gibson

Paul reminded the elders of the church of Ephesus of their responsibilities as elders and the scope of that responsibility: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28). They were to shepherd (pastor) the church of God at Ephesus. This was the flock "among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." They did not have a right to oversee any other flock (local congregation) such as Troas to the north or Colossae to the east. They could not act as district bishops to oversee the work of Asia Minor as a whole. Such organizational structures were invented later by men and were a perversion of the divine pattern.

Peter wrote concerning the work of elders, *"Shepherd the flock of God which is among you..."* (1 Pet. 5:2). It is wrong for the elders of one local church to oversee the work of another local church. This would include choosing a preacher, overseeing the monies, owning the property, or any other part of the Lord's work of that congregation. Such bishops have stepped outside the bounds of their divine realm of work.

The existence today of sponsoring church arrangements where one church sponsors a work that is funded by multiple churches is a violation of the divine pattern for the work of the local church and eldership. The elders of one church do not have the authority to oversee a work larger than that local church which would involve funds from other local churches. An eldership of one church does not have the authority to conduct a school for preachers that is supported by other churches. This is a work larger than the local church. Elders are to oversee the work of the flock which is among them, not large brotherhood works maintained by monies gathered from other churches. There is no divine authority for such arrangements or action.

These basic principles need to be taught again. Another generation is arising that knows little about the past battles and divisions over these issues. The battle over the missionary society in the last half of the 1800's is ancient history to many, if they know about it at all. The division that resulted in the 1950's and 60's over the sponsoring church arrangement, support of human institutions, and the social gospel should not be forgotten. These battles over Bible authority and truth will be fought again as we face these old issues again in new disguises. Let us be prepared to preach and stand on the truth about the work of the local church and the scope of the authority of elders in local churches.