

On the radio program Saturday, we were reminded of the difference in a church in which the power exists in the hands of a few versus being acknowledged as in the hands of God.

In this case, it was the “men’s group” who had evidently taken it on themselves to appoint elders

During the first few centuries of the church's existence the very nature of the church changed.

Act 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 20:28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for 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. 29 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.

At some point men ceased to read the Bible for themselves and simply listened to older, presumably wiser men who had been placed in positions of leadership in local churches -- Bishops. Some of these Bishops came to view those whom they led to be incapable of understanding the truths they presented.

This apostasy began while most of the apostles were still alive.

2 Thess 2:2 that you may not be quickly shaken from your composure or be disturbed either by a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. 3 Let no one in any way deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, 4 who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God.

Paul wrote again concerning the departure
of men from the faith.

Gal 1:6 I am amazed that you are so
quickly deserting Him who called you by
the grace of Christ, for a different gospel;
7 which is really not another; only there
are some who are disturbing you, and
want to distort the gospel of Christ.

The apostasy did not stop at the appointment of one group of elders to manage, not just oversee, the work of another local congregation.

1 Peter 5:1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you, ...

Bishops failed to realize that their work in the local church did not extend beyond that flock. They thought they could oversee (manage) a flock or members of another flock from long distances.

In the Christian Chronicle, April 2007, it was reported that the Highland Oaks congregation (2000 members) in Dallas would have “a second location” in Plano, TX (about 14 miles away, 200 members).

That’s not the only time that happened. In the 1980’s, an elder in the Eastside church of Christ in Baltimore, told me he wondered why their preacher was reporting to “his” elders in Lubbock, TX.

I visited the church at Rue Deodat de Steverac in Paris in 1986, which had elders at the time, and the American preacher's wife said she was sorry her husband missed us, but he was reporting to "our elders" in Texas.

This is exactly the pattern of apostasy which resulted in the Roman Catholic church

In the early history of the church, smaller churches came under the bishops of larger churches until finally there was "one universal bishop" in Rome.

Cyriacus, who was presbyter of the great church at Constantinople had taken the title of “universal” Bishop. Gregory the Great, in 604, compares the assumption of the title of Universal Bishop “to the sin of Antichrist, since both exhibit a spirit of lawless pride.”

Gregory’s successor, Boniface III, in 606 AD, claimed that title for himself and proclaimed the church at Rome to be the head of all the church.

True churches of Christ are said to be
“autonomous,” meaning that in doctrine and
action, each church with its bishops goes directly
to the word of God for its instruction.

1Pe 5:2 shepherd the flock of God that is among
you,

Act 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and
to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made
you overseers,

In the New Testament church, each local group had its own elders.

At the end of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas were guided by the Holy Spirit to appoint elders.

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote Titus
Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in
Crete, that you might set in order what
remains, and appoint elders in every city
as I directed you,

At about the same time Peter wrote - 1
Peter 5:2 shepherd the flock of God
among you ...

Why did God think it important
that we follow His will in the
matter of local autonomy and
having elders oversee the work in
one flock rather than two?

A suggestion --

As we look at Gideon, we find that God selected only 300 from the 32,000 who were in the army.

Why?

Judg 7:2 "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'

All too often, the children of God in this age delight in the number of brethren, not because they are souls that are saved, but because it makes us appear to be part of something important to men.

At the same time, many are disheartened because the growth of the church in some area is not sufficient to make us “count” among men.

Elijah – 1Ki 19:10 He said, "I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away."

But God wasn't worried by small numbers either – 1 Kings 19:18 Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal

Lives are won for Christ one at a
time.

1 Cor 15:58 Therefore, my beloved
brethren, be steadfast, immovable,
always abounding in the work of the
Lord, knowing that your toil is not
in vain in the Lord.

1Sa 15:22-23 And Samuel said, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. (23) For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king."

“To obey” – “to listen”

“For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and
idolatry. ... you have rejected the word of
the Lord”

Most importantly, we must hear the good
news of the kingdom and each of us must
obey it.

What happens when a group of the Lord's people drift from the word of the Lord in their practice?

They have rebelled!

Gal 1:6-7 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— (7) not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

“For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
... you have rejected the word of the Lord”

Mark 16:15 "Go into all the world and
preach the gospel to all creation. 16 "He
who has believed and has been baptized
shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved
shall be condemned.