

## REGARDING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN EVANGELIST AND ELDER IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Virgil Warren, PhD

In theory, two positions operating in relationship may differ from one another in authority in at least six ways:

- (a) as to its being resident in one vs. passing through the other from the first;
- (b) as to the area of work to be done where authority is exercised;
- (c) as to the level at which it is exercised, the first being higher than the second;
- (d) the second receives authority from the first;
- (e) as to the time exercised;
- (f) as to the basis of it;
- (g) as to implied powers and necessary judgments.

(1) On certain occasions an office that does not possess authority may serve to extend a superior office's authority as in the case of elders who might have deacons supervise other people's activities (cp. the apostles' use of evangelists for this same type of activity). The office of evangelist might have authority passing through it, but the authority of eldership is resident in it.

(2) The area of authority might be different as if, for example, the elder exercised authority in spiritual matters and the deacons in material matters.

(3) The level might be different by putting evangelist authoritatively above or below the elder.

(4) The elders might give authority to the evangelist once he gets on the scene.

(5) Evangelist might have authority over a congregation until elders are elected. In practice, he probably uses natural rather than official leadership until that time.

(6) As to the different basis on which the "right" is founded, (a) the right may be founded on service. Paul argues his right of apostleship in 2 Corinthians on the service that he has rendered; he has "earned the right" to be heard and followed (11:16-12:13; cp. 1 Corinthians 9:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). The people he has served "ought" to follow him. If authority finally rests on service, leadership on any basis rests on service.

(b) The right may be founded on the message proclaimed. If authority rests in the message proclaimed, it may be seen to be in the message by virtue of the fact that only in what has been revealed to him by God does he speak with authority. In matters beyond that area he does not speak with authority though it is in the realm of optional, permissive things and does not contradict the letter or spirit of the message he has been given.

(c) The right may be founded on the qualities of the person. Such a person is heard because he knows what he is talking about (2 Corinthians 6:6; 11:6), because of his experience with Christ (2 Corinthians 12:1-6), because of his demonstrated commitment to the Person in the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:23-27), because of his living concern for the people he leads (2 Corinthians 22:28-29), because of his trustworthiness (2 Corinthians 4:2), or because of other personal characteristics germane to the work he leads (2 Corinthians 6:1-10).

(d) The right may rest in the office itself. If it is resident in the office itself, it is not limited to areas of revelation (as in “b” above); it is authoritative beyond revelation. Right is not tied simply to previous service or greater life quality. Consequently, the elder would be more than a natural leader; he is an authorized leader as well. This last position is presumably the correct one.

Elders lead on all four bases ideally because they first are men of developed qualities above their peers, hence, natural leaders in their group. They must serve; they teach a revealed message having authority in it; they have authority in procedural and operational matters beyond revelation. The nature of their work involves supervising other people’s activities, not just proclaiming truth to them (prophet, evangelist) or doing something for them (deacons).

Evangelists, on the other hand, are authoritative in that the message they proclaim is authoritative. Evangelists as evangelists do not supervise other people’s activities beyond revelational matters. Their work as a function ends where the New Testament ends (not so of elders) and does not go beyond it into unrevealed procedural matters. Manifestly, then, their office does not contain supervisory authority; only the revelation to which they appeal has this authority. An evangelist does not have to go beyond the authority of the New Testament revelation to aggregate believers and organize them with elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3), and lead them in the process of discipline (1 Timothy 5:19), because the organizational aspect of the local church is prescribed in the New Testament, and with all authority (Titus 2:15) he commands them to order themselves in this fashion and exercise discipline. Titus and Timothy had letters written to them for this precise purpose—as a present authority for their actions in Ephesus and Crete at Paul’s behest. Of course, beyond revelation an evangelist may give direction in procedural matters, but his basis is not in his office as evangelist, but on his personal qualities, previous service, or natural leadership abilities.

In the case of evangelist in relation to the people, the people follow him peculiarly because he said so (natural, personal basis), not because the evangelist said so (position), not because he has helped them (service), but because the evangelist’s Bible says so (message).

In the case of evangelist in relation to the elders, it is worth noting the following points:

- (a) An evangelist is never said to be responsible for the flock; elders are. One person is held responsible for the activities of others only when he has supervisory authority over them; otherwise, he has no right to speak for them or be held guilty if they err.
- (b) No evangelist is seen to be directing beyond the message; elders are.
- (c) It cannot be shown that evangelists have authority in the position; with elders it can be shown.
- (d) None of the authority words used of apostles, Christ, and elders are ever used of evangelists.
- (e) None of the authority figures used of Christ, apostles, or elders are ever used of evangelists.

We may close these notes with this theoretical premise: the highest present position in an authoritative system is itself authoritative. That position is evidently the eldership as a set of qualified men.