

God Gave Us Elders

Numbers 11:16–25

How important is the family? At the pre-presbytery conference the other day I met up with Jacob Martin, a man under care of our presbytery who is preparing to go into the ministry. He came with his new wife and young son, Jacob Martin, Jr. (two months old). As he lay there in his stroller little Jacob wouldn't take his eyes off me, which charmed me exceedingly. Jacob asked me to add the word "senior" to his name as it appears in the presbytery directory. It now appears as "Jacob Martin, Sr." Such is an expression of family pride that one does not always see anymore.

Compare this with reports that one of the candidates running in the upcoming election deleted hundreds of old social-media posts before launching his campaign. Some of the deleted posts had him bashing the nuclear family—that is, families composed of a father, mother and children. "Hurry up and die," he angrily exclaimed, calling the nuclear family an "isolating, individualistic, violent way of organizing society." When the story came out, the candidate disavowed his former opinions, but did he do this from the heart?

Where did the nuclear family come from? Clearly, from God himself. God made man in his own image and formed Eve from Adam's rib. The Bible records that "Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bore [a son]." The nuclear family is thus the creation of God; it is God's perfect plan for the human race. Our Savior, Jesus Christ, was born into a nuclear family. Though he was not the biological son of a human father, he was the legal son of Joseph and Mary. He was brought up in a nuclear family.

Though in a world under the curse there are single parent families—and the church of Jesus Christ has a responsibility to take them in and care for them. Nature itself teaches us that children come from parents. Fathers by necessity are older—and hopefully wiser—than their children. In the Bible some older men are called *elders*. The "elders of Israel" and "the elders of the people"—phrases seen in our text this morning—are common biblical phrases. The Bible tells us that "if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work."¹ The man who holds the office of a bishop (*bishop* means *overseer*) is an *elder*, that is, in biblical usage, a man of good character and sound doctrine. Blessed is the church that has good elders! We get prayer requests all the time from churches that plead: "Pray for God to raise up elders." That is a biblical prayer request.

1. Revealed in both nature and Scripture

Our text begins: "So the LORD said to Moses: "Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers

¹ 1 Tim. 3:1

over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you.”

Notice the phrases “the elders of Israel” and “the elders of the people.” What are elders? It is really a simple concept, understandable by all people. It doesn’t take a college degree to figure out what the basic idea of an elder is. Both nature and Scripture make this clear. An elder in its basic sense is someone who is older and wiser, more experienced and responsible.

God gave us elders. Progressives want to eliminate the nuclear family. They want a world where “it takes a village” to raise a child. They want people to live in communes rather than in multi-generational families where elders are respected and children are obedient. Under progressive society, men and women have multiple sex partners. The man’s role is reduced to merely getting women pregnant. Women without husbands are responsible for bringing up children. The ever-growing state with its compulsory taxation funds adult irresponsibility.

But this was not God’s plan. God gave a son to Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel, the first children ever born to human parents, did not raise themselves. There was no omnipotent, paternalistic government to provide the funds. Cain and Abel were under the care and nurture of loving parents who wanted the best for them and wanted to pass down the truth about the God who fellowshiped with them in the Garden—the heavenly Father who cared for them but whose threats were real.

God gave us elders. Adam and Eve were *adults*—fully mature humans. How long after the fall did their children come along? Scripture doesn’t say, but however long or short it was, the truth was plain: Adam and Eve were *adults*, Cain and Abel were *children*. This was taught by both nature and divine revelation. The man’s role was to provide for his family and take the primary spiritual oversight of his wife and children. After the fall, Adam was notified: “cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” Eve was warned: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.” Both men and women would have their respective unique roles: man as the provider and protector, the woman as the feeder and nurturer. Adam would provide the primary spiritual oversight, and his wife’s role was to nurture and feed her children and instruct them in the ways of the Lord, under her husband’s protection.

Right from the start it was evident that God gave us *elders*. Young Cain may have been only nine months younger than his parents, but *they* were the elders. Cain was responsible to obey his parents and ultimately to obey God. But in a world marred by sin, that would never happen perfectly. Children were never intended to raise themselves, to choose their own identity, choose their desired sex, choose their own religion. Cain may not have been younger than his parents by

decades, but clearly, *they* were the elders. *They* were the ones who must be followed. The nuclear family and extended family were God's idea. It was the best and wisest plan for the human race. In the beginning, the family, church and state were all one. The family was the place where children were born and reared. The father was the spiritual leader, the primary one entrusted with the task of bringing up his children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. His law was to be followed. Man intuitively understood the principle, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Every human being intuitively understands the basic pattern: *If I obey, it will go well for me; if I disobey, I am in trouble*. Ultimately, man intuitively understands that that is the same principle that will be followed on Judgment Day. "The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse."²

A young man might want to move away from his parents to cultivate his own land, but he would need a helper. He would need a woman. "Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living." So it is today. Contrary to some of the idiotic ideas circulating in society, there are no *pregnant and lactating men*, and fathers are not expendable. The idea that paternity is bad, that adult white men are the source of all the world's problems, is foreign to Scripture. (I mention white men not because whites are better but because the progressives keep saying that paternity is the problem, that white men are the source of all our country's problems.)

Both men and women are necessary. A society is healthiest when both men *and* women take responsibility to live according to the biblical plan: men who are involved in their children's lives, and women who voluntarily and willingly submit to the spiritual authority of their husbands; *both* looking to God and to his Word for the wisdom to understand life on this earth. This is all behind the language in our text: "seventy men of the *elders* of Israel, whom you know to be the *elders* of the people." What God was prescribing was not something utterly foreign to human thinking; rather, it was something baked into our basic humanity. All of us intuitively realize that we need *elders*. Children are *not* smarter and wiser than their parents. Dads are not expendable. Moms are not just to be remembered once a year on Mother's Day.

But at the same time God does not tell Moses, "Gather to me seventy men *and* women." Did you catch that? Men and women *both* bear the image of God. Both are loved by our beneficent and wise Creator. Both are important. The church is not a men's club where men pat one another on the back and say, "Masculinity is good, femininity is bad." Church is not a place for beating down women. But notice: God

² Rom. 1:20

did *not* say, “Gather to me seventy *men* is strictly an Old Testament idea, but now, under the New Testament, *women* can be in charge.” The New Testament clearly says, “Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence.” Paul did not write this because he hated women and wanted to keep them from achieving their full human potential. He wrote those words under divine inspiration. They are the will of God. They are not optional but are binding upon all churches everywhere. Women should not preach in the church’s Sabbath-day worship. (The first day of the week, Lord’s day, is the Christian Sabbath.) Women can and should teach other women. Older women are to “teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.”³ We must not get the idea that God did not tell the churches of the New Testament that they could have women preachers because they were not ready for it then, but that is OK now. If you are attending a church that has women preachers, you are in the wrong church. You should find a church that follows the Bible.

Second, notice that this is

2. The pattern in both testaments

A simple search reveals this. The word *elders* (plural) occurs 119 times in the Old Testament and 60 times in the New Testament. The phrase “elders of Israel” occurs 33 times in the Old Testament and once in the New Testament. When Peter and John healed the lame man who had been lame from his mother’s womb—publicly, right in the middle of the temple that was in Jerusalem—and they were brought before the Sanhedrin and asked, “By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?” we read that “Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and *elders of Israel*” (Acts 4:8). The Sanhedrin (the highest court of the Jewish church, composed of seventy or so of the wisest, most learned men in all Israel) was composed of *elders*. Israel was still following that part of the revealed law. Tragically, the Sanhedrin had made a fatal mistake. It had rejected God’s Messiah. It feared that by acknowledging Jesus to be Israel’s true Messiah it would lose its power over the people. The men of the Sanhedrin didn’t want to relinquish their power, and they considered Jesus a threat. So they sentenced him to death. They went before the Roman governor and said, “Let him be crucified. His blood be on us and on our children.” That was a fatal mistake. Judaism forfeited its right to be the church of God. Paul and Barnabas would later say, “It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles.”

³ Titus 2:4–5

But the point I want you to see is that the concept “the elders of Israel” was still a valid concept under the New Testament. Unbelieving Judaism would forfeit its right to represent God in the world. The church—the true sons of Abraham—would now become “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16). But the New Testament church would still be ruled by elders. We find the word *elders* some 60 times in the New Testament. “Let the *elders* that rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. . . . For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain *elders* in every city, as I had appointed thee. . . . Is any sick among you? let him call for *the elders of the church*; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. . . . The *elders* which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed.” And even in the book of Revelation, where we read, “And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty *elders* sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. . . . The four and twenty *elders* fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne.”⁴

The bottom line: the church in both Testaments is governed by elders. This is the pattern in both testaments. You who hear my voice who are part of churches that don’t have elders need to realize that your church is being disobedient to God on this fundamental matter. The Word of God does not give the church the option of *not* having elders.

Thirdly, rule by elders is

3. The simplest, most caring, most effective oversight

Moses was directed to choose men whom he knew to be elders, that is, godly wise and experienced men of good character, whom he should set over the people. Moses was not to rule over the people alone. He would need godly men to help rule over the church of God. These elders would be officers over the people. They were to be brought to the tabernacle of meeting to stand before God and be ordained to office.

There was to be a service of ordination and installation. This is much like the work that the Presbytery was involved in yesterday. The presbytery is the biblical institution that ordains and oversees ministers of the Word. This pattern has never been rescinded. Biblical church government is *presbyterian*, that is rule by a plurality of godly elders. Presbyterian government is *not* optional. It is clearly the biblical pattern. God never said, “Go ahead and organize your church the way you like it, the way it appeals to you”—never! Some churches have extensive

⁴ 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1; Rev. 4:4, 10

hierarchies: deacons, priests, bishops, archbishops, cardinals, the pope, who answers to no one except allegedly to Christ himself. The problem with popery is that it is nowhere commanded anywhere in the Bible. As a matter of fact it is contrary to the principle, “Obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves” (Heb. 13:17). God’s Word says, “In a multitude of counselors there is safety.” There is no example in the Bible of a church with just a single elder who bears sole authority. Under presbyterian government, if a church session grows so small as to not have a plurality of elders, it may petition the presbytery to appoint adjunct elders. Our church did this in the past. Thankfully, the Lord has been faithful and raised up more ruling elders in our midst. Last week, Grace OPC prayed that the Lord would raise up more ministers in our denomination. That is a biblical prayer. Similarly, we ought to pray that the Lord would raise up more elders and deacons in our midst to share the load. This would be a great benefit to God’s people. Under Old Testament law, there were many Levites. The Levites were scattered all throughout the land, not just crowded around Jerusalem. The Levites were teachers of the Word. They taught the Word of God in an official capacity. This is the biblical pattern.

We live in a culture of consumer Christianity, where people choose teachers according to their personal likes or dislikes. You can find self-appointed teachers on TV, radio, the Internet—women as well as men. Many of them are young and hip—teachers who have no connection with the local church but just do their own thing. Teachers who teach that people ought to *stay away from* the visible church, that the visible church is *not to be trusted*. But what did Christ say? “I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.” The Lord Jesus committed himself to the building up of his *church*, his heavenly kingdom. But the church is not just heavenly; it has an earthly expression. God wanted his people to be under the oversight of godly elders. I was talking to someone last week about a friend of his who has had bad experiences in various churches, who is wary of church authority. But God wisely instituted proper church authority: pastors, ruling elders and deacons. That is the Bible way. Churches that do not have elders ought to adopt adjunct elders. They ought to contact a biblical presbytery and ask for help to bring their church government into conformity with biblical church government. This is the Bible way. It is not optional. The Bible doesn’t say, “Do this if you think it’s a good idea.” This is *Christ’s* church! He is alone is King. And as King, he has the sole and undisputed right to set up the kind of government in his church that is pleasing to him. People choose churches for all kinds of reasons. God’s Word does not tell us to choose a church based on one’s personal tastes. The church ought to be overseen by elders.

At presbytery yesterday we heard our moderator pray that the Spirit of God would rest upon the men we received and licensed: “In the name of the Lord Jesus

Christ, and by the authority that he has given to the church for its edification, we license you to preach the gospel, wherever God in his providence may call you; and for this purpose, may the blessing of God rest upon you, and the Spirit of Christ fill your heart. Amen.”

The church is the institution God promises to bless by his Spirit. It is the place of healing and growth and instruction in the ways of the Lord. It is the place where the gospel is preached. Let us all submit ourselves to the government of his church, for our own good. Amen!