

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF GOD

BY ZACK M. GUESS
MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE
MARCH, 1999

INTRODUCTION

We all know that God is **omnipresent**. He is “everywhere present, and nowhere absent.” However, throughout recorded Biblical history, He has often been pleased to manifest Himself in special ways in certain places. One of the first instances of this is recorded in Genesis 28:17. Here, after Jacob had awakened from his vision of the ladder bridging heaven and earth, he said, “How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the **house of God**, and this is the gate of heaven.” It is significant that this first mention of the house of God in Scripture speaks of His **specially manifested presence**. Later, the **tabernacle** was called the house of God. (1 Chron. 6:48). We know that the Lord was pleased to reveal Himself in the tabernacle in a very special way. Even later, the **temple** was referred to as the house of God. (2 Chron. 3:3). The Lord was manifested in the temple in a unique way. He chose to reveal His presence there in a way that He did in no other place on earth.

In New Testament times the Scripture makes plain that the Lord specially inhabits an entity which is also called the house of God. We read of this in 1 Timothy 3:15, where Paul speaks of the “**house of God**, which is the **church of the living God**, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Now this New Testament church is not a building. The “church” or ekklesia is composed of those individuals who have been called out from the world by the Holy Spirit and who have been assembled to corporately worship Him. I believe that these are the ones Jesus was referring to in John 4:23 when He said, “the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.”

God, then, has chosen to manifest Himself specially today in the New Testament church. This **special presence** is what makes a church a church. This special, abiding presence is referred to as a **candlestick** in the book of Revelation. The Lord has revealed to us in Revelation 1: 20 that “the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”

When I am speaking, therefore, of “building the house of God,” I am speaking of building the New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THINE IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY

At the very outset of our study we do well to emphasize what the Lord Jesus said in John 15:5, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for **without me ye can do nothing.**” We very rarely realize how utterly dependent we are on the Lord.

When we have a little success we are so prone to get lifted up in pride. It has been my sad observation to see several good, able ministers let a little spiritual prosperity go to their heads. They got to thinking they had “arrived” and that they had the prerogative to not only pastor their churches, but had earned the right to tell everyone else how to run their business. Even the meek Moses fell prey to this. In Numbers 20: 10 he said, “Hear now, ye rebels; must **we** fetch you water out of this rock?” He made a big mistake when he used the word “we.” Moses could have smitten that rock for a hundred years and not a drop of water would have come out of it without the power of God. A very safe course for us would be to give God **100%** of the credit for anything good that happens in our ministries, and to accept **100%** of the blame for anything that does not turn out right. We have a very good clause in one of the songs that we frequently sing: “All is vain unless the Spirit of the holy One comes down.”

We ministers of the gospel need to memorize and often quote to ourselves Isaiah 42:8, “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.”

One final Scriptural truth that we must constantly keep in mind is found in Psalm 127:1 “Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.”

AN ENCOURAGEMENT

Having said all the above, however, I believe that we have the greatest reason to be optimistic and enthusiastic as we go about the task of building the house of God. While it is true that we can do nothing without the Lord, it is also true that, as Paul said in Philippians 4:13, “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Another consideration that should set us on fire with encouragement and enthusiasm is the fact that we are actually laboring with God as we go about the work of the ministry. Speaking of himself and other ministers of the gospel, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 3:9, “For we are **labourers together** with God...” That is an incredible truth that you need to meditate on the next time you become discouraged. Building the church is the work of Jesus Christ. In Matthew 16:18 the Lord Jesus said, “upon this rock **I will build** my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” He merely uses us as instruments in His hand. This sense of wonder that the Lord has chosen such sinners as we are as instruments to build His church should never leave us. Paul never got over being amazed that God would use such a one as he was in His work. The great but humble apostle said in Ephesians 3:8, “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...”

We also need to remember that the Lord has never called us to be **successful**. He has called us to be **faithful**. He has told us in 1 Corinthians 4:2, “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.” If we are faithful we will be successful as far as the Lord is concerned, no matter what the outward results of our ministries may seem to be.

My prayer is that as we consider some of the mechanics of building up the churches where we labor, we will work hard because our heart is in the work. If we truly love God’s house, we will give it our best shot. We will have the attitude that King David expressed in 1 Chronicles 29:3, “Moreover, because **I have set my affection to the house of my God**, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which

I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house..."

TEAMWORK

I have been doing the work of a pastor for more than thirty years, and I have become increasingly convinced that if a church prospers spiritually, that prosperity comes as a result of teamwork. A church may have a powerful preacher, but if she does not have the other necessary gifts functioning as they should, she will not truly be a strong church. The pastor must be doing his job; the same holds true of the deacons and other members. The preaching of the gospel is the most important thing the church does, but the church is not a stage where the preacher is in the spotlight and "performs." The propagation of the gospel is teamwork. The minister is the one who actually does the preaching, but the entire church is vitally involved in this work. This teamwork is pictured in the New Testament under the figure of the human body. A properly functioning body is a marvel of precision and coordination. We rarely appreciate how smoothly our bodies function until we have a stroke or some other ailment that prevents us from functioning as we should. Just to be able to perform the normal tasks of a day is a wonderful thing. It is amazing indeed to observe the tremendous coordination of a body which is engaged in an athletic endeavor. For the body to work as it should each member must do what it is specifically designed to do, and each member must work in coordination with the other members. This working of the church as compared to the human body is seen in Romans 12 and in 1 Corinthians 12. This is also spoken of in Ephesians 4 and one of the passages that most beautifully describes this is Ephesians 4:15,16, "But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

Another verse where this teamwork is mentioned is Philippians 1:27, where Paul says, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel..." The word translated "striving together" is a very interesting word. It is *sunathleo* (sunathleo). This is a compound of two words: the preposition *sun* (sun), which means "with, together with," and *athleo* (athleo), a verb, which means "to strive or contend." We get the English word "athlete" from this verb. Put the words together and the picture is that of an army or an athletic team working in close cooperation to win a battle or a contest.

Paul recognized the necessity of this teamwork in spreading the gospel. He thanked the Philippians for their "fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;..." (Phil. 1:5). The word translated "fellowship" is *koinwnia* (koinonia). This is a very rich word, and one of its primary meanings is "joint participation." These Philippian "saints," not just the bishops and deacons, were joint participants in the spread of the gospel at Rome where Paul was imprisoned as he wrote this letter. They participated by praying for Paul, by contributing to his financial needs, and perhaps in other ways. It would not have been possible for Paul to have done what he did without their cooperation and assistance. This was **gospel teamwork**.

If a church can get a vision of this teamwork they are in for some exciting times. In too many cases, the idea is that the minister, and maybe the deacons, are about the only ones that really have anything to do in a church. The church just kind of exists as a stage where the preacher can do his thing. If this idea prevails there will not be much motivation in the pew. However, if you can convince your church members that each of them has a real and vital role in the spread of the gospel, your church will be a bee hive of godly activity. You must believe and you must convince those to whom you minister, that you cannot do your work to the fullest potential without their cooperation and assistance. A pastor that runs a "one man show" does not have the proper Biblical vision of how a New Testament church is designed to operate.

There is a beautiful passage which describes the inseparable relationship between the pastor and the church as they worship God together. In Philippians 2:17 Paul says, "Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all." When Paul uses the words "and if I be offered," he is referring to the drink offering. In many instances in the Old Testament sacrificial system a drink offering was offered in conjunction with the main or primary offering. The drink offering was poured out on or beside the primary offering. The primary offering was the principal one. An example of this can be seen in Numbers 28:8. Paul is saying that the worship of the church at Philippi is the fundamental offering and that his worship and service is being poured out in association with theirs. The two offerings are so closely intertwined that they really become parts of the same offering. What a glorious picture this is of the closeness that should exist in the combined worship of a pastor and the flock that he oversees! If both pastor and people could get a vision of this what an inducement it would be for them to work closely together.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PASTOR AND FLOCK

PASTOR

Satan knows what tremendous spiritual power there is in a pastor and church loving each other and closely working together in the propagation of the gospel. He will do everything he can to hinder this. It saddens me to sometimes observe tension, resentment, and mistrust arising between a pastor and those to whom he ministers. We must work hard to educate ourselves and our people to the relationship that our Lord intended to exist between pastor and flock. I have experienced it both ways. There have been occasions in my ministry that I have sometimes dreaded going to church, especially to business meetings! For the past two decades, however, it has mostly been a great joy to preach to and lead the flock that God has made me the overseer of. It takes constant prayer, study, and work to maintain this relationship. The results, however, are more than worth the effort.

The pastor is the one who has to take the lead in this relationship. First, he has to have a great love for the people he pastors. This will not always be easy, because God's people do not always act like they should. The pastor must always remember that he is shepherding sheep that the Lord loves and has shed His own precious blood for. As Paul instructed the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." We must never make the

mistake of becoming sinfully angry with the Lord's people, no matter how much they may provoke us. Moses made this mistake only one time and was not permitted to enter Caanan because of it.

We must love the people and we must let them know we love them both by our **words** and by our **actions**. Paul constantly used terms of endearment when he wrote his epistles. An example of this is in Philippians 4:1, "Therefore, my brethren **dearly beloved** and longed for, my **joy and crown**, so stand fast in the Lord, my **dearly beloved**." Not only did he tell the people how much he loved them; he proved this love by his actions. He said in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, "But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children..." He said in verse 11 of this same chapter, "As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as a father doth his children..."

This last-quoted verse brings to mind the God-ordained relationship that God has designed to exist between pastor and people. A pastor must be a kind of **father figure** to his people. This is clearly taught in 1 Timothy 3:4,5, where Paul is giving the necessary qualifications for a bishop. He says that a bishop must be "One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity." He then asks that "if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?"

A good father must not be a weakling nor a pushover. He must have the respect of his children. He must provide them with direction and incentive. On the other hand, he must not be an unreasonable tyrant. The pastor must also provide this balance. On the one hand, he must be willing to take "the oversight of the flock." He must not shirk his responsibility in this. Some pastors are so weak and timid that they are afraid to step out and take the leadership. They are willing to turn this responsibility over to the deacons or to other men who have strong personalities. This will never do. A man once wisely told me that if a person in a position of responsibility failed to exercise in that capacity a leadership vacuum would be created. He said that invariably the least qualified person would try to step in and fill that void. This sadly happened to me one time when I failed to assume my God-given responsibility.

However, in exercising this strong leadership, neither a father nor a pastor must be a dictator. They must personally model the proper behavior to those who are under them. Much of their leadership must be by **example**. As Peter instructed a group of elders in 1 Peter 5:3, "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock." This is true of pastors of all ages, but it is especially pertinent to young pastors, who must earn the respect of the people they lead. Paul instructed his favorite young preacher in 1 Timothy 4:12 to "Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an **example of the believers**, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." A wise old preacher once told me, "If you have proved to the people you preach to that you really love them, you can come down hard on them with the Word of God, and they will accept it. However, if they do not know you love them, they won't take it."

This entire question of pastoral leadership is thrown clearly into the light by an analysis of Hebrews 13:17, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you." The word "obey" is *pei,qw* (*peitho*). In the middle voice which is used here it means "to be persuaded, to listen to, to obey." W. E. Vine says "The obedience suggested is not by submission to

authority, but resulting from persuasion.” We must persuade our people to do what is right by skillfully, and with the power of the Holy Spirit, presenting the Scriptures to them. The word “rule” in this passage is h`ge,omai (hegeomai). The primary idea in this word is “leading by going before.” The English word that comes from this is “hegemony.” It can mean “leadership, predominant influence.” That is the way that New Testament pastors rule. If a pastor is leading like he ought, the sheep should be happy to follow him. This will be a very dedicated and hard-working pastor. This is indicated by the word translated “watch” in the clause “watch for your souls.” The word is avgrupne,w(agrupneo), and means “to be sleepless, keep awake, watch.”

I realize that this is a daunting task. It is not easy. A realization of this should drive us to our knees in prayer. When God offered Solomon his heart's desire, the king made a very wise request. This is recorded in 1 Kings 3:7-9, “And now, O LORD my God, thou hast made thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. **Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart** to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?” Brethren, if we will ask our God for this wisdom, He will surely give it to us. He has promised us in James 1:5 that “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.”

One of the best practical ways that I have found for a pastor to watch for the souls of those God has placed under his care is to **regularly pray** for them. A very good way to do this is to daily pray for a few names on the church membership list. It should be a reasonable goal even in a good-sized church for the pastor to pray for each of the members at least once a week. As you are praying for the members, you will be compelled to think about their spiritual condition and about their various needs.

THE PEOPLE

There is another side to this coin. The people of God have a **sacred duty** to love and support their pastors as long as these men are leading them according to the Scriptures and are preaching to them from the word of God. God's people need to be taught this responsibility from the Word of God. If, according to Titus 2:4, the younger women should be taught to love their husbands, then the people of God can and should be taught to love and esteem their pastors. We live in a day of rebellion and of widespread disrespect for authority. Children are often disobedient to their parents. In many instances employees do not treat their employers with the deference that is demanded by Scripture. This attitude sometimes raises its ugly head in our churches. As I have already indicated, pastors are not to be tyrants. However, they are supposed to exercise strong leadership. If the pastors will not lead, or if the people will not follow, it is impossible for a church to be healthy and well-pleasing to God.

According to the Scriptures, it would be very difficult for the members of a church to esteem their faithful pastor too highly. Scripture has some very strong things to say about this. One of my favorite passages on this subject is 1 Thessalonians 5:12,13, which says, “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them

very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.”

The word translated “know,” according to the *Online Bible*, means here in 1 Thessalonians 4:12, “to have regard for one, cherish, pay attention to.” How rich this meaning is! When you have **regard** for someone, you show respect and concern for that person. When you **cherish** an individual, you treat that person as dear and care tenderly for him or her. When you pay attention to somebody, you consciously mentally **concentrate** on what they are saying. To pay attention to a person is to show consideration for what he is saying. If God’s people would “know” their pastors in the sense of this text, our churches would be in a position to move mightily forward in the work of the Lord.

The expression “esteem them very highly” is a powerful one indeed. The word “esteem” here means “to consider, deem, account, think.” “Very highly” is the same expression translated “exceeding abundantly above” in Ephesians 3:20. This is a grammatical construction called a **double-compound superlative adverb**. To attempt to show the great force of this consider that there are three degrees of intensity in adverbs. We might say that a man had done **well**. That is the **positive degree**. We might say that another man had done **better**. That is the **comparative degree**. We might say that still another man had done **best**. That is the **superlative degree**. There is a preposition which is attached to this adverb which intensifies its force. This is preceded by still another preposition *u`pe,r* (huper), from which we get the English word “super.” It is obvious that the Holy Spirit here is very powerfully showing us that a congregation has a **sacred obligation** to hold their pastors in the very highest regard.

If we can get back to this: the pastors loving their people enough to die for them, and the people holding their pastors in the very highest esteem, and both of them loving the Lord Jesus Christ with all their hearts, we will see great things in our churches.

DEACONS

There have been a lot of jokes told of strained relationships between pastors and deacons. I do not think these jokes are very funny. God ordained only two offices in the New Testament Church, bishops and deacons. It is obvious that a church cannot function well if there is friction or animosity between those who hold these offices. It should also be apparent that things will not work if either of those who hold these offices misunderstands the function of the office and tries to discharge the business of an office which does not belong to him. Satan knows how important it is that pastors and deacons work in close cooperation, and he will do everything he can to disrupt this relationship.

In my over thirty years of pastoral leadership, I have had both happy and sad experiences with deacons. There is nothing which can greater demoralize and hinder a pastor than a deacon who opposes him and will not cooperate. A deacon who has a bad spirit and who is out of his place is a curse to a pastor and to a church.

Thankfully, however, a Spirit-filled deacon is the best friend a pastor can have. I am thankful that most of

my experiences with deacons have been very good ones. I feel very strong in the church that I pastor, partly because we are blessed with deacons who are loyal to me as long as I am following the Lord. This does not mean that they are "yes men," but they do respect and support me, and they let everyone know that they are behind me. What a great blessing this is. We need to pray that God will raise up good pastors, but we also need to pray that He will raise up good deacons. The pastor has a responsibility to teach the deacon brethren from the Scriptures how they are to function in their office. Just like a man has to spend some time with his wife if they are to have a good relationship, a pastor has to spend some time with his deacons if he wants to cultivate the proper working relationship with them. One of the best things a pastor and deacons can do is to pray and study God's word together.

This is really not the place to discuss the office of deacon extensively, however I want to include in the section below, some material I wrote two years ago occasioned by the death of my dear father-in-law, Brother Tony Machiavello. If every deacon had the spirit that Brother Tony had, our churches would be on the road to revival.

SPIRIT-FILLED DEACON

One of the greatest blessings a church can have is a faithful minister. However, equally important is to have good deacons. As a pastor for over thirty years, I can testify that a good deacon cannot be valued too highly. The qualifications for the office of deacon are set forth in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. Brother Tony met those qualifications. Moreover, in the account of the institution of the office of deacon in the New Testament church which is recorded in the book of Acts, there are some other qualifications mentioned which are very important. In Acts 6:3 Peter told the church, "Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." As his pastor for many years, I can truly say that Brother Tony was "full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." He was not argumentative. He was a peace maker. He was alert. He gave sound advice. During the song service, or sometimes at the end of the preaching, our dear brother would comment on a portion of Scripture or give us a word of exhortation. His remarks were always appropriate and stimulated us to a closer walk with God. He was held in the highest regard by all our church members and by many members of other churches. When he died we knew that we had suffered a **great loss**.

What was the secret of his being filled with the Holy Ghost and with wisdom? For one thing, he constantly read and studied the Bible and good Christian literature. He had a library that was better than most preachers' libraries. He had a room on his house that he converted into a study. On the night stand beside his bed you would always find a Bible, some books, and some religious periodicals. He knew his Bible well. He was also very well versed in church history and had an intimate knowledge of Primitive Baptist church history.

He was also a man of fervent prayer. Each night he and his wife would lift up family, church, friends, the nation, and the needy before the throne of grace. On two occasions one of our ministers, Elder Bobby Poe, went to the Philippines to preach the everlasting gospel. We at Grace Chapel determined that each night he was gone, we would meet to pray. On one of the trips Brother Bobby was gone for about sixty

days. Brother Tony did not miss a single one of those prayer meetings! For over ten years, several of the men here at Grace Chapel have met early one morning of each week to pray that God would send revival to His people. Brother Tony was a regular attendant at these prayer meetings. On the Tuesday morning before his death on the following Sunday, he was at that meeting, even though it was obvious that he did not feel well.

It is not easy to be Spirit-filled. That is why there are not more spirit-filled church members. However, if our churches are ever going to prosper spiritually, we must have spirit-filled members. It is especially important that the leaders of the churches be constantly filled with the Holy Spirit. I pray that many who read this will be stirred up to follow the example of Brother Tony in this regard. If you want to be this way, you have got to do it the same way he did. You must constantly read and study the word of God. You must be diligent in prayer. You must not have so many outside interests that they drain away the energy you need to put into spiritual pursuits.

PLURALITY OF ELDERS

This last part of the paper may be controversial, but I believe I can bring the New Testament to bear on the subject. I believe that in the early days of the church the common practice was that each church had more than one elder. In our day we have lost that in most places. There are many reasons why we have lost it. Sometimes men have been contentious and not able to get along. Sometimes, because of Scriptural ignorance, we have not been aware of God's pattern for His church. Some of us may have meant well, but have not known how to go about it.

I believe that, properly practiced, a plurality of elders can be a great blessing to both the church and the elders themselves. Let me make it very plain that I am **not** talking about the practice of co-pastors. I do not believe that this is Biblical. I believe that each church ought to have her own pastor (I will support this from the Bible a little later on). The "buck has got to stop" somewhere. I do not believe in Presbyterianism with its "ruling elders" and such like. However, I do believe the Bible clearly teaches that in an ideal situation there is more than one elder in a church.

Of course, we must go to the Bible to make our case. I will make the bold statement that **in each church in the New Testament in which the number of elders is revealed, there are always more than one!** Most of our Scriptural data will be found in the Acts of the Apostles. It will be well to establish, first of all, that in the New Testament the terms "elder" and "bishop" are referring to the same person. This can be clearly seen from the 20th chapter of Acts. In Acts 20: 17 Paul called for the elders of the church at Ephesus. He gave them a powerful charge, and in doing so he mentioned in verse twenty-eight that the Holy Ghost had made them "overseers" of the flock. The word translated "overseers" is *epi,skopoj* (*episkopos*). This means "one who looks over or superintends." This is the same word which is translated "bishop" in 1 Timothy 3:2. Paul called these Ephesian elders overseers or bishops. Probably the word "elder" refers more to the **dignity** of the office, while the word "bishop" refers more to the **function** of the office.

A plurality of elders is indicated in Acts 11:30 where the love-offering from Antioch was carried by Paul and Barnabas to the “elders” of the church at Jerusalem. It is plain that the Jerusalem church had more than one elder. That this is so is also plain from considering Acts 15: 2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 21:8. In each of these verses the Jerusalem church is under consideration and the number of elders is plural.

We have already seen from Acts 20: 17, 28 that there was more than one elder in the Ephesian church. Titus was commanded to go to Crete so that he could “ordain elders in every city.” It is very likely that in each city that he went to in Crete there was only one church, so he was ordaining elders in every church. If anyone would dispute this he needs to carefully consider Acts 14:23 where it is said that Barnabas and Paul “ordained them elders in every church.” Incidentally, a comparison of Titus 1:5 and 1: 7 shows conclusively that the bishop and elder were the same person.

Other Scriptures which use the word “elder” in the plural are James 5:14 and 1Peter 5:1. All of this seems consistent with the way the Lord Jesus sent out His followers personally while He was here in the days of His earthly ministry. He sent two disciples to do a job in Matthew 21:1. It says of Jesus in Mark 6:7 “And he called unto him the twelve, and began to send them forth by two and two...” Later He did the same thing as is said in Luke 10:1 “After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come.”

I realize that the Old Testament Scripture which I am about to quote has nothing to do directly with how many elders there should be in a New Testament church, but I think an important principle is taught here, nevertheless. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 reads “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

I mentioned previously that I do not believe the Bible supports the idea of **co-pastors**. I believe the Scriptures make it plain that we are correct in the concept of one man who is properly called “pastor.” The primary proof I will give for this is the church at Jerusalem. We have already seen that this church had more than one elder. However, it is very plain from a look at Acts that James was the **spokesman and principal leader** of this church. This is true even though some of the apostles were members of this church. In Acts 15, when the church at Jerusalem was the scene of a great counsel meeting involving primarily the Jerusalem church and the one at Syrian Antioch, Peter arose and made a speech. When he was finished, James spoke, beginning in verse 13. It is obvious that he held a position of respect and leadership. When he was finished speaking the apostles and other elders were pleased with what he had said and acted on it. Another indication that James was the primary leader at the Jerusalem church occurred when Paul returned to Jerusalem after a long absence. When he did this it is written in Acts 21:18 “And the day following Paul went in with us unto James; and all the elders were present.”

Most commentators think that the “angels” of the churches mentioned in Revelation, chapters one and

two, are the pastors. Each church had only one angel.

PRACTICAL OUT-WORKING

I do not have all the answers on this concept of the plurality of elders, but I do have a few thoughts to offer. First, I have been blessed in most of my ministry to work in situations in which there was more than one elder. When I was first ordained there were three young preachers who were in the same church with our father-in-the ministry, Elder Hassell Wallis. Looking back, these were some of the happiest and most fruitful days of my ministry. Brother Wallis was a wonderful pastor and a powerful preacher. We learned from him as we heard him preach. He constantly charged us to study and to be honest and godly ministers. He set the example of sterling integrity. We visited the hospitals and homes of members with him and learned how to deal with delicate situations. We did not know it at the time, but we were being trained for the ministry according to the Biblical path. Paul told his favorite young preacher in 2 Timothy 2:2 "And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also."

We were also a blessing to Brother Wallis and the church. Everyone knew who the pastor was. We would not have dared to usurp his authority or to be disloyal to him. We backed him up in what he taught and did. He always had a Scripture to support what he said. He let us preach when he could. We had some powerful services, sometimes with more than one sermon. We did not have to wait for a special meeting to have a wonderful spiritual time. For several years, almost every time we met we had a special meeting.

Later, fields of labor began to open up for us and we began to go where God opened doors for us. For several years I labored without the help of another elder. In time God called me to Grace Chapel. That has been almost thirty years ago. In all that time it has been my great blessing to work with a plurality of elders. I will not say that it has always been easy. There have been times when we have had to work out differences. However, we have done this prayerfully and we have done it privately, without disturbing the flock. As I have said earlier, a church has to practice team work. Everyone has to prayerfully seek his place and then has to be content to labor in that place. One advantage we have at Grace Chapel is that we meet three times each week. We meet on Sunday, morning and evening, and we meet on Wednesday evening. After preaching on Sunday morning, it is a great blessing for me to get to hear some able preaching on Sunday night.

One of my fellow elders and one of the best friends I have ever had is Elder Bobby Poe. Brother Bobby is older than I am, but he constantly supports me in the pastoral role in which God has placed me. He publicly supports me in the primary leadership role. This support gives me great strength. On the other hand, I greatly respect him and treat him accordingly. Brother Bobby was the founding pastor of Grace Chapel. I moved out of Memphis to start a new church. When I came back after several years, he resigned Grace Chapel and suggested that they call me as pastor. I was shocked. However, after much prayer, I felt that the Lord would have me to accept that call. He and I labored together for several years. He left for awhile to help some struggling churches get on their feet, and then, to my great joy, he

came back. In the meantime there have been several other men with whom I have been blessed to work.

I have found that when the Lord is in the matter, the ministries of several men in a church greatly benefit each other. There are certain gifts that I don't have that other men have. Some men are more gifted in leadership than are others. Some men are more dynamic preachers than are others. Some men excel in visiting in the homes. Sometimes I have been blessed to do what might be called "team counseling" with the help of one of my fellow elders. It is beautiful to me to see the Lord mold the gifts of different men in such a way that they supplement one another. It is a great blessing to pray with and to seek counsel from fellow laborers when difficulties arise in the church. I believe we should pray that the Lord would teach us to work with other men in the oversight of the flock.

If you are given to jealousy and feel that other men are a threat to you, you will never be able to enjoy the blessing of working in a close relationship with other men. I will offer a word of caution to those of you who may be in a church with another minister who is the pastor. Give that man your strong support. Do not undermine him, either publicly or privately.

One thing that will help men work together is that they pray together. For approximately twelve years now, some of the men of Grace Chapel have faithfully met together for prayer on Tuesday mornings. These have been some glorious occasions. When ministers sincerely pray together on a consistent basis, God will show them how to work together. It is very significant that, according to Acts 13:1-4, when several leaders of the church in Antioch of Syria, began to fast and pray together, the Lord opened up a great door of evangelism on the European continent.

CONCLUSION

Brethren, we have a great work ahead of us. Our Master has given us everything we need to get the job done. It is our inestimable privilege to be engaged in the greatest work on earth- that of **building the house of God!** The task is great, but it is worth our very best effort. Let us remember back into Old Testament times when another people had a formidable task of building. They had to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. There were many skeptics and critics who said that the job could not be done. However, with the help of God, they completed the task in just fifty-two days! When Nehemiah called the leaders of the people together he said "...**come, and let us build** up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach." Then he told them how the Lord had been with him in the planning and preparatory stages. The people were encouraged and they said "**Let us rise up and build.**" It is finally said in Nehemiah 4:6 "So built we the wall; and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for **the people had a mind to work.**"

Brethren, let it be so with us!