

The Elders' Secretary

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Why it is wise for a church to have one?

When I came into ministry in the distant past, I joined an eldership team which had a secretary who came along and took notes and minutes of the elders' meetings.

Over the years three different mature Christian women fulfilled this role with wonderful confidentiality and efficiency. You know who you are. A big 'thank you' to you! Then, with the passing of time, a new set of younger elders came in and they felt that the post was unnecessary. They could take their own minutes with their laptops and i-Phones. They felt constrained by the presence of another person.

Having stepped down from ministry over five years ago now, on reflection I have come to conclude that the termination of the previous arrangement was a very unfortunate move. I want to strongly suggest that, given the right person, churches and leadership teams would benefit greatly in these days from the church having an elders' secretary.

Benefits

Here are four benefits which spring immediately to mind.

Accuracy

A person who is just there to take notes is likely to be more accurate. How many problems arise in churches because of misunderstandings or disagreements over what was said? An agreed set of minutes can save a church a lot of heartache. If the minute taker is also part of the discussion, he can think something and not actually voice his thoughts, but inadvertently it lands up in the minutes. An independent arbiter of truth is a help to unity.

Transparency

We live in days when the whole topic of spiritual abuse and leaders misusing their power is in the air. In his excellent book *Powerful Leaders?*, Marcus Honeysett writes of leaderships where 'transparency is replaced by secrecy' and the plural leadership becomes 'an impenetrable and mutually reinforcing inner circle.' Having a secretary present can help prevent that happening.

Accountability

My own understanding of NT ecclesiology is that though the elders have a certain authority as they teach the Word of God, they are, under Christ, ultimately accountable to the congregation they serve. Having a trustworthy member of the congregation, like a secretary, present in the elders' meetings is a gentle reminder to the elders that they are not a law unto themselves.

Courtesy

Elders are likely to have differing views on matters from time to time. Their discussions ought to be carried out with mutual respect and courtesy. Sadly, in my own experience, the only time I ever found myself being shouted at by another elder was once we had dispensed with having a secretary. To have another witness present can often be an encouragement to necessary restraint.

But of course appointing an elders' secretary is not a guaranteed panacea for all problems. If he or she cannot keep confidences then they can be a disaster. And manipulative leaders can sometimes subvert the secretary to make sure they are 'on side.' 'You wouldn't want to rock the boat would you? So keep this quiet.' Making this a 'staff' paid position is likely to aid such subversion. Better to keep things informal.

There also needs to be a decision and guidelines to which the church assents concerning whether or not the secretary should be privy to pastoral problems which the elders might discuss.

There are difficulties to address in having a secretary, but it seems to me that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

Is this Scriptural?

Certainly you will not find the title 'elders' secretary' in the NT. But what you will find are gifted church members and also deacons.

Church members are not meant to be passive but active members of the body of Christ using their gifts to build up the body (Ephesians 4:16). Every Christian is spiritually gifted and a spiritual gift is any ability that the Holy Spirit can use for strengthening the church. A church is strengthened when its activities are well managed. Everyone is confident that everything will stand up to scrutiny. Indeed 'everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way' (1 Corinthians 14:40). If a man or woman who is a member of the church, who is a mature and trustworthy Christian, is gifted in the area of administration, surely it is not wrong for them to be asked to use their gift in helping the elders as their secretary?

Again, the work of deacons in Scripture is not meant to be restricted to repairing the building and setting out the chairs. These are people just as spiritual as the elders (1 Timothy 3:8–13). The difference is that they are not teachers of the church (1 Timothy 3:2). They are people who are meant to serve the church and help the elders in whatever ways are necessary. Here again we have people who are tailor-made for the job of elders' secretary.

If there are a number of people who are gifted in this way, it may be appropriate to share out the work of attending elders' meetings and getting minutes ready in order that the work does not become too much of a burden, and to widen transparency.

The appointment of an elders' secretary is a simple and practical move towards more openness in the government of a church.