

Biblical Eldership

Leadership

To define biblical eldership we will look at three, distinguishing features of a New Testament, Christian eldership: Church oversight & leadership, qualified leadership, and servant leadership.

Shepherding Leadership

According to the New Testament, elders lead the church, teach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the “local church”. Therefore, when Paul and Peter directly exhort the elders to do their duty, they both employ shepherding imagery. *It should be observed that these two giant apostles assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group but the elders.* Paul reminds the Asian elders that God the Holy Spirit placed them in the flock as overseers for the purpose of shepherding the church of God (Acts 20:28). Peter exhorts the elders to be all that shepherds should be to the flock (1 Peter 5:2). If we want to understand Christian elders and their work, we must understand the biblical imagery of shepherding. As keepers of sheep, biblical elders are to protect, feed, and lead the flock and to help meet the flock’s many practical needs. Using these four, broad, categories, let us briefly consider the examples, exhortations, and teachings of the New Testament regarding shepherd elders.

Protecting the Flock

A **major part** of the New Testament elders’ work is **to protect the local church from false teachers**. As Paul was leaving Asia Minor, he summons the elders of the church in Ephesus for a farewell exhortation. The essence of Paul’s charge is this: *guard the flock—wolves are coming*: And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church “*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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert.*” (Acts 20:17,28-31a; italics added).

According to Paul’s required qualifications for eldership, a prospective elder must have enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to refute false teachers: For this reason I left “you (Titus a young pastor)” in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach . . . holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, *that he may be able . . . to refute those who contradict* [sound doctrine] (Titus 1:5,6a,9; italics added). The Jerusalem elders, for example, met with the apostles to judge doctrinal error: “And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this [doctrinal] matter” (Acts 15:6).

Like the apostles, the Jerusalem elders had to know the Word so that they could protect the flock from false teaching.

Feeding the Flock

New Testament elders should be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Listing elder qualifications in his letter to Titus, Paul states, “[The elder must hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). In an extremely significant passage on elders, Paul writes about some elders who labor at preaching and teaching and thus deserve financial support from the local church: Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially *those who work hard at preaching and teaching*. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Tim. 5:17,18; italics added). Paul reminds the Ephesians elders that he has taught them and the church the full plan and purpose of God: “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Now it was time for the elders to do the same. Since elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), part of their shepherding task is to see that the flock is fed God’s Word.

Leading the Flock

In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or any group of people means to lead or govern (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:71, 72). According to Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, elders are to lead and govern the church of God. To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “Let the elders who rule [lead, direct, manage] well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17a). Elders, then, are to lead, direct, govern, manage, and otherwise care for the flock of God. In Titus 1:7, Paul insists that a prospective elder be morally and spiritually above reproach because he will be “God’s steward.” A steward is a “household manager,” someone with official responsibility over the master’s servants, property, and even finances. Elders are stewards of God’s household, the local church.

Meet the Flock’s Many Practical Needs

In addition to the familiar, broad categories of protecting, feeding, and leading the flock, elders are also to bear responsibility for meeting the practical, diverse needs of the flock. For example, James instructs sick members of the flock to call for the elders of the church: “Is anyone among you sick? 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” (James 5:14). Paul exhorts the Ephesians elders to care for the weak and needy of the flock: “In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner *you must help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (Acts 20:35; italics added).

Elders must be available and willing to meet the needs of those in the church. This responsibility includes: visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved; strengthening the weak; praying for *all* the sheep; visiting new members; providing counsel for couples who are engaged, married, and/or divorcing; and managing the many, day-to-day details related to the inner life of the congregation.

The call of an Elder is to Hard Work and Sacrifice

There can be no biblical eldership in a church where there is no biblical Christianity. If a biblical eldership is to function effectively, it requires men who are firmly committed to living out our Lord's principles of discipleship. Biblical eldership is dependent on men who seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6:33), men who have presented themselves as living and holy sacrifices to God and view themselves as slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1,2), men who love Jesus Christ above all else, men who willingly sacrifice self for the sake of others, men who seek to love as Christ loved, men who are self-disciplined and self-sacrificing, and men who have taken up the cross and are willing to suffer for Christ. Some people say, "You can't expect laymen to rear their families, work all day, and shepherd a local church." That statement is simply not true. Many people rear families, work, and give substantial hours of time to community service, clubs, athletic activities, and/or religious institutions. It is positively amazing how much people can accomplish when they are motivated to work toward a goal they love. I've seen people build and remodel houses in their spare time, for example. I've also seen men discipline themselves to gain a phenomenal knowledge of the Scriptures. The real problem, then, lies not in men's limited time and energy but in false ideas about work, Christian living, life's priorities, and—especially—Christian ministry. To the Ephesians elders, Paul says, "You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my own needs and to the men who were with me. In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner you must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive' " (Acts 20:34, 35). How do working men shepherd the church and still maintain a godly family life and employment? They do it by self-sacrifice, self-discipline, faith, perseverance, hard work, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Qualified Leadership

In a letter to a young presbyter named Nepotian, dated AD 394, Jerome (AD 345-419) rebukes the churches of his day for their hypocrisy in showing more concern for the appearance of their church buildings than the careful selection of their church leaders: "Many build churches nowadays; their walls and pillars of glowing marble, their ceilings glittering with gold, their altars studded with jewels. Yet to the choice of Christ's ministers no heed is paid." Multitudes of churches today repeat similar error. Many of them seem oblivious to the biblical requirements for their spiritual leaders as well as to the need for each congregation to properly examine all candidates for leadership qualities in light of biblical standards (1 Tim. 3:10). The most common mistake made by churches that are eager to implement biblical eldership is to appoint biblically unqualified individuals. Because there is always a need for more shepherds, it is tempting to allow

unqualified, unprepared individuals to assume leadership in the church. This is, however, a time-proven formula for failure. A biblical eldership requires biblically qualified elders. The overriding concern of the New Testament in relation to church leadership is to ensure that the right kind of men will serve as elders and deacons. The offices of God's church are not honorary positions bestowed on individuals who have attended church faithfully or who are senior in years. Nor are these offices to be viewed as church-board positions to be filled with good friends, rich donors, or charismatic personalities. Nor are they positions that only graduate seminary students can fill. The church offices—both eldership and deaconship—are open to all individuals who meet the apostolic, biblical requirements. The New Testament unequivocally emphasizes this. Consider these points:

To the troubled church in Ephesus, Paul insists that a properly constituted, biblical Christian church (1Tim. 3:14,15) must have qualified, approved elders: It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. *An overseer, then, must be* above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, un-contentious, free from the love of money. *He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And *he must have* a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:1-7; italics added).

Paul, as we've seen, also insists that prospective elders and deacons be publicly examined in light of the stated list of qualifications. He writes, "And let these [deacons] also [like the elders] first be tested [examined]; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach" (1 Tim 3:10; cf. 5:24, 25).

When directing Titus in how to organize churches on the island of Crete, Paul reminds him to appoint only morally and spiritually qualified individuals to be elders. By stating elder qualifications in a letter, Paul establishes a public list that will guide the local church in its choice of elders and empower it to hold its elders accountable: 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, namely, if any man be* above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the *overseer must be* above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:5-9; italics added).

When writing to churches scattered throughout northwestern Asia Minor, Peter speaks of the kind of individuals who should be elders. He exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock... "not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for

sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2, 3).

It is highly noteworthy that the New Testament provides more instruction concerning the qualifications for eldership than on any other aspect of eldership. Such qualifications are not required of all teachers or evangelists. One person may be gifted as an evangelist and be used of God in that capacity, yet be unqualified to be an elder. An individual may be an evangelist immediately after conversion, but Scripture says that a new convert cannot be an elder (1 Tim. 3:6). When we speak of the elders’ qualifications, most people think that these qualifications are different than those of the clergy. The New Testament, however, has no separate standards for professional clergy and lay elders. From the New Testament perspective, anyone in the congregation who desires to shepherd the Lord’s people and meets God’s requirements for the office can be an elder.

Yet what about women, can women serve in this capacity? The scriptures in referring to the qualifications of elders clearly “imply” that it is a role to be filled by a man. Yet the scriptures do not exclude it. Paul does address the potential problems with women leadership Such as when the apostle Paul instructed Timothy that women should not teach men or have authority over them (1 Timothy 2:12). Yet in such a case as this, systematic theology that is built upon sound hermeneutics mandates that we must understand the context in which a direction is written, this includes the audience it is written to the environment the recipients are in and the specific issue it is addressing. In the first century Jewish culture women were not allowed to study. When Paul advised Timothy that they should learn quietly he was offering them an amazing freedom once never offered before. Paul did not want the Ephesians women to teach because they didn’t yet have the knowledge or experience to do so. The Ephesians church also had a notorious problem with false teachers. (2 Timothy 3:1-9) Why? Because they did not yet have enough biblical knowledge to discern the truth. Paul was addressing an immature church in which new Christian members (and specifically women) were taking liberties regarding their new found freedom in Christ and were going into great details about things they did not know and causing confusion in the congregation. Paul was issuing the direction that there needs to be order in worship. Was Paul by this one writing putting into place a historical edict that women could never be apart of the teaching or, for that matter, any leadership within the church? We do not believe so as a matter of biblical fact in contrast we can find other references to Paul’s advocating of women’s service in the church. After all Paul did commend his co-worker, Priscilla assisting in the teaching of Apollos, the great preacher (Acts 18:24-26) he also mentioned other women who held positions of responsibility in the church such as Phoebe the deacon (Romans 16:1), Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis (Romans 16:6, 12), and Euodia and Syntyche (Philippians 4:2).

Paul is pointing out that women do serve a valuable part in Gods service, again remember they were made equally in Gods image as were men, yet neither of which fully displays the complete image of God apart from one another. Therefore the deeper questions is how do the two become one and function. It is found in the concept of serving in “the roles” we have been designed for within the image. God has by creative order and design

inherently placed men first among equals. Simply put for the sake of real harmony God has placed man in the primary role of decision maker and overseer. In _____ Christ himself tells us that as God is the head of Christ, Christ is over man and man is over woman. This is for the sake of harmony and functionality. Is it that women are of lesser value? No, again Christ is fully God and equal to the father, but there is a functionary role they play. With this in mind the roles should be played out in the life of the body of believers as well. Therefore though women and men are equally made in the image of God and they both share in the giftedness bestowed upon the body the roles they are assigned are fully implied. It is the role of the man to serve as the protector and leader where as the woman should serve as the completion and help mate. Thus it is believed that in any area whereby the two can serve together (Deacons, Teachers, Home Team Pastors, Youth workers and Children's workers) this should be the practice in order to achieve the greatest benefit for this again is where the best opportunity for the fullness of Gods image to be expressed. Yet in the role of ultimate overseer while always recognizing respecting and seeking counsel from the helpmate the man has been given the responsibility of Elder.

So then what are the scriptural qualifications and how can they be crystallized? The qualifications can be divided into three broad categories relating to moral and spiritual character, abilities, and Spirit-given motivation.

Moral and Spiritual Character

Most of the biblical qualifications relate to each candidate's moral and spiritual qualities. The first, overarching qualification is that of being "above reproach." The meaning of "above reproach" is defined by the character qualities that follow the term. In both of Paul's lists of elder qualifications, the first, specific, character virtue itemized is "the husband of one wife." This means that each elder must be above reproach in his marital and sexual life.

The other character qualities stress the elder's integrity, self-control, and spiritual maturity. Since elders govern the church body, each one must be self-controlled in the use of money, alcohol, and the exercise of his pastoral authority. Since each elder is to be a model of Christian living, he must be spiritually devout, righteous, a lover of good, hospitable, and morally above reproach before the non-Christian community. In pastoral work, relationship skills are preeminent. Thus a shepherd elder must be gentle, stable, sound-minded, and un-contentious. An angry, hotheaded man hurts people. So, an elder must not have a dictatorial spirit or be quick-tempered, pugnacious, or self-willed. Finally, an elder must not be a new Christian. He must be a spiritually mature, humble, time-proven disciple of Jesus Christ.

Abilities

Within the lists of elder qualifications, three requirements address the elder's abilities to perform the task. He must be able to manage his family household well, provide a model of Christian living for others to follow, and be able to teach and defend the faith.

Able to manage his family household well: An elder must be able to manage his family household well. The Scripture states, “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)” (1 Tim. 3:4, 5). The Puritans referred to the family household as the “little church.” This perspective is in keeping with the scriptural reasoning that if a man cannot shepherd his family, he can’t shepherd the extended family of the church. Managing the local church is more like managing a family than managing a business or state. A man may be a successful businessman, a capable public official, a brilliant office manager, or a top military leader but be a terrible church elder or father. Thus a man’s ability to oversee his family household well is a prerequisite for overseeing God’s household.

Able to provide a model for others to follow: An elder must be an example of Christian living that others will want to follow. Peter reminds the Asian elders “to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3b). If an individual is not a godly model for others to follow, he cannot be an elder even if he is a good teacher and manager. The greatest way to inspire and influence people for God is through personal example. Character and deeds, not official position or title, is what really influences people for eternity. Today men and women crave authentic examples of true Christianity in action. Who can better provide the week-by-week, long-term examples of family life, business life, and church life than a local-church elder? That is why it is so important that an elder, as a living imitator of Christ, shepherd God’s flock in God’s way.

Able to teach and defend the faith: An elder must be able to teach and defend the faith. It doesn’t matter how successful a man is in his business, how eloquently he speaks, or how intelligent he is. If he isn’t firmly committed to and able to instruct people in biblical doctrine, he does not qualify to be a biblical elder (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). The New Testament requires that a pastor elder “[hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching” (Titus 1:9a). This means that an elder must firmly adhere to biblical teaching. “Elders must not,” one commentator says, “be chosen from among those who have been toying with new doctrines.” Since the local church is “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3: 15b), its leaders must be rock-solid pillars of biblical doctrine or the house will crumble.

It is essential for an elder to be firmly committed to biblical doctrine so “that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9b). This requires that a prospective elder must have applied himself for some years to the reading and study of Scripture that he can reason intelligently and logically discuss biblical issues, that he has formulated doctrinal beliefs, and that he has the verbal ability and willingness to teach other people. There should be no confusion, then, about what a New Testament elder is called to do. He is to teach and exhort the congregation in sound doctrine and to defend the truth from false teachers. This is the big difference between board elders and pastor elders. New Testament elders are both guardians and teachers of sound, biblical doctrine.

Spirit-given Motivation for the Task

An obvious but not insignificant qualification is the elder's personal desire to love and care for God's people. Paul and the first Christians applaud such willingness and created this popular Christian saying: "If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do" (1 Tim. 3:1). Peter, too, insists that an elder must shepherd the flock willingly and voluntarily (1 Peter 5:2). He knew from years of personal experience that someone who views spiritual care as an unwanted obligation cannot fulfill the shepherding task. An elder who serves grudgingly or under constraint is incapable of genuinely caring for people. He will be an unhappy, impatient, guilty, fearful, and ineffective shepherd. Shepherding God's people through this sin-weary world is far too difficult a task—fraught with too many problems, dangers, and demands—to be entrusted to someone who lacks the will and desire to do the work effectively.

A true desire to lead the family of God is always a Spirit-generated desire. Paul reminds the Ephesians elders that the Holy Spirit—not the church or the apostles—placed them as overseers in the church to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28). The Spirit called them to shepherd the church and moved them to care for the flock. The Spirit planted the pastoral desire in their hearts. He gave them the compulsion and strength to do the work and also the wisdom and appropriate gifts to care for the flock. The elders were His wise choice to complete the task. In the church of God, it is not man's will that matters; it is God's will and arrangement that matter. So, the only men who qualify for eldership are those whom the Holy Spirit gives the motivation and gifts for the task. A biblical eldership, then, is a biblically qualified team of shepherd leaders. I agree fully with the counsel of Jon Zen, who writes, "Better have no elders than the wrong ones." The local church must in all earnestness insist on biblically qualified elders, even if such men take years to develop.

Servant Leadership

Principles in the Scriptures

When we read the Gospels, however, we see that the principles of brotherly community, love, humility, and servant hood are at the very heart of Christ's teaching. Unfortunately, like many of the early Christians, we have been slow to understand these great virtues and especially slow to apply them to church structure and leadership style. New Testament, Christ like elders are to be servant leaders, not rulers or dictators. God doesn't want His people to be used by petty, self-serving tyrants. Elders are to choose a life of service on behalf of others. Like the servant Christ, they are to sacrifice their time and energy for the good of others. Only elders who are loving, humble servants can genuinely manifest the incomparable life of Jesus Christ to their congregations and a watching world. A group of elders, however, can become a self-serving, autocratic leadership body. Thus Peter, using the same terminology as Jesus, warns the Asian elders against abusive, lordly leadership: "...nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). Peter also charges the elders, as well as everyone else in the congregation, to clothe themselves in humility just as Jesus clothed Himself in humility: "All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one

another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5b). With similar concern, Paul reminds the Ephesians elders of his example of humility. In Acts 20:19, he describes his manner of “serving the Lord with all humility” and implies that they, too, must serve the Lord in the same manner. Because of pride’s lurking temptation, a new Christian should not be an elder: “And not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6). In addition to shepherding others with a servant spirit, the elders must humbly and lovingly relate to one another. They must be able to patiently build consensus, compromise, persuade, listen, handle disagreement, forgive, receive rebuke and correction, confess sin, and appreciate the wisdom and perspective of others—even those with whom they disagree. They must be able to submit to one another, speak kindly and gently to one another, be patient with their fellow colleagues, defer to one another, and speak their minds openly in truth and love. Stronger and more gifted elders must not use their giftedness, as talented people sometimes do, to force their own way by threatening to leave the church and take their followers with them. Such selfishness creates ugly, carnal power struggles that endanger the unity and peace of the entire congregation.

Humility AND Authority

The humble-servant character of the eldership doesn’t imply, however, an absence of authority. The New Testament terms that describe the elders’ position and work (“God’s stewards,” “overseers,” “shepherd,” “leading”) imply authority as well as responsibility. Peter could not have warned the Asian elders against “lording it over those allotted to your charge” (1 Peter 5:3) if they had no authority. As shepherds of the church, elders have been given the authority to lead and protect the local church (Acts 20:28-31). The key issue is the attitude in which elders exercise that authority. Following the biblical model, elders must not wield the authority given to them in a heavy-handed way. They must not use manipulative tactics, play power games, or be arrogant and aloof. They must never think that they are unanswerable to their fellow brethren or to God. Elders must not be authoritarian, which is incompatible with humble servant hood. When we consider Paul’s example and that of our Lord’s, we must agree that biblical elders do not dictate; they direct. True elders do not command the consciences of their brethren but appeal to their brethren to faithfully follow God’s Word. Out of love, true elders suffer and bear the brunt of difficult people and problems so that the lambs are not bruised. The elders bear the misunderstandings and sins of other people so that the assembly may live in peace. They lose sleep so that others may rest. They make great personal sacrifices of time and energy for the welfare of others. They see themselves as men under authority. They depend on God for wisdom and help, not on their own power and cleverness. They face the false teachers’ fierce attacks. They guard the community’s liberty and freedom in Christ so that the saints are encouraged to develop their gifts, to mature, and to serve one another.

In summary, using Paul’s great love chapter, we can say that a servant elder “is patient... kind... not jealous; ...[a servant elder] does not brag... [a servant elder] is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly... does not seek [his]... own... [a servant elder] is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in

unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; [a servant elder] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

EXAMPLES OF IMPORTANT ELDER’S TASKS

Church Discipline

Pray for the sick

Stop Gossip

Protect the Pastor and leadership

Intervene in disputes

Correct false teachings

Teach when called upon

Address sin issues in lives of the body

Oversee the administration of the church