

Church Leadership

What Is An Elder?

A biblical elder is a godly qualified man that labors and serves the local church through leadership and teaching. He meets all the qualifications outlined by Paul in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. He is an under-shepherd that seeks to exalt Christ in all he does. He is not the head of the church but seeks to faithfully carry out the will of Christ.

The terms "pastor/shepherd" (*poimen* – Eph. 4:11), "elder" (*presbuteros* – Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:6), and "overseer/bishop" (*episkopos* – Phil. 1:1, 1 Tim. 3:2) all mean the same thing (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5–7; 1 Peter 5:1–3) and only serve to emphasize different aspects of an elder's calling. Senior pastor, youth pastor, lead pastor, lay pastor are all contemporary terms. They may not be bad in themselves but are not biblical. They reflect contemporary culture more than they do biblical teaching. In this paper, I will be referring to the office as simply elder.

Why Elders?

Although the form of church government is nowhere commanded in the Bible, it at least clearly appears that in the majority of situations a plurality of qualified elders shepherded the church. This is seen from various places. In fact, I cannot think of a New Testament example where it appears that there were not at least two elders. Although there is no explicit text commanding this form of government we feel it is the best option since it appears that this is the form of government in the New Testament church.

Biblical Examples Of A Plurality Of Elders

In the Old Testament we see examples of shared godly leadership. "Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people" (Ex. 18:25) as his father-in-law suggested. There are also other examples of elders in the Old Testament (Lev. 4:15; Ex. 3:16–18; Deut. 21:18–21; 27:1; 31:9; 2 Sam. 5:3; 1 Kings 20:7–8).

In the Manual of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in the "Statement on Church Government" "a foundation for strengthening the role of elders" is laid (p. 205). It is pointed out that

"The synagogue was under the management of "elders" (Luke 7:1–5) who seem to have had disciplinary and administrative authority as well as religious...

Because of their heritage, New Testament leaders likely knew and used the synagogue models for the organization of the church... This might explain the fact that the New Testament gives no historical record of the institution of the eldership as it does with the Seven (Acts 6). Much

of the church's organization is assumed in the New Testament rather than argued... However, development in the church's organization is found in the New Testament.

Christian elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 as an existing institution. It is possible that some of the first Christians were already (Jewish) elders and continued in a similar capacity in the early church... Throughout the Book of Acts the elders are seen to be leaders of the church (Acts 14:23, 15:2, 20:17, 21:18)."

All over the New Testament we see that churches didn't have an elder (singular) but elders (plural) (cf. Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1; James 5:15). In fact, Paul didn't think a church was as it should be until it had a plurality of elders (Titus 1:5). Paul left Titus in Crete that he "might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town." The churches were therefore out of order it seems until a plurality of elders was established there. We also see shared leadership in various other New Testament passages (1 Cor. 16:15-16; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:7,17,24 and Paul was almost always accompanied by another leader on his missionary journeys cf. for ex. Acts 13:1-5, 13; 14:14; 15:35-41; 16:3,19; 17:1,10,15-16; 18:2-3,18 not to mention Luke) so this teaching does not arrive from some isolated passage. Rather, we see a good case can be made for shared leadership, i.e., a plurality of elders.

What Are The Biblical Qualifications For An Elder?

Paul gives a fairly long list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 yet his list is not exhaustive. An elder must be (1) above reproach, (2) a one woman man, (3) sober-minded, (4) self-controlled, (5) respectable, (6) hospitable, (7) able to teach, (8) in good standing with outsiders, (9) gentle, (10) able to manage his household well and have faithful children (or child), (11) disciplined, (12) upright, (13) holy, and (14) firm in the faith and thus able to teach, exhort, and rebuke (Titus 1:9). Further an elder must not be (15) addicted to substances, (16) violent, (17) argumentative, (18) greedy, (19) a new Christian, or (20) arrogant.

What Do Elders Do?

To arrive at the precise function of this elder-overseer-shepherd we must look at various texts and descriptions. Elders are to protect (Acts 20:28-31), shepherd (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1-3), teach (Titus 1:9), anoint the sick (James 5:14), represent the congregation (Acts 11:30), and make policy decisions (Acts 15:6, 22). An elder is to intercede in prayer on behalf of people (Acts 6:4). He is to plead with people on behalf of God (Acts 6:1-7). He is to preach, teach, rebuke, and counsel with love and patience (2 Tim. 2:4; Col. 1:28-29). He is to oversee, lead, and protect the flock. In all of these things he is to humbly and happily serve (Jn. 13:14-15; 1 Peter 5:1-5). Those who labor especially hard at preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). The Elders of the church are accountable to God for how they shepherd the souls under their care and thus should be obeyed by the church (Heb. 13:17 see also 1 Cor. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:12).

What Is A Deacon?

The book of Acts tells us that the Apostles were dedicating so much time to serve tables that they didn't have enough time to do what the Lord had called them to do and thus they had neglected "prayer and the ministry of the word." Therefore, they appointed seven men that would serve the church's needs and thus free up time for the Apostles (Acts 6:2-4). This, you could say, is the first installation of the office of deacon. It is here that we most clearly see the rule of deacons. They serve the external needs of the flock so that those entrusted with the task of ministering to the internal needs have the time to do so. That is not to say that deacons cannot also teach, they can (see Acts 6:5; 7:2-53) but their primary role is to serve the church to free the elders for prayer and the ministry of the word.

After Paul told Timothy what the qualifications for elders were he said, "Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

Therefore, although it is often confused, in Scripture deacons and elders have different but complementary roles. Elders are to be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) and "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). The elders' primary ministry is "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Whereas, for deacons there is no qualification regarding teaching because that is not their main responsibility, they serve the church in a different way.

The practical advantage to having biblical functioning deacons and elders is that it frees the elders up to do what they are called and responsible to do: pray and teach. It is also practical because you have the elders, i.e. overseers and shepherds, overseeing the direction of the church. This is significant because it is the elders and not the deacons that have been formally recognized to "hold firm to the trustworthy word" (Titus 1:9). Elders have proven themselves able in both character and scriptural wisdom to guide the church. Thus the office of elder and deacon is different but complementary.

Female Elders?

Probably the most debated topic here is whether or not women can be elders. This paper can only briefly discuss this subject. However, we will be posting a forthcoming position paper on the topic. Although, Grace Crossing as a whole may not hold to this position, the elders are convicted that Scripture does not allow women to hold the office of elder however there is a lot they can do. We do not want to minimize the rule of woman, they are vital and a vast blessing to the church! For example Paul had woman co-laborers (cf. Rom. 16:1-15; Phil. 4:2-3). And I would like to see an increase in women practicing the teaching that Paul talks of in Titus 2:3-5.

Let's look at some of the relevant passages. First, an elder is supposed to be a one woman man (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:5) which a woman obviously cannot be. Second, Jesus set the precedence for male leadership

because He called twelve men as His apostles (Luke 6:13) although he had close relationships with women (for ex. Mary and Martha). Even when Judas' spot as an apostle had to be filled only men were considered (Acts 1:24). This was in keeping with male leadership established at creation (cf. Gen. 2:18-25). Third, every passage in the New Testament that deals with marital relationships says that woman should submit to their husbands (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; Titus 2:1,4,5; 1 Peter 3:1-6). This should lead us away from saying that wives submitting to their husbands was merely based on the cultural context. Further, Paul takes us all the way back to Genesis in his argument, which in my opinion means that woman submitting to their husbands is not just a cultural mandate. It is rather for all time. If Paul says that woman should not exercise authority over men and grounds it in Genesis than he applies it to various churches in his own day and various cultures. If what Paul says holds true from Genesis to his own day than it surely applies to ours as well (Gen. 2:20-23; 1 Cor. 11:8-9; 14:34-38; 1 Tim. 2:11-14).

Of course, submission does not mean that women are any less than men in person or character only that they have a different role. Adam and Eve were both created in the image of God. Similarly Jesus is not any less than God His Father yet they have different roles. Jesus submits to His Father (Jn. 3:35; 8:21-47; 14:41; 17:1-5; 1 Cor. 11:3; 15:24-28).

Practical Advantages To A Biblically Qualified Plurality Of Elders

A qualified plurality of elders is very practical in the life of the church. First, there are many advantages to qualified leadership. If the elders are biblically qualified than the church should have mature and loving Christians leading the direction of the church rather than some who may be less spiritually mature. If elders are holy and able to teach than they should have biblical wisdom and be able to make good decisions for the church. On the other hand, if the general members are making the majority of the decisions then at least some new Christians (contra 1 Tim. 3:6) will be influential in guiding the direction of the church.

Second, a plurality of leadership is helpful for accountability. I, for instance, have been under two pastors that fell to grave sin and left their families and church. They were the sole pastor of their church and didn't have the accountability that they should have. I believe that if they had fellow elders to encourage them and keep them accountable things may have been very different. A plurality of leadership is also very helpful in decision making. The Proverbs attest to this: "Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety" and "Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed" (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; cf. 10:17; 12:15; 19:20; 20:18; 24:6; Eccl. 9:17-18).

Conclusion

Although there is not a formal command saying that churches must have a plurality of qualified leaders we at Grace Crossing believe that it is in fact the most biblical model and thus it the best and has the most practical advantages.

Suggested Resources

- Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995).
- Chad Own Brand and R. Stanton Norman eds., *Perspectives on Church Government: Five Views of Church Polity* (Nashville: Broadman Holman Publishers, 2004).
- The “Statement on Church Government” in the Manual of the Christian and Missionary Alliance.
- For male elders see especially: John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).