

Leadership Conference 2021

Biblical Eldership



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Biblical Eldership

Biblically, the focal point of all church leadership is the elder. An elder is one of a plurality of biblically qualified men who jointly shepherd and oversee a local body of believers. The word translated “elder” is used nearly twenty times in Acts and the epistles about this unique group of leaders who have responsibility for overseeing the people of God.

The Office of Elder

- As numerous passages in the New Testament indicate, the words “**ELDER**” (presbuteros), “**OVERSEER**” (episkopos), and “**PASTOR**” (poimēn) all refer to the same office.
- In other words, overseers and pastors are not distinct from elders; the terms are simply different ways of identifying the same people.
- The qualifications for an overseer (episkopos) in [1 Timothy 3:1-7](#), and those for an elder (presbuteros) in [Titus 1:6-9](#) are unmistakably **PARALLEL**.
- In fact, in Titus 1, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man (presbuteros in v. 5 and episkopos in v. 7). All three terms are used interchangeably in Acts 20. In verse 17, Paul assembles all the elders (presbuteros) of the church of Ephesus to give them his farewell message. In verse 28 he says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episkopos], to shepherd [poimainō] the church of God.”
- [First Peter 5:1-2](#) brings all three terms together as well. Peter writes, “Therefore, I exhort the elders [presbuteros] among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd [poimainō] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [episkopēō] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God.”
- The different terms, then, indicate various features of ministry, not varying levels of **AUTHORITY** or separate offices, as some churches espouse.

A Plurality of Elders

The consistent pattern throughout the New Testament is that each local body of believers is **SHEPHERDED** by a **PLURALITY** of God-ordained elders.

Simply stated, this is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament. Nowhere in Scripture does one find a local assembly ruled by **MAJORITY** opinion or by a single **PASTOR**.

- The Apostle Paul left Titus in Crete and instructed him to “appoint **ELDERS** in every city” ([Titus 1:5](#)).
 - James instructed his readers to “call for the elders of the church” to **PRAY** for those who are sick ([James 5:14](#)).
 - When Paul and Barnabas were in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they “appointed elders for them in every church” ([Acts 14:23](#)).
 - In Paul’s first epistle to Timothy, the apostle referred to “the elders who **RULE** well” at the church at Ephesus ([1 Tim. 5:17](#); see also [Acts 20:17](#), where Paul addresses “the elders of the church” at Ephesus).
 - The book of Acts indicates that there were “elders” at the church in Jerusalem ([Acts 11:30](#); [15:2, 4](#); [21:18](#)).
 - Again and again, reference is made to a plurality of elders in each of the various churches. In fact, every place in the New Testament where the term presbuteros (“elder”) is used it is **PLURAL**, except where the apostle John uses it of himself in 2 and 3 John and where Peter uses it of himself in [1 Peter 5:1](#).
 - Nowhere in the New Testament is there a reference to a **ONE-PASTOR** congregation.
 - It may be that each elder in the city had an individual group in which he had specific oversight. But the church was seen as one church, and decisions were made by a **COLLECTIVE** process and in reference to the **WHOLE**, not the individual parts.
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- In other passages, reference is made to a plurality of elders even though the word presbuteros itself is not used.
 - In the opening greeting of his epistle to the Philippians, Paul refers to the “overseers [plural of episkopos] and deacons” at the church of Philippi ([Phil. 1:2](#)). In [Acts 20:28](#),
 - Paul warned the elders of the church of Ephesus, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which God has made you **OVERSEERS** [plural of episkopos]” ([Acts 20:28](#)).
 - The writer of Hebrews called his readers to obey and submit to the “leaders” who **KEPT WATCH OVER THEIR SOULS** ([Heb. 13:17](#)).
 - Paul exhorted his Thessalonian readers to “appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have **CHARGE** over you in the Lord and give you **INSTRUCTION**” ([1 Thess. 5:12](#))—a clear reference to the overseers in the Thessalonian assembly.
 - Much can be said for the benefits of leadership made up of a plurality of godly men.
 - **Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not SELF-WILLED or SELF-SERVING to a single individual** (cf. [Prov. 11:14](#)).
 - If there is division among the elders in making decisions, all the elders should **STUDY, PRAY, and SEEK** the will of God together until consensus is achieved. In this way, the unity and harmony that the Lord desires for the church will begin with those individuals he has appointed to shepherd His flock.

The Qualifications of Elders

The **CHARACTER** and **EFFECTIVENESS** of any church is directly related to the quality of its leadership. That's why Scripture stresses the importance of **QUALIFIED** church leadership and delineates specific **STANDARDS** for evaluating those who would serve in that sacred position.

The qualifications for elders are found in [1 Timothy 3:2-7](#) and [Titus 1:6-8](#). According to these passages:

1. an elder must be above **REPROACH**,
2. the husband of **ONE** wife,
3. **TEMPERATE**,
4. **PRUDENT**,
5. **RESPECTABLE**,
6. **HOSPITABLE**,
7. able to **TEACH**,
8. not **ADDICTED** to wine,
9. not **PUGNACIOUS**,
10. **GENTLE**,
11. **UNCONTENTIOUS**,
12. free from the **LOVE** of money,
13. not fond of **SORDID GAIN**,
14. a good **MANAGER** of his household,
15. one who has his **CHILDREN** under control with **DIGNITY**,
16. not a **NEW** convert,
17. one who has a **GOOD** reputation **OUTSIDE** the church,
18. self-**CONTROLLED**,
19. **SENSIBLE**,
20. able to **EXHORT** in sound doctrine and to **REFUTE** those who contradict,
21. above **REPROACH** as God's steward,
22. not self-**WILLED**,
23. not quick-**TEMPERED**,
24. **LOVING** what is good,
25. **JUST**,
26. **DEVOUT**.

The single, overarching qualification of which the rest are supportive is that he is to be "above reproach." That is, he must be a leader who cannot be accused of anything sinful because he has a sustained reputation for **BLAMELESSNESS**. An elder is to be above reproach in his **MARITAL** life, his **SOCIAL** life, his **BUSINESS** life, and his **SPIRITUAL** life. In this way, he is to be a **MODEL** of godliness so he can **LEGITIMATELY** call the congregation to follow his example ([Phil. 3:17](#)). All the other qualifications, except perhaps teaching and management skills, only **AMPLIFY** that idea.

In addition, the office of elder is limited to men. [1 Timothy 2:11-12](#) says, "Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise

authority over a man, but to remain quiet." In the church, women are to be under the authority of the elders, excluded from teaching men or holding positions of authority over them.

The Functions of Elders

As the apostolic era came to a close, the office of elder emerged as the highest level of local church leadership. Thus, it carried a great amount of responsibility. There was no higher court of appeal and no greater resource to know the mind and heart of God with regard to issues in the church.

The primary responsibility of an elder is to serve as a **MANAGER** and **CARETAKER** of the church ([1 Tim. 3:5](#)). That involves a number of specific duties.

1. As spiritual overseers of the flock, elders are to determine church **POLICY** ([Acts 15:22](#));
2. **OVERSEE** the church ([Acts 20:28](#));
3. **ORDAIN** others ([1 Tim. 4:4](#));
4. **RULE, TEACH,** and **PREACH** ([1 Tim. 5:17](#); cf. [1 Thess. 5:12](#); [1 Tim. 3:2](#));
5. **EXHORT** and **REFUTE** ([Titus 1:9](#)); and
6. act as shepherds, **SETTING** an **EXAMPLE** for all ([1 Pet. 5:1-3](#)).

Those responsibilities put elders at the core of the New Testament church's work.

Because of its heritage of democratic values and its long history of congregational church government, modern American evangelicalism often views the concept of elder rule with suspicion. The clear teaching of Scripture, however, demonstrates that the biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders, and only by following this biblical pattern will the church maximize its fruitfulness to the glory of God.

Difference in Elder and Deacon

The New Testament uses three primary words that refer to deacons: *diakonos*, which means "**SERVANT**"; *diakonia*, which means "**SERVICE**"; and *diakoneō*, which means "to **SERVE**." The original use of this group of words might have been specific, meaning the service of waiting on tables or serving people food. But it broadened beyond that and came to mean **ANYKIND** of service. While all believers are to be characterized by service, some have been specially gifted by the Spirit of God to serve (cf. [Romans 12:7](#)). Only in 1 Timothy 3 is there a specific discussion of the office of deacon (vv. 8–10, 12).

Deacons are **EQUALLY** qualified with elders in terms of character and spiritual life. The one difference between their qualifications is that an elder must be able to **TEACH**, but the deacon doesn't have to be. The elders **OVERSEE** the work of those who serve the Lord, and they are **ASSISTED** in their work by deacons. The basic offices of a church do not need to be any more sophisticated than that.

Why Elders for St. Paul?

1. It is **BIBLICAL**.
2. It broadens the scope of how **DECISIONS** are made
3. It takes pressure off the **LEAD PASTOR** to have all the answers
4. The Pastor/teacher is held **ACCOUNTABLE** to fulfill his calling to his faithful teaching of God's Word and living an exemplary Christian lifestyle.
5. It creates a **FISCAL** accountability beyond the pastor/teacher.

What about:

Voting?

The following issues should be presented to the church for approval in order to create transparency and accountability within the church and among its leaders:

1. the church **BUDGET**,
2. the **CALLING** of the senior pastor,
3. any decision that involves the purchase of **PROPERTY** or construction of buildings,
4. financial **INDEBTEDNESS** on the part of the church,
5. The exercise of church **DISCIPLINE**,
6. The **APPOINTMENT** of leaders - Acts 6:5

Women?

Women are valuable and vital to church life and their opinions are valid. Although we do not find a biblical basis for women elders, it will be important to develop a structure whereby women are heard and utilized for the intellect, know-how, and creativity they bring to church ministry.

To that end, a Vision Advisory Council that includes women will ensure that their voices are heard and considered. This role would be a ministry, much like every other ministry in the church, but one whose recommendations are considered any time the church elders are developing/changing vision or has other significant decisions to make affecting the church.

What's Next?

1. Develop structure of council of elders.
 - Lead elder
 - Lay elders
 - Staff elders
 - Meeting schedule
2. Bring structure to the church for discussion.
3. Bring it to a vote and move forward to change by-laws.
4. Take nominations for Council of Elders and bring nominations to a vote.
5. Appoint Vision Advisory Council members.

Elder-Led Church References

1. JP Moreland, *Love Your God With All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing, 2012), 221-234.
2. Todd Morikawa, *What is an Elder Led Baptist Church?: Eldership and Congregationalism Hand in Hand* (Monee: Native Dogma Press, 2016), 1-23.
3. Phil Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 7-154.
4. Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway Publishers, 2014), 17-122.