

ELDERSHIP: Biblical Responsibilities and Qualifications

Excerpts from *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch.

Pastoral Leadership

When most Christians hear about church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisers to the pastor. They think of elders as being policymakers, financial officers, fund-raisers or administrators. However, such a view, not only lacks scriptural support but flatly contradicts New Testament Scriptures.

According to the New Testament, elders lead the church, teach and preach 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.

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: "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).

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 . . . 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).

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 or single person 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). We, then, must also view apostolic, Christianized elders to be primarily pastors of a flock, not corporate executives, or advisers to a pastor.

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 [guide] the flock and to help care for the needs of the flock. Using these four, broad, pastoral categories, let us briefly consider the examples, exhortations, and teachings of the New Testament regarding shepherd elders.

Feeding the Flock: Unlike modern, church-board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 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*. Therefore, 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 continually fed the *whole counsel* of God's word.

Leading the Flock: In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or any group of people means to lead or govern. According to Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, elders are to shepherd the church of God. So, to shepherd a local church means, among other things, to lead the church. To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, "Let the elders who rule [lead, direct, manage] well be considered worthy of double honor" (1 Timothy 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.

Elders are also called "overseers," which signifies that they supervise and manage the church. Peter uses the verb form of *overseer* when he exhorts the elders: "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you . . . shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight" (1 Peter 5:1a, 2a).

Helping to Care for the Needs of the Flock: 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."

As shepherds of the flock, the elders must be available to meet the needs of the flock. 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.

Hard Work and Sacrifice: When the church eldership is viewed as a status or board position in the church, there will be plenty of volunteers. When it is viewed as a demanding, pastoral work, few people will rush to volunteer. One reason there are so few good shepherd elders or church elderships is that, men are spiritually lazy. In much of the church today, generally speaking, men are more than willing to let someone else fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, whether it be their wives, the clergy, or church professionals.

Biblical eldership, however, can't exist in an atmosphere of nominal Christianity. 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 (Matthew 6:33), men who have presented themselves as living and holy sacrifices to God and view themselves as slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 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.

Qualified Leadership

Today, many churches 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 Timothy 3:10). The most common mistake made by churches that are eager to implement biblical eldership is to appoint biblically unqualified men. Because there is always a need for more shepherds, it is tempting to allow unqualified and/or unprepared men to assume leadership in the church. 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.

The New Testament unequivocally emphasizes this. Consider these points:

- To the troubled church in Ephesus, Paul insists that a properly constituted, biblical Christian church (1 Timothy 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, uncontentious, 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 a new convert is not qualified to be an elder (1 Timothy 3:6), 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 Timothy 3:1-7).

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.

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. The reason is simple. There aren't three separate offices--pastor, elders, and deacons--in the New Testament-style local church. There are only two offices--elders and deacons. From the New Testament perspective, any man in the congregation who desires to shepherd the Lord's people and meets God's requirements for the office can be a pastor elder.

The Biblical [Scriptural] qualifications can be divided into three broad categories relating to moral and spiritual character, abilities and Spirit-given motivation (i.e. Spiritual gifts).

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.

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 Timothy 3:4, 5).

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 a man is not a godly model for others to follow, he cannot be an elder even if he is a good teacher and manager.

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 historic, apostolic doctrine and able to instruct people in biblical doctrine, he does not qualify to be a biblical elder (1 Timothy 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 orthodox, historic, biblical teaching. An elder, then, must be characterized by doctrinal integrity. It is essential for an elder to be firmly committed to apostolic, 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. He is to teach and exhort the congregation in sound doctrine and to defend the truth from false teachers. New Testament elders are both guardians and teachers of sound, biblical doctrine.

Servant Leadership

When we read the Gospels, however, we see that the principles of brotherly community, love, humility, and servanthood 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, Christlike 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.

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.

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.

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 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.

New Testament Pattern

The New Testament records evidence of pastoral oversight by a council of elders in nearly all the first churches. These local churches were spread over a wide geographical and culturally diverse area--from Jerusalem to Rome.

Examples of Eldership: Consider, as recorded in the New Testament, the consistent pattern of plural leadership by elders that existed among the first Christian churches.

1. Elders are found in the churches of Judea and the surrounding area (Acts 11:30; James 5:14, 15).
2. Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15, 21).
3. Among the Pauline churches, leadership by the plurality of elders was established in the churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:20-23); in the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-25); in the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1); and in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).
4. According to the well-traveled letter of 1 Peter, elders existed in churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1).

5. There are strong indications that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 5:12) and Rome (Hebrews 13:17).

Instruction about Elders: Not only does the New Testament provide examples of elder-led churches, it includes explicit instructions to churches about how to care for, protect, discipline, select, restore and call the elders. The apostles intended these instructions to be obeyed, and they should be regarded as normative teaching for all Christian churches at all times.

- James instructs those who are sick to call for the elders of the church (James 5:14).
- Paul instructs the Ephesians church to financially support elders who labor "at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17, 18).
- Paul instructs the local church about protecting elders from false accusation, disciplining elders who sin, and restoring fallen elders (1 Timothy 5:19-22).
- Paul instructs the church regarding the proper qualifications for eldership (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
- To the church in Ephesus, Paul states that anyone who desires to be an elder desires a "fine work" (1 Tim. 3:1).
- Paul instructs the church to examine the qualifications of prospective elders (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:24, 25).
- Peter instructs the young men of the church to submit to church elders (1 Peter 5:5).
- Paul teaches that elders are the household stewards, leaders, instructors, and teachers of the local church (Titus 1:7, 9; 1 Thessalonians 5:12;).

Instruction and Exhortation to Elders: Besides giving instruction to churches about elders, Paul, Peter, and James give these instructions directly to elders:

- James tells elders to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14).
- Peter directly charges elders to willingly pastor and oversee the local congregation (1 Peter 5:1, 2).
- Peter warns elders not to be too domineering (1 Peter 5:3).
- Peter promises elders that when the Lord Jesus returns they will receive "the unfading crown of glory" (1 Peter 5:4).
- Peter exhorts elders to be clothed in humility (1 Peter 5:5).
- Paul reminds the Ephesians elders that the Holy Spirit placed them in the church to be overseers and pastor the church of God (Acts 20:28).
- Paul exhorts elders to guard the church from false teachers (Acts 20:28) and to be alert to the constant threat of false doctrine (Acts 20:31).
- Paul reminds elders to work hard, help the needy, and be generous like the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:35).

Promotes the Protection & Sanctification of Spiritual Leaders

We come now to two, extremely significant reasons for and benefits of pastoral leadership by a council of qualified elders. First, the shared leadership structure of eldership provides necessary accountability protection from the particular sins that plague spiritual leaders. In turn, this

protects the spiritual character of the local church and the testimony of the Lord's name. Second, the eldership structure provides peer relationships to help balance elders' weaknesses and correct their character, an essential component in the sanctification process of spiritual leaders.

Leadership Accountability: English historian Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Because of our biblical beliefs in the dreadful realities of sin, the curse, Satan, and human depravity, we should understand well why people in positions of power are easily corrupted. In fact, the better we understand the exceeding sinfulness and deceitfulness of sin, the stronger our commitment to accountability will be. The collective leadership of a biblical eldership provides a formal structure for genuine accountability.

Shared, brotherly leadership provides needed restraint concerning such sins as pride, greed, and "playing god." Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God's will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a 'check and balance' on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people.

It is my conviction that God has provided a hedge against these powerful temptations by the concept of multiple elders. The check and balance that is provided by men of equal authority is most wholesome and helps to bring about the desired attitude expressed by Peter to the plurality of elders: ". . . shepherd the flock of God among you, 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)."

In addition to providing close accountability, genuine partnership, and peer relationships--the very things most imperial pastors shrink from at all costs--shared leadership provides the local church shepherd with accountability for his work. Church leaders (like all of us) can be lazy, forgetful, fearful, or too busy to fulfill their responsibilities. Thus, they need colleagues in ministry to whom they are accountable.

Peer Relationships: One of the deep joys of my life has been to share the pastoral leadership of a church with a team of dedicated pastor elders. As partners in the work of shepherding God's precious, blood-bought people, we have sharpened, balanced, comforted, protected, and strengthened one another through nearly every conceivable life situation. I do not hesitate to say that the relationship with my fellow elders has been the most important tool God has used, outside of my marriage relationship, for the spiritual development of my Christian character, leadership abilities, and teaching ministry. The eldership has played a major role in the sanctification process of my Christian life.

Shared leadership can provide a church leader with critically needed recognition of his faults and deficiencies and can help to offset them.. We all have blind spots, eccentricities, and deficiencies. We all have what C. S. Lewis called "a fatal flaw." We can see these fatal flaws so clearly in others but not in ourselves. These fatal flaws or blind spots distort our judgment. They deceive us. They can even destroy us. This is particularly true of multitalented, charismatic leaders. I believe that traditional, single-church pastors would improve their character and ministry if they had genuine peers to whom they were regularly accountable and with whom they worked jointly.

An Apostolic Directive

Since Paul established the elder structure of government among Gentile churches (Acts 14:23) and, most likely, the Twelve established it among Jewish churches (Acts 15:6; James 5:14), the New Testament writers assumed eldership to be a fixed, apostolic institution. In Titus 1:5, Paul

tells Titus and the churches that a church is not properly ordered until qualified elders (plural) have been appointed. So he orders Titus to install elders: "Appoint elders in every city as I directed you" (Titus 1:5b).

By doing this, Paul is going against customary cultural practices because both the Jewish synagogue and Greco-Roman society commonly practiced one-man oversight. Thus Paul's choice of the elder structure of government is intentional.

I conclude, therefore, that the instructions given to elders and about elders, as well as the eldership structure itself, are to be regarded as apostolic directives (Titus 1:5) that are normative for churches today. Ladd is quite wrong when he claims that "there was no normative pattern of church government in the apostolic age, and that the organizational structure of the church is no essential element in the theology of the church."

CONCLUSION

For the Bible-believing Christian, the real issue is this: is pastoral leadership by a plurality of elders biblical? Is it apostolic? It is my contention that it is! Both the apostles, Paul and Peter, mandate that the local church elders pastor the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1, 2; cf. Titus 1:5). We have no right, then, to take away the elders' God-given mandate. Yet that is precisely what most churches have done by applying the apostolic mandate to shepherd the local church to a single, professional pastor and by subordinating the eldership to the pastor. Where in the New Testament do we find references to the ordained (reverend-clergyman) pastor and his advising elders? We don't! We find only pastor elders mentioned.

We must admit, however, that most traditional, clergy-led churches will find pastoral leadership by a plurality of qualified pastor elders to be difficult if not impossible to implement. So, to try to implement biblical eldership will require two conditions. First, each local church and its leaders must be firmly convinced that eldership is a scriptural teaching. Second, the local church must be committed to make the difficult, personal changes necessary in order to make eldership work for God's glory.

To be sure, the incorporation of pastoral eldership into the local church is not the cure-all for every problem. Eldership creates its own problems, and these must be understood and continually addressed. However, when properly implemented, biblical eldership allows the church to be what God designed it to be, fosters the spiritual development of the leading men within the church family, and honors the teaching of God's precious Word.

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