

Greg Stienbarger Commissioning Service (The Office and Function of an Elder)

Today is a very special service. At the end of our time together we are going to invite Greg (with Pam) to come up front so we can lay hands on Greg, pray for him, officially ordain him as our newest elder. With this in mind, I would like to spend our time speaking about the office and function of a NT elder.

1. Biblical basis for the office of elder. Generally speaking, we see men serving as elders throughout the history of Israel. We have a clear example with Moses as he appeared before Pharaoh with the elders of the people (Exod. 3:16-18). During the Exodus we often see the example of the elders serving with Moses. Later on, with Kings of Israel (both north and south) we see the practice of elders in the political structure of Israel. This example carries over to the NT. In Acts 15:6 we read: **“The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.”** Paul addresses the Philippians with these words: **“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. . . (Phil. 1:1).** Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint elders in the churches (Tit. 1:5).

I believe we see a clear distinction between the elders and the deacons in Acts 6. (Retell story). I know this is a very brief overview, but it is important that we follow the Scriptures, particularly the NT as WE do our best to be obedient by having elders (and deacons).

2. Qualifications for the office of elder. So, what are the qualifications for the office of elder? Let's begin with our constitution and then I will make some comments.

7.4.5 Qualifications of Elders. The general qualifications for a man chosen to fill the office of elder are clearly set forth in Scripture, particularly in I Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Any man called to this office must be able conscientiously to affirm his agreement with our confession and the Constitution of the church. Should he at any time move from this position, he is under spiritual and moral obligation to make this fact known to the church at the discretion of his fellow elders. Elders must be members of this congregation for at least two years before assuming any responsibilities as an officer.

I'll read from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 later as we give a charge to Greg. But, for a few minutes, I want to highlight three aspects (calling, character, ability to teach) to the qualification of an elder in these passages.

a. Calling – The first is calling. An elder must be “called.” What does this look like? I believe this “call” has two very important parts, an internal call and an external call.

i. internal call – This “internal” call begins with God. He is the ONE who calls and gives a desire for man to become an elder. This is my experience. This is our elders experience, including Greg (we have spoken with him at length over the past year).

ii. external call – This is really the “call” of the congregation as we see and confirm how a man with the call of God works this out practically among us as a body. (We have certainly see

this with Greg.) Let me read part of our constitution. From 7.1 The General Concept of Church Officers. *It is the duty of the church to seek and discover among its members those to whom Christ the Lord has imparted the necessary gifts for office bearing (Acts 6:3; I Tim. 3:1-8; Tit. 1:5-9), and, after formally recognizing them by common consent (Acts 6:5-6; 14:21-22), to set them apart by united prayer (Acts 6:6; 13:1-3) and then to submit to their authority (Luke 10:16; John 13:20; Heb. 13:17; I Pet. 5:5). Church officers are not exempt from church discipline, but on the contrary, their office obliges them to a more rigorous standard of conduct than regular members (James 3:1).*

b. Character – As we will see in a few minutes as I read the NT, the overall qualification for calling an elder is that he must be “above reproach.” Though Paul could have said more, we see a clear list of character qualities in 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1. (Greg’s example in godliness.)

c. Able to teach – Along with a desire to be an elder, this is the quality that distinguishes elders from deacons. I believe that elders are gifted with the ability to teach, not necessarily to preach as I do every week. But, an elder must be mature in understanding the Gospel of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Word of God. AND, be able to apply the Scriptures to the body of Christ, whether that be in a Sunday School class, a Home Group, from the Pulpit, or all kinds of other meetings in our homes.

THIS IS THE JOB DESCRIPTION OF THE ELDER! And, we believe this is what we are getting with Greg. We’ve seen his calling (internal/external). We’ve seen his character. We’ve seen his ability to teach. And so, we believe he is qualified, which is why we are calling him!

3. Function of an elder. The two primary words in the NT for “elder” are *presbuteros* and *episkipos*. These words express various functions such as “overseer,” “minister,” “pastor,” “teacher,” “shepherd,” “bishop,” etc. These words are often used interchangeably in the NT in such a way that our elders at Grace function in all these ways.

Let me read from our constitution in a couple places and make some comments about function.

7.1 The General Concept of Church Officers: *Jesus Christ alone is the Head of the church (Col. 1:18), and he governs His church through office bearers whom He appoints (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11), and who are endowed by His Spirit with the gifts and graces needed to accomplish their work (I Cor. 15:9-10). Because Christ appoints church officers, they both have authority (II Cor. 13:10) and their authority is limited by Him in the Scriptures (I Cor. 14:36-38; III John 9). There are two kinds of church officers, elders and deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). Elders are also called “bishops” (meaning “overseers”) because they are charged with the oversight of the assembly (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2). These are also the “pastors and teachers” given to the church “for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11-12). Elders only function (according to the will of Christ) as an extension of the heart and hand of Christ, overseeing His flock committed to their charge (Acts 20:28).*

7.3 The Limits of Their Authority: The Word of God defines the limits and boundaries of the authority of church officers and of the congregation. The eldership, as a body, (Acts 20:17-35; I Pet. 5:1-2), is authorized and responsible to give comprehensive oversight to the church, including: the preaching and teaching of the whole counsel and gospel of God (Acts 20:20-21, 27; Titus 1:9); the watching out for the welfare of the soul of every member of the church (Eph. 4:11-16; Col. 1:28; I Thess. 2:11; Heb. 13:17); and the directing of the church in all its tasks by setting general policy and by making specific decisions (I Tim. 3:4-5; Heb. 13:17; I Pet. 5:1-2). Nonetheless, the elders must always exercise this authority with sensitivity to the needs of the congregation (Ezek. 34:4; I Tim. 3:4-5; I Pet. 3:7) in the posture of servants and examples to the congregation (Matt. 20:25-28; I Pet. 5:3). Therefore, the elders should seek the advice and support of the congregation respecting any large project or expenditure and should be willing to yield to the congregation when appropriate (Acts 19:30; 21:11-14).

4. Pastoral thoughts on how healthy elders serve the church (body at Grace).

a. Plurality – *7.4.1 Plurality of Elders: Although in new or small congregations only one man may have the gifts requisite to his being recognized as an elder, the Scriptures indicate that, normally, there should be a plurality of elders in the local church (Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1). The church should endeavor, therefore, to discover, and then formally to recognize, all the men whom the Holy Spirit has endowed with the requisite gifts and graces, but only such men. With a church our size it is so important that we have a plurality of elders, both paid and non-paid.*

b. Specific gifts -- *7.4.2 Parity and Diversity of Elders: The elders are all equal in office and authority but diverse in gift and function. While every elder should be “able to teach,” some will be more engaged in formal and public teaching, while others will be more engaged in pastoring (that is, private teaching and admonishing) and governing. Elders are usually referred to as pastors for they all share the pastoral responsibility. Since the responsibilities of this office are numerous and grave, it is highly desirable that at least one elder should devote himself, full-time, to the work of the ministry and the oversight of the church.*

I cannot imagine serving as your pastor without a plurality of elders who are gifted differently! What a blessing to me and to the church! I can only do so much! My giftings are small! But, with 5 or 6 or us, how great is this for our body! This means you may have different relationships with different pastors. This is ok! One pastor may serve you in a way that ONLY he could serve you; because of his giftings. And as we consider Greg, many of you know what I am talking about. (service, teaching, counsel, etc.) I MUST spend more time in preaching for Sunday mornings, weddings, funerals, certain kinds of counseling and not be able to spend time in other areas. But, this is ok! If we have a plurality! You know my strengths and you know my weaknesses. This is ok. God has gifted our body with elders to equip you for the work of the ministry. This is good!

c. Priority of praying and the ministry of the Word. Thinking back to Acts 6 and the call of the first deacons I must ask, “Why was this necessary and how did this model serve the church back then and now?” The calling of deacons in the local church allows the elders to focus on prayer

and the ministry of the Word. Our elders serve as our “spiritual committee” and our deacons serve as our “physical committee.” In this we our polity make sure our elders prioritize the Word and Prayer and ministries that go along as opposed to every other thing under the sun. In this way, we are best served at Grace and should become more and more healthy.

At the end of the day, I try to keep things simple for myself as an elder. And, I think the same goes for all our elders. So, how do we as elders keep things simple? 1) Preach, 2) Pray, 3) Make Disciples, and 4) Be patient. If we do this over time, we will see the church of Christ grow

5. The Responsibility of the Congregation.

Reading the last part of 7.1 again: *It is the duty of the church to seek and discover among its members those to whom Christ the Lord has imparted the necessary gifts for office bearing (Acts 6:3; I Tim. 3:1-8; Tit. 1:5-9), and, after formally recognizing them by common consent (Acts 6:5-6; 14:21-22), to set them apart by united prayer (Acts 6:6; 13:1-3) and then to submit to their authority (Luke 10:16; John 13:20; Heb. 13:17; I Pet. 5:5). Church officers are not exempt from church discipline, but on the contrary, their office obliges them to a more rigorous standard of conduct than regular members (James 3:1).*

Let me also add the necessity of trust. There must be trust. If not, we have big problems. So, trust your elders, and if they cannot be trusted, it is the responsibility of the congregation to find elders who are trustworthy. (Speak to this briefly.)

5. Charge to Greg. I would like to finish our time by reading the qualifications of elder from 1 Tim. 3, Titus 1, and then finish with 1 Tim. 4:6-16 as we, as a church, charge Greg as he begins his service as an elder.

(Finish with a formal laying on of hands and prayer with the congregation.)