

The  
*Caring*  
*Elder*

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*A Training Manual for Serving*

**Victor A. Constien**

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 20 19 18 17 16 15

# Contents

	Page
<b>For Your Reading . . . and Much More</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Why Elders?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. The Congregation's Expectations</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>3. Who Are These Elders?</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>4. Elders Assist in Congregational Worship</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>5. Elders Help Others Learn and Teach the Gospel of Christ, Too</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>6. Elders Promote Witnessing to Christ, the World's Savior</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>7. Elders Equip Servants of Jesus, the Compassionate Lord</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>8. Elders Build Up Congregational Fellowship and Support</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>9. Evaluating Elders</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendix A – 200 Bible Readings for an Elder's Personal Devotions</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Appendix B – An Elder's Prayers</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Appendix C – Personal Pages for an Elder's Goals, Diary, and Records</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>Appendix D – Six Devotions for Elders Meetings</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Appendix E – Five Bible Studies for Elders Meetings</b>	<b>105</b>

## **For Your Reading . . . and Much More**

This book is for you to read, of course. Whether you are an elder in your congregation, a member of an elders zone, a called church worker, or chairman of a nominating committee, personally scanning these pages will increase your appreciation for an elder's service to Christ Jesus and a congregation of His people.

You should also be stimulated by your reading to include the work of elders in your prayers. More aware of the extensive and sensitive areas in which elders minister with other Christians, you will perceive the need for God's blessing. Only through total dependence on Jesus will elders be able to carry out their divinely given tasks.

As a guide for discussion the book can become a valuable tool for elders' growth. Those who recently have been elected as elders can use the book in orienting themselves to their new calling. A preservice training manual you might call it.

In another setting, a congregation with a seasoned board of elders can use this book to review and evaluate the elder's position description and the strengths and weaknesses of the board's current operation. As effective as board members are, by God's grace they are always in the process of becoming even better representatives of His mercy in Christ Jesus.

Debating answers to the questions at the end of each session will lead you to reflect more deeply on the role of the elder in a Christian congregation. Discussion in elders meetings and training events can also provoke you to some exciting decisions about new hopes, goals, and strategies for your congregation in the mission of Jesus Christ.

# 1. Why Elders?

**T**odd James and his wife Emelda were stumped. Seated at their kitchen table, they were trying to complete a questionnaire. Their congregation's officers wanted feedback on parish programs.

One set of questions focused on the elders as spiritual leaders.

"I thought our pastor was our spiritual leader," Emelda said. "He's been trained for it. God called him to his vocation, and our congregation called him to this location."

Todd agreed. "I wonder whether ordinary people like elders or the rest of us members in the congregation can ever really guide someone else's spiritual life. Isn't that the pastor's job?" he asked.

Members of Lutheran congregations like Mr. and Mrs. James may assume that elders simply come with the package. Join the congregation and you get a board of elders with it. You may even be assigned to an elder. You may not be sure why, but if that's the system, it probably won't hurt you.

Some elders themselves may not have probed very deeply the reasons for their eldership, the rationale for their position. Parish constitutions and bylaws sometimes do little more than state briefly the elders' duties. Orientation or training sessions for elders may be superficial, if conducted at all. However, the elders of a congregation need and deserve more than a handshake to welcome them to their jobs.

It becomes clear that the elders we read about in the Old and New Testaments did not serve the same role as elders in our congregations today. However, we can learn from those early spiritual guides something about leadership among God's people in every age, including our own.

So the goals of this first session are that you (1) discover differences in the ways Biblical authors wrote about elders and the meanings we attach to the word "elder" today, (2) identify leadership qualifications among Old and New Testament elders which congregation officers might imitate today, and (3) list at least two reasons why a contemporary congregation appoints people to the position of elder.

## **Elders in the Old Testament**

In Old Testament times elders served God's people. In Exodus 3 we note that God chose Moses to lead the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. But Moses was uncertain about his credibility. He asked God what he should tell Israel about the name of the God of their fathers who sent

him. God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM . . . Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also explained to Moses that His name is "The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob . . . My name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations."

God further instructed Moses, "Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt; and I promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey." ' "

God promised Moses that the people would listen to him. Then God continued, "And you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.' I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all the wonders I will do in it; after that he will let you go."

Although no writer in the Old Testament tells how elders were appointed, they obviously played significant leadership roles. They obeyed powerful figures like Moses and Joshua, while at the same time they acted for the whole people of Israel at major events. Perhaps at one time the elders were heads of families or clans. Later they represented the entire nation.

Elders directed the Passover celebration (Exodus 12:21-27). They came with Aaron to eat bread with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, as he offered burnt offerings and sacrifices to God (Exodus 18:12). In the sight of the elders Moses struck the rock at Horeb from which God miraculously poured out water for His people to drink (Exodus 17:6). The elders of Israel joined Joshua for the attack on Ai (Joshua 8:10).

When God heard the people of Israel complaining about their misfortunes in the wilderness, He said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; and bring them to the tent of the meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there; and I will take some of the spirit which is upon you and put it on them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you that you may not bear it yourself alone" (Numbers 11:16-17). Moses then appointed special elders to share his leadership burdens.

At Mount Sinai God invited 70 elders to come up to Him with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu and worship afar off. Only Moses came near to the Lord. But the elders of Israel were there, too. "And they saw the God of Israel; and there was under His feet as it were a pavement of sapphire

stone, like the very heaven for clearness. And He did not lay His hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank” (Exodus 24:10-11).

Later when Israel received a king, the elders lost some of their influence. Nevertheless, in a time of crisis, such as described in 1 Kings 20, kings like Ahab wisely called in all the elders of the land for advice. Kings coveted and needed the support of the elders.

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the ruling body of the Jews was called the Sanhedrin. Also known as the Council of Elders, it eventually became the high court, the chief authority for interpreting the Law and instructing the scribes.

### **Elders in the New Testament**

We first read about elders in the Christian church in Jerusalem in Acts 11. Luke wrote that Agabus forecast a great famine all over the world. When it came, “the disciples determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul” (vv. 29-30).

Later a dispute arose over the question “Can a person be saved without circumcision?” At the height of the discussion, “Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. . . . When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them” (Acts 15:2-4).

Following the apostolic council, as Paul and Timothy “went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observances the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:4-5).

In Acts 21:17-20a, Luke reported: “When we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day, Paul went in with us to James; and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it they glorified God.” Representing the Jerusalem congregation, the elders assembled for their meetings under the chairmanship of the apostle James. As mature and experienced members they helped to monitor with the apostles the teaching of the Gospel of Christ throughout the church.

When Paul and Barnabas evangelized communities and organized clusters of believers, they appointed elders and with prayer and fasting committed them to the Lord in whom they believed (Acts 14:23). After the apostles left to continue their work in other places, these elders built on the foundations the apostles had laid.

In his farewell speech to the elders from Ephesus (Acts 20:17-38), Paul shared the whole counsel of God. He named the elders guardians

of God's people who were to "care for the church of God which He obtained with the blood of His own Son." He urged them to be alert for fierce wolves who attack the flock from without and perverse men from within who try to draw away Christians after them. Appointed by the apostles, the elders preserved the teaching of the apostles, and trained and guided the company of believers.

Perhaps writing from Rome, the apostle Peter also drafted instructions for congregations in Asia Minor. "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-3). Obviously, these elders had authority. But they were to be models for believers, responsible to Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, who comes on the Day of Fulfillment to give the "unfading crown of glory" to those who in faith wait for His appearing.

The apostle Paul urged the young minister Timothy to recall the action of the elders at his ordination. "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the council of elders laid their hands upon you," Paul wrote. ". . . Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:14, 16). The word Paul used here reveals the tradition of a "college of elders" at the time.

When he wrote to Titus, another young pastor, the apostle Paul requested elders for the sake of good order. "This is why I left you in Crete," Paul penned, "that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate" (Titus 1:5-6).

Paul encouraged Christians to recognize the faithful service of elders. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching," Paul taught Timothy (1 Timothy 5:17). Paul also wanted the elders to be protected in their work. "Never admit any charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses," he wrote (1 Timothy 5:19).

The apostle John called himself "the elder" when he wrote the opening verses of his second and third letters. By this term he probably did not mean that he spoke as an elected official. Rather, he was a highly respected teacher, a spiritual person who cherished and shared the teachings of Jesus.

The 24 elders described in the Book of Revelation are seated around the throne of God. They perform no ruling function. Instead, they revel in the majesty of God as they "fall down before Him who is seated on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing, 'Worthy art Thou, our Lord and God,