

## **BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP**

### **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The term elder actually means “aged” in Hebrew. Age was associated with wisdom and experience and the patriarchs of various nations became the leaders because of that experience and wisdom. They were the “chiefs” of their various families, clans, or tribes. These family heads were the political and spiritual leaders of the various nations including the Hebrews.

In Genesis 50:7 the officers in Pharaoh’s house were called “the elders”. Since the elder men or patriarchs functioned as leaders this term became the name for various leadership offices or positions. When Moses was sent to the children of Israel they already had “elders” (Exodus 3:16). After the return of the exiles the office rose into higher significance and fuller organization. With every synagogue there was connected a government of elders, varying in numbers according to the population attached to it. The rulers of the synagogue and the elders of the people were essentially one and some of them belonged to the Sanhedron.

When we move into the New Testament we find that the “elders” were a part of the spiritual and political structure as well. They were often referred to with the Scribes, Pharisees, and chief priests. This leadership title carries over into the New Testament church and there is no specific reference to the origin of eldership in the apostolic church. In Acts 6:12 they are referred to as part of the Jewish leadership who was persecuting the church and the apostles. In the next reference (Acts 11:30) we find them as a well known established class of officials in Jerusalem.

As we see the New Testament develop and eldership develop in the church what is really happening is the defining of what that role looks like in this new setting.

### **2. NEW TESTAMENT TERMS**

There are three primary terms used in the New Testament that refer to elders.

- Episkopoi--Overseer
- Presbuteros—Elder
- Poimen—Pastor/Shepherd

While these terms are often used interchangeably in the New Testament, the term “elder” (presbuteros) seems to emphasize age, wisdom, spiritual maturity, (character) necessary for the position; and the terms “overseer” (episkopoi) and “pastor” (poimen) seem to emphasize the nature (task) of the ministry.

### **3. JOB DESCRIPTION**

When we look to the most often used passages to find the requirements of leaders, we find more on character than we do on job description. The few action/activities that are listed are not always specific enough to be universally understood as to meaning. As a result, difficulties sometimes arise between leaders and the entire church family. After reviewing the teaching of Scripture and church history we find certain principles concerning leadership in the local church and have listed them in this document. The job description for an elder is to do all that it takes for the spiritual oversight and servant leadership of the church. Elders are biblically qualified men that share the pastoring of a local body of believers. That pastoring is described as shepherding in the New Testament. It then includes all the responsibilities of a good shepherd including the following. Since in our culture being a shepherd is not a common occupation any more, we might use words like “coaching”, or even “parenting” to describe what is involved in adequately caring for the people in a church.

#### **A. LEADING**

1 Tim. 5:17, Titus 1:7; Hebrews 13:17

In any group of people there must be leadership and the church is no exception. While the Spirit of God indwells every believer, the masses never set the course. The interesting phenomenon

within the church is that some of the sheep are also shepherds. God gifts and calls some to lead the rest of the flock.

Elders must be men who discover God's purposes, priorities and direction for a local body. They then establish a strategy and set the pace to accomplish God's agenda. Like Paul they should actually be able to say, "Follow me as I follow Christ". (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Peter 5:3)

It is important to understand that biblical eldership requires leadership, but it is leadership that is servant leadership. Probably the best known example of this kind of leadership is in John 13 when Jesus washes his disciples' feet and then tells them to do likewise. In mark 10:35-45 Jesus calls his disciples to understand that leadership with him means sacrifice and suffering, not prominence and prestige.

## **B. FEEDING**

John 21:17; Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:13; 5:17-18; Titus 1:9

Feeding or nourishing the sheep means that elders must be able to take the Word of God and aptly apply it to daily lives. They must be able to accurately divide the Word of Truth as Paul admonishes Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15. There is a shared responsibility for the spiritual growth of the individuals in the local body with the leadership of that body. Each individual is responsible for their own personal growth, but elders are also held responsible for the clear teaching of those individuals and God takes that responsibility very seriously (James 3:1).

This is one of the greatest challenges for elders in today's culture. Clearly distinguishing what is a biblical principle from a cultural bias and then applying those principles to everyday situations takes ongoing study prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit for wisdom.

## **C. PROTECTING**

(Acts 15:6ff, Acts 20:17-31, Titus 1:9, John 10:12)

One of the primary responsibilities of Shepherds is to protect the sheep. In the case of the church, that protection primarily is from doctrinal error and those who would push those errors or try and take advantage of the sheep.

It is extremely important that elders are very wise in their understanding of Scripture, conscious of cultural pitfalls, and aware of the dangers of human nature, especially in those who aspire to leadership. Elders then must be consistent students of God's Word so that they can recognize and refute doctrinal errors.

The cost for protection is high. It means that elders must pay the price to understand the truth and bear the heat to say no to certain things or to certain people.

## **D. NURTURING**

Ezekiel 34; Acts 20:35

Ministry to each other is the responsibility of each member of the body of Christ. But as leaders, elders must make sure that the necessary nurture and care of the flock is accomplished. The bottom line is that the elders must have a deep and abiding love for the members of a local congregation. Without that love they are in danger of becoming manipulative and managerial or as 1 Corinthians 13 puts it "noisy gongs or clanging symbols." Individuals should feel a part of local body, but the elders must have a deep sense of personal responsibility and care for the members of that body. In 2 Corinthians 11:27-29, Paul gives us a good picture of the weightiness of that concern.

## **4. QUALIFICATIONS**

Nowhere in Scripture does God call for perfect men to lead his people. That is also true of his church, but the New Testament does give us guidelines to assess the godly character qualities which God

expects every man who is appointed to the position of *overseer* to have and maintain. We believe the local body and its elders have the final responsibility to affirm/appoint each candidate for the position and office of Elder.

The following is a list of and very brief explanation of the qualities listed in various New Testament passages. If you have any questions about these qualifications or their meaning, please take the time to look up the various passages and to ask any of the elders what they mean.

#### **A. MORAL OR SPIRITUAL CHARACTER**

##### ***BLAMELESS/ABOVE REPROACH*** (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6)

###### Meaning:

None of us is perfect and the pressure to be perfect is not healthy or godly. What God desires is that we are godly and that means that we are consistently being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. An elder's conduct in life is to be consistently lived in conformity to God's Word. There are to be no "handholds for blame". No critic should have grounds for charges that would cast reproach on the office of elder, the local church, or the name of Christ.

###### Application:

Does this man have a good reputation and does he deserve it? Is his (your) private life patterned after the Word of God and the character of God?

##### ***EXEMPLARY*** (1 Peter 5)

###### Meaning:

Exemplary means that these are men that can be looked up to and a younger believer can pattern their lives after the manner of life of an elder.

###### Application:

Can this man say as Paul did, "Follow me as I follow Christ"? Is this a man that you would want your children to emulate in his pursuit of Christ, his family, his business, etc? How does he conduct himself when he is confronted with a failure?

##### ***ONE WOMAN MAN*** (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6)

###### Meaning:

This term forbids involvement in any extra marital affairs. It also means that the inner nature of a man is not driven to sexual addiction, perversion, or sexual activity outside of marriage. His love is isolated and centralized.

###### Application:

Has this man maintained a sexually pure and moral life? Has this man demonstrated a faithful commitment to one woman? What are his standards for personal entertainment? Does he have a problem with pornography or any sexual activity outside of marriage?

##### ***TEMPERATE - FREE FROM EXCESSES*** (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7)

###### Meaning:

Scripture does not forbid the consumption of alcoholic beverages but it does forbid drunkenness or excess. This includes excesses in areas besides the use of alcohol.

Application: Is there any material substance, which this man uses in excess or abuses to the detriment of his physical, mental, or emotional being? Is this man given to excesses or is self-indulgence in any area of his life?

##### ***SELF-CONTROLLED*** (1 Timothy 3)

###### Meaning:

Is he able to discipline his thoughts and actions, even under difficult circumstances? Is this person a person of extremes or does he demonstrate stability and balance in his life?

Application:

Is this person one who consistently demonstrates self-control in areas of temptation and areas of tension? How does he handle himself in tough situations? Does this person “go off” easily and regularly?

***RESPECTABLE (1 Timothy 3)***

Meaning:

This word is translated a number of different ways. It has the meaning of good behavior or respectability.

Application:

Does this man live an ordered, modest life as opposed to a garish or ostentatious one?

***HOSPITABLE (1 Timothy 3)***

Meaning:

He enjoys getting to know and help others. He is willing to open his life and home to others.

Application:

How open is this man and his family to people? Are they easy to get to know and are they genuinely interested in others?

***SOBER MINDED (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)***

Meaning:

Sensible, prudent, and serious. It does not mean that he does not have a sense of humor, but is he serious about the things of life that should be taken seriously.

Application:

Is this a man who understands life and can laugh at the things that are not that serious, but his life is not just a lark? Does he know that there are matters that impact eternity and his life is purposely directed towards that end?

***GENTLE (1 Timothy 3)***

Meaning:

His attitude, as reflected in his speech and actions, is kind, moderate, yielding. He does not strike out at others like a bully. He is not one that throws his weight around or is consistently rude or harsh.

Application:

Are people afraid of this man (not because he speaks the truth, but he is insensitive or even purposely hurtful)? Is he a bully physically or verbally with his family or others? Does he genuinely care about the feelings and care of people?

***NOT QUARRELSOME; NOT OVERBEARING, NOT VIOLENT, NOT HOT HEADED, NOT SELF-WILLED (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)***

Meaning:

His mental composure is not roused to anger or irritation by sudden emotions; he reacts calmly and moderately. He does not have a contentious spirit that enjoys or incites physical or verbal fights. He is not an agitator who loves to stir people to discontent and bickering. Relationships are more important than winning arguments or being in charge.

Application:

How much stress does it take to “set this man off”? Does he go around “with a chip on his shoulder”? Does this person like to argue just to argue? Is he quick tempered and violent in his home or elsewhere? Would this man be considered stubborn or unreasonable? Is he judgmental and critical? Is he grumpy? Does he have a history of broken relationships with individuals or churches? Is he one who is often discontent himself or stirs up discontent in others? Does this man take offense easily or often?

***NOT MONEY HUNGRY*** (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Meaning:

This does not mean that an elder cannot be wealthy, but he is not to be greedy for, or obsessed with, obtaining worldly treasure. Rather, his great priorities and desires are eternal. He does not condone cheating, bribery, deceit, or any other improper means to secure things, nor does he demonstrate that a certain status or lifestyle is more important than ministry.

Application:

How does this man handle his finances? Does he have a preoccupation with making or storing up money? Is he a giver to the cause of Christ? Is he consistently tempted by get rich quick schemes? Would this man fudge on biblical principles in order to make money? Would he or has he unfairly used people in the past to make money?

***MATURE*** (1 Timothy 3)

Meaning:

An elder must have a consistent working knowledge of the Word of God and how it applies to daily life. He needs to have the maturity to deal with difficult situations and difficult people gently but firmly. The concern here is not so much with chronological or even spiritual age as it is with the a man's demonstrated ability to apply the truth of the Word of God consistently over time and testing.

Application:

When did this man commit his life to Christ? What has been his experience within local churches or in the Christian community in the past? Is this a person to whom you would go for godly wisdom and counsel? What happens in this man's life during times of personal difficulties or crisis?

***JUST, HOLY*** (Titus 1:8)

Meaning:

This person deals rightly with issues and people. He consistently does the right thing regardless of whether it is personally costly. He is non-compromising when it comes to obeying God's Word and principles. He is consistently anxious to be conformed to the image of Christ.

Application:

Is this man sincere in his walk with God and consistent in his application of the Word of God in his life and the lives of others around him? Is he fickle when it is inconvenient or uncomfortable to walk in personal obedience to God's Word? Is he consistent in his pursuit of personal spiritual growth?

***HOLDS SOLIDLY TO THE WORD OF GOD***

Meaning:

The Word of God is the ultimate authority in this man's life. Obedience is not optional.

Application:

Is this man a consistent student of God's Word? Is he convinced that it is the inspired inerrant word of God and does it dictate his lifestyle, priorities, and practice?

***GOOD REPUTATION WITHIN THE COMMUNITY*** (1 Timothy 3)

Meaning:

His life and attitudes must attract unbelievers to the person of Jesus Christ. The non-Christian world must have no grounds for charges that he violates their standards of conduct (which are in accord with God's Word).

Application:

How does this person relate to his neighbors or coworkers? What do they think of him and his faith? Would they have a negative perspective of Christ because of this man's reputation in the

business world, social circles, etc.? Would his being appointed/affirmed as an Elder exalt their opinion of this local church for its high quality of leadership? Would they recommend him for leadership in the church?

## **B. ABILITIES**

*MANAGES HIS FAMILY WELL* (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Meaning:

One of the ways that the church is described is “The Family of God”. Leadership in the church functions very much like leadership in a home. It is a position of respect and influence rather than power and authority. Therefore the best testing ground for ability to oversee or manage the church is the family. If he has children, they must manifest sincere respect for him as they submit in obedience to his leading and authority. His children must not have a reputation of living abandoned, dissolute lives that cannot be subjected to control; unrestrained morally and/or wasteful (reckless) in living. He needs to have demonstrated the ability to lead them towards godly living.

Application:

Again, we are not looking for perfect families. They do not exist, but does this man’s family demonstrate respect for him and a willingness to follow his life and example? Has he been effective in raising kids that are controllable and have a desire to know and follow Christ?

*ABLE TO TEACH THE TRUTH AND REFUTE ERROR* (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1)

Meaning:

An elder must first and continually be learning and have a desire to understand God’s Word more clearly. He needs to be able to explain the significant doctrines of Scripture and their application to every day life. He needs to be able to defend his faith and refute doctrinal error and teach others to do the same. It refers more to a clear and mature understanding of God’s Word.

Application:

What is this man doing to consistently grow in his understanding of God and His Word? If you had a question about the teaching of some cult or some theological issue, would this be a man whose counsel you would seek? Is he in any way foggy or unclear in his ability to handle the Bible or to teach it?

*LEADERSHIP* (Romans 12:8; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Hebrews 13:17, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1)

Meaning:

One of the jobs of elders is to lead the local congregation. They do so as servants and as examples, but they also have the responsibility to set the spiritual direction and focus for the church. Hebrews teaches that they are held responsible for the spiritual leadership of the church.

Application:

Is this a man who is helping set the pace for the congregation? Is he involved in the lives of people and helping care for their spiritual growth and maturity? Could you willingly follow his direction so that you and your family will be more like Christ and the community will be impacted by the life of the individuals in the church and the reputation of the church as a whole?

## **C. DESIRE OR CALL**

*WILLING, DESIROUS, EAGER, SERVANT, SELF SACRIFICING* (1 Peter 5; 1 Timothy 3)

Meaning:

Being an elder is not an easy task. It involves extra time and energy because it is very much like parenting. It is never done and it is highly relational. There are tough issues to deal with and tough decisions to make. A man who is an elder must not do so because “there is no one else to do it”. It is also not a position to be looked at for status or power. It is a position of servanthood.

Application:

Does this man desire the office or does he desire ministry? Is this man consistently desirous to help others be like Jesus? Is this local church just something else in his life or are the people in this church and their spiritual well being one of the great priorities of his life? Is ministry consistent even when it is costly, or does it happen sporadically only when it is convenient?

**RESPONSIBLE** (1 Timothy 3; 5:17-20; Ezek. 34; Titus 1)

Meaning:

Responsible means being able to accept and complete tasks as well as accepting the added burden to life's busyness. Biblical eldership is not an easy task. It is sometimes demanding of time and energy.

Application:

Does this man have the time and demonstrated ability to follow through on tasks related to people and this local church body? Is he a person that can be counted on to do what he says and to honor his word? Is he in a position in life with his work and family to dedicate time and energy to the needs of the church and the individuals under his care?

**5. PROCESS FOR APPOINTING/AFFIRMING**

One of God's provisions for the local body is leadership. It is ultimately His responsibility. The local body has the opportunity and the responsibility to recognize those leaders that he provides. The process is not necessarily easy, nor is it speedy, but if done well will result in qualified and gifted leadership of the local body.

The first phase of appointing an elder is a recommendation. Those within the body who see quality of life and leadership of an individual may recommend him for the position of elder. Upon receiving the recommendation of existing elders will begin the process of evaluation of an individual.

That process includes:

- Training about biblical eldership.
  - Personal study
  - Handouts
  - Study with one or more elders
- Self-evaluation by the candidate.
- Evaluation by the existing elder board.
- Evaluation by the candidate's family.
- Evaluation by the candidate's neighbors and co-workers.
- Evaluation by the church.
- Time of testing (training)  
Approximately one year in which a man functions as an elder to demonstrate his maturity, calling, and giftedness.
- Recognition and appointing/affirming to elder team by the other elders and the congregation.

1/5/16