



Getting Back to Church

Lesson 3: Understanding the Office of Elder

Introduction

Any building that does not have structure will not stand for long. The lack of structure creates weakness, and it is only a matter of time before the building crumbles. The same is true of the church. Without structure, the church will crumble. That is why God has established structure and order in His church. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14:40, “But all things should be done decently and in order.” While Paul is speaking of using spiritual gifts in the worship service, the principle applies to other areas of the church as well. God cares about order and structure in His church, and it begins with the establishment of elders.

Paul tells Titus in Titus 1:5, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.” Titus was tasked with setting the churches in order. The word for “set in order” in the Greek is *epidiorthoō*. It is a compound word made up of three words, *epi*, which means “upon;” *dia*, which means “through;” and *orthos*, which means “to straighten.” Titus was like a ‘spiritual’ orthodontist who was tasked with setting straight what was still in a defective state. Part of putting the church in order was to appoint spiritual leadership in the local church. The spiritual leaders are the elders in the church.

In this lesson, we will look at office of elder that God has established and see what an elder is and what qualifications a man must meet in order to serve as an elder in the church.

The Definition of the Elder

What is an elder? Some people see the elders functioning as the corporate executives of the church. Some people see the elders as the old men who have wisdom and life experience in the church. Some people see the elders as the ones who do all of the ministry in the church. Others are confused about elders and don’t know if they are the pastors in the church or not.

How does the Bible define an elder? In order to understand the function, stature, and responsibility of the elder, we must understand the biblical definition of elder as definitions bring clarity. There are five key texts of Scripture that tells us about the elder: Acts 20:17-31, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, Hebrews 13:17-19, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. These texts combine to help us understand who the elder is and what he does.

1. Overseer

The Bible calls the elders *overseers* of the church. The Greek word for overseer is the word *episkopos* and it can mean “overseer, or bishop.” This word is used five times in the New Testament, and it emphasizes the elder’s function and service. The following verses use the word *episkopos* to speak of an elder.

- Acts 20:28: “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.”
- Philippians 1:1: “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons.”

2. Elder

The Bible also uses the Greek work *presbuteros* to refer to the elders. This term emphasized the elder’s stature and maturity. The following verses use the word *presbuteros* when referring to elders.

- Acts 14:23: “When they had appointed **elders** for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
- Titus 1:5: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you.”

3. Shepherd

A third word that is used in reference to elders is the Greek word *poimēn*. This word is defined as “one who herds sheep, a shepherd, one who serves as guardian or leader.”¹ This word is used both as a noun, describing the elder, and as a verb, describing the elder’s role and responsibility. The following verses use the word *poimēn* in reference to the elders.

- Acts 20:28 – “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.”
- Ephesians 4:11 – “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as **pastors** and teachers,”

The three words overseer, elder, and shepherd are all used to define the elder of the church. This shows not only what an elder is, but also his responsibilities as one who serves in the office of elder.

The Aspiration for the Office of Elder

Before a man is chosen to the office of elder in the church, he must have an aspiration for it. Elders are not to be selected based upon popularity, leadership skills, or affluence. There are qualifications that he must have before taking on the role of elder. The first qualification is that he must aspire to the position and, therefore, the responsibilities that come with the position. This aspiration does not come to every man in the church, but every man who does aspire to be an elder aspires to a good thing. As Alexander Strauch says, “The Holy Spirit planted in the hearts of the elders the desire and motivation to be shepherd elders . . . So the starting point is a Spirit-given desire to be a shepherd of God’s people.”² No man should be forced to do this task. He should desire it out of a humble heart that seeks to serve God’s church for God’s glory.

¹ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition*, ed. Fredrick William Danker (Chicago Press: Chicago, 2000), pg 843. (Hereafter, BDAG)

² Strauch, Alexander. *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Church*. (Pensacola, FL: Chapel Library, 2002), 281.

1 Timothy 3:1 states: “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” The phrase, “It is a trustworthy statement” points forward to Paul’s discussion about elders and says that this aspiration is an important part of a man’s qualification for eldership.

The word “aspires” means to seek to accomplish a specific goal, aspire to, strive for, or desire. The reason for this aspiration is due to the sacrifice that it takes to serve as an elder of the church. Robert L. Thomas says, “The office in the first century involved not so much honor as it did personal sacrifice, and a willingness to serve in this office was a sign of dedication.”³

Paul ends verse 1 with, “it is a fine work he desires to do.” The word “desires” means to have a strong desire to do or secure something, or to long for.” John MacArthur states, “The word ‘desire’ refers to a strong inner compulsion that releases itself in outward desire. It is not a title that is desired but the work of ministry. The pastorate is a calling to men who have a passionate desire to minister.”⁴ In order for a man to be chosen for the position of elder in the church, he must aspire to the calling.

Peter speaks of a similar qualification in 1 Peter 5:2–3 where he says, “shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight 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.” Peter is emphasizing the fact that a man is not to be forced into this position. The church is not to select a man because they have a slot to fill. He is called to serve out of the willingness of his own heart.

The Qualifications of the Elder

Every church needs qualified elders. Sadly, many churches have men in leadership who do not meet the biblical qualifications. Rosedale Bible Church not only desires to have a multitude of qualified elders in the church, but purposes to train men up who desire the office. The following are the biblical qualifications that every elder **must** meet in order to be appointed to the office of elder at Rosedale Bible Church.

- 1. Above Reproach:** This qualification identifies the overarching quality that defines with one word the true candidate in all his spheres of life (personal, family, religious, business) while the rest of the qualities will define what it means to be above reproach. The synonym for “above reproach” is “blameless.” “Above reproach” means accusations against an elder do not stick.
- 2. The Husband of One Wife:** The elder is to emulate to the rest of the church the kind of marriage relationship God desires. Another way to say “the husband of one wife” is “one-woman man.” What does “one-woman man” mean? It means the elder must be pure in his marriage as he upholds the sanctity of marriage (Heb. 13:4).
- 3. Temperate (Self-Controlled or Sober-Minded):** This word refers to the elder having control of his flesh—he has self-control or constant sobriety in all bodily appetites and desires. Such temperateness is evidence that they are walking in the Spirit, and the Spirit is producing the fruit of “self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

³ Robert L. Thomas, *Exegetical Digest of 1 Timothy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980).

⁴ John MacArthur, “The Highest Calling,” Convocation Message, TMS, September 9, 1990.

4. **Prudent (Self-Controlled or Wise):** The focus of this qualification is on the candidate’s control of his mind—the exercise of his mind is in harmony with the mind of Christ. The candidate for eldership must be prudent in that they are of sound mind, displaying wisdom in the accurate and balanced use of their mental abilities. This is the kind of wisdom spoken of in the book of Proverbs.
5. **Respectable:** Very simply, the elder must have a lifestyle that garners respect from those who know him. He must be a man who has integrity—a consistency, orderliness in character that is inherently attractive in a splintered world.
6. **Hospitable:** The word for “hospitable” is constructed from two Greek words: φίλος (“love”) + ξένος (“strangers”) which means a love for strangers. Alexander Strauch states, “Giving oneself to the care of God’s people means sharing one’s life and home with others. An open home is a sign of an open heart and a loving, sacrificial, serving spirit. A lack of hospitality is a sure sign of selfish, lifeless, loveless Christianity.”⁵
7. **Able to Teach:** This is the only qualification that relates to the elder’s *function*. All other qualifications relate to the elder’s *character*. The same concept is found in Titus 1:9 which says, “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.” Exhortation and refutation require that a man be able to teach.
8. **Not Addicted to Wine (Sober):** This is the first description in the list of what the elder *cannot* be. This deals with the elder’s relationship to alcohol. This is a specific application of qualification #3 “temperate.” The principle here is that the elder is not marked by a “thirst” for alcohol. He does not cross the line into “excess.”
9. **Not Pugnacious (Not Combative):** This is the second description in the list of what the candidate *cannot* be. Literally, the elder is a man who is not violent, not a striker, and not a bully. The candidate cannot be one who is always ready to fight, who creates a culture of fear and intimidation.
10. **Gentle:** This term (*epieikes*) implies not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, or tolerant.”⁶ Strauch states, “A gentle man exhibits a willingness to yield and patiently makes allowances for the weakness and ignorance of the fallen human condition. One who is gentle refuses to retaliate in kind for wrongs done by others and does not insist upon the letter of the law or his personal rights.”⁷
11. **Peaceable (Averse to Fighting):** The Greek term (*amakos*) means a negation from fighting, quarrels, strife, and disputes. The term is therefore translated simply as “peaceable.” The same general concept is advanced in texts like Romans 12:18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”
12. **Free From the Love of Money (Not Materialistic):** God does not want His servants to be greedy-minded pilferers. God’s standard is that the church’s elders be concerned with giving, rather than getting, money. Accountability will detour the elder from any temptation for sordid gain.

⁵ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 194.

⁶ BDAG, 371.

⁷ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 197

- 13. One who Manages His own Household Well (A Leader at Home):** The Greek word for manager (*proistemi*) means to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, or be at the head. He must be able to manage his own household. That means all that is attached to him: his wife, his children, and others in his home. This management aims at a particular state—submission from his children. His children ought to desire to submit to him (Eph. 6:4). This management is exercised in a particular manner—with all dignity. His behavior indicates he is above what is ordinary and therefore worthy of respect. He must also prove he can manage his home if he is to manage the church. Strauch states, “This perspective is in keeping with the scriptural reasoning that if a man cannot shepherd his family, he can’t shepherd the extended family of the church.”⁸
- 14. Not a New Convert (Spiritually Mature):** This is the third description in the list of what the candidate *cannot* be. A new convert literally means “newly planted,” or “newly sprouted,” and came to refer to one newly converted. It speaks here not to physical age per se, but to length of time in Christ as a Christian.
- 15. He Must Have a Good Reputation with Those Outside (Evangelistic Credibility):** Unbelievers influence the testing of the candidate as well. The elder candidate who does not have a good reputation with unbelievers outside the church will bring disgrace to the church and ultimately to the name of Christ.

The Responsibility of the Elder

The elder has significant responsibility when it comes to leading God’s people. The office of elder is not to be taken lightly. As an under-shepherd of the Chief Shepherd, the elder has the responsibility to lead, feed, and protect the flock of God.

1. Lead

Elders are called to lead, direct, govern, manage, and care for the flock of God (1 Tim.3:5; 5:17; Titus 1:7)). They must be leaders and managers and must clarify direction and beliefs for the flock. They must set goals, make decisions, give direction, correct failures, affect change, and motivate the people. They must evaluate, plan, and govern and be problem solvers when problems arise.

The elder who is a leader knows how to be kind and patient and gentle but also knows when to be tough and give corrective teaching. The elder understands that leading takes hard work and he is willing to put in the work to lead the sheep.

2. Feed

Shepherds have the responsibility of feeding the sheep. Sheep were nearly incapable of feeding and watering themselves. They did not know the difference between healthy and poisonous grass, so it was the shepherd’s job to lead them to healthy grass (Ps. 23). In the biblical sense, feeding the sheep

⁸ Alexander Strauch, *The Biblical Qualifications For Pastoral Eldership (Titus 1:5-9, 1 Tim. 3:1-7, 1 Peter 5:1-4)!* (<https://bible.org/seriespage/2-biblical-qualifications-pastoral-eldership-titus-15-9-1-tim-31-7-1-peter-51-4>, accessed December 9, 2021.)

means teaching them God's Word. As those who are able to teach, the elders must feed the flock God's Word and give them a diet that is filled with truth and edification.

3. Protect

Sheep are defenseless and do not know how to defend themselves from attacks. Therefore, the shepherd carried a rod, often with nails sticking out of the end of it, in order to protect the sheep from attacks. Elders must be knowledgeable in the Word of God in order to protect the flock from false teachers (Acts 20:28–31; Titus 1:9). Protecting the flock also meant going after a lost or straying sheep. This includes church discipline and admonishing improper behaviors and attitudes (1 Thess. 5:12). It also includes stopping fighting amongst the church members (Phil. 4:2). The elder as a protector is to be a peacemaker.

Common Questions about Elders

Can a woman serve as an elder?

While the Bible is clear that men and women are both created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), and equal in value and worth in God's eyes, God has given men and women unique roles. First Timothy 2:11-12 says, "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet." Since elders are to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) and exercises authority over the church (1 Tim. 5:17), the office of elder is only for men. Paul also says in 1 Timothy 3:2, that an elder must be "the husband of one wife." These qualifications limit the office of elder to men only.

How should elders be selected?

Candidates for eldership in the church must first meet the requirements set out in First Timothy 3 and Titus 1. There is also a period of time when their life is evaluated to make sure they are following the biblical qualifications laid out in Scripture.

An elder candidate should be chosen by the current Elder Board after an evaluation period is laid out by the current Elder Board. The Elder Board will come together to pray and vote on whether or not the elder candidate should be selected to hold the office of elder. Once the Elder Board affirms that the candidate is called and ready for the office, the Elder Board will take the candidate's name before the church to see if there are any objections or accusations against the candidate. If there are no legitimate objections or accusations after 30 days, the Elder Board will affirm the man to serve in the office.

Resources on Eldership

- *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch
- *The Master's Plan for the Church* by John MacArthur
- *Pastoral Training in the Church* by Rocky Wyatt
- *Spiritual Maturity: Based on Qualifications for Biblical Elders* by Biblical Eldership Resources