

ELDER DEVELOPMENT COHORT

Elders are biblically-qualified men who “shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.” ¹

A true biblical eldership is not a businesslike committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church. ²

In the Bible, the terms “pastor,” “bishop,” and “elder” all refer to the same role in the local church.

An elder is a pastor. Many of us only apply the title of “pastor” to those in full-time vocational ministry. But in the Bible, the terms elder (presbuteros), pastor (poimen), and bishop (episkopos) are used interchangeably to refer to the same person or group of people. Two particular New Testament texts make this abundantly clear. ³

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the *elders [presbuterous]* of the church. And when they had come to him, he said to them... “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers [episkopous]*, to *shepherd [poimainein]* the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. — Acts 20:17-18

Therefore, I exhort the *elders [presbuterous]* among you, as your fellow elders and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, *shepherd [poimanein]* the flock of God among you, exercising *oversight [episkopountes]* not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God. — 1 Peter 5:1-2

These terms point to the various roles and responsibilities of an elder. The term “*elder*” relates to the man’s spiritual maturity. Elders are to be spiritual fathers in the church. The term “*bishop*” or “*overseer*” relates to the man’s governmental leadership. Bishops have a sphere of responsibility given to them by God over which they will give an account. The term “*pastor*” relates to the man’s spiritual leadership of shepherding. Pastors are mature men who lead the church as under-shepherds.

CALLING

Called to Jesus

The first and primary calling of elders is *TO* Jesus. They must be marked by devotion, spiritual vitality, and a life of repentance. We must always remember that Jesus is

¹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (USA: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 16.

² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (USA: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 31.

³ Robert H. Thune, *Gospel Eldership* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016), 2, 24

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better than ministry. Before we are shepherds, we are sheep. (1 Peter 5:1; 1 Corinthians 11:1)

Called for Jesus

An elder is secondarily called by Jesus to step into this role of servant leadership. We can see the call of Jesus in the following ways:

1. Internal Call (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:1-2)

This internal call is marked by aspiration, desire, and willingness. No one should become an elder out of compulsion.

2. External Confirmation (1 Timothy 5:22)

The calling of Jesus is confirmed by others, especially by his wife, the saints, and the elders who commission and install him.

Knowledge of God and Self

An elder knows his gold and shadow. He is aware of his strengths, capacities, gifts, experiences and victories. But he is also aware of his weaknesses, limitations, struggles, wounds, and sin. (Romans 12:3)

CHARACTER

The New Testament gives us specific qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. — 1 Timothy 3:1-7

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. — Titus 1:5-8

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Elder development is a crockpot, not a microwave. It is not just about technique, knowledge, or capacity. But it's about character. And character takes time. Elders are spiritual leaders of themselves, their family, and other individuals and groups. They understand their callings, that they are first a Christian, then a husband, father, and member. They should be marked by depth of soul.

Character is formed over time. The English word character comes from a Greek and Latin term that describes the mark left by an engraving tool. It is how you have been etched, marked, formed. Christian philosopher Dallas Willard defines character as “who a person is and what they can be counted on to do.”⁴

God forges character in the crucible. Suffering, loss, failure, and rejection are all teachers in God's schoolhouse. We should avoid impossible idealized standards, as well as a cheap grace removal of standards.

COMPETENCY

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. i know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. — Acts 20:28-31

Elders are charged with feeding, leading, protecting, and caring for the flock of God.

- *Elders feed God's flock: by treasuring God's Word and teaching it to others.*
- *Elders lead God's flock: by being examples in both character and skill.*
- *Elders protect God's flock: from false teachers and spiritual apathy and sin.*
- *Elders care for God's flock: by encouraging them in the gospel through all kinds of life circumstances.* ⁵

In addition, elders equip God's flock.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. — Ephesians 4:11-14

⁴ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 35

⁵ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 57.

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Elders are not super Christians who do all the ministry. We are not called to do for the people what they must learn to do themselves. We equip God's people to be a kingdom of priests.

COMMUNION

Each local church should be led by a team of elders who together carry the burden of ministry. Plurality isn't primarily about pragmatic leadership. It is fundamentally connected to rightly imaging the triune God in the local church and preaching a trinitarian gospel. (John 17:20-21, Acts 1:14-15, Acts 2:14, Acts 2:42-47)

The Bible consistently speaks of elders in terms of plurality. For instance: "When [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23). Likewise, 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." Even Paul, who was an apostle with a capital A, submitted his own ministry and calling to the elders in Jerusalem. "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (Galatians 2:1-2).

A properly functioning biblical church is led by a plurality of leaders. Some of them may serve in a full-time, vocational capacity, receiving their financial income from the church (1 Timothy 5:17-18; 1 Corinthians 9:7-14). Others may serve in a volunteer capacity, receiving their income from another job. One of them may have "first among equals" role, while others may serve in less visible ways according to their gifting and calling. But whatever the nuance of its specific application, the biblical model of church leadership demands the qualified pastor-elders serve together as the spiritual leaders of the church, shepherding the flock and sharing the responsibility, authority, and accountability as a team.⁶

A healthy eldership teams a spiritual brotherhood who work together to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace. They must prioritize unity with the local church. They are united in doctrine, values, philosophy, mission, and relationship.

Members need to know our doctrine, values, philosophy, and mission. Group leaders need to believe our doctrine, values, philosophy, and mission. Deacons need to embody our doctrine, values, philosophy, and mission. Elders need to embody and teach our doctrine, values, philosophy, and mission.

⁶ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 21.