

Church Leadership

A Valley Bible Church Position Paper www.valleybible.net

There are few that question the fact that the Lord desires that there be a recognized position of authority in the church. But who should that authority be in the church? We believe that the New Testament describes churches being led by a group of men, called elders.

A plurality of leaders

Does the authority in the church rest in the congregation? Though this is a very popular view it does not appear to be the pattern in the New Testament. The congregation is clearly told to be in subjection to their leaders in Hebrews 13:17. How could a congregation be the ultimate authority within the church and yet at the same time be in subjection to their leaders? Is there any basis at all in the New Testament for what is commonly referred to as “congregational rule?” Some would use Acts 6 to show that the seven men were selected by the congregation at Jerusalem. Yet in Acts 6 we see congregational participation under the direction and the authority of the apostles.

Does the authority in the church rest in “the pastor?” Though again we see this type of government being practiced in many churches there is little basis for a church being led by one person in God’s Word. In Hebrews 13:17 the congregation is commanded to be in subjection to their “leaders” not “leader.” There is no clear passage in the New Testament that refers to one man being the leader.

There obviously is a time at the birth of a congregation where a single man may have been handling the full responsibility for the oversight of the church but this condition biblically would be looked at as temporary until a group of men could be given oversight. This is what happened with Titus in the churches on Crete (Titus 1:5). Titus was instructed by Paul to appoint elders. It was the responsibility of the elders to oversee the churches that had been established by Paul.

The fact that a group of men were involved in the oversight of each individual church can be demonstrated in a number of ways.

When Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem to settle a dispute of doctrine they went up to the apostles and elders (plural) of the church (singular) in Acts 15:1-5.

When Paul and Barnabas finished their first missionary journey they appointed elders (plural) in every church (singular) in Acts 14:23.

When Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and wanted to challenge the leadership of the church at Ephesus he called for the elders in Acts 20:17-35. Paul’s words to Timothy regarding the church in 1 Timothy 5:17 adds support for a plurality of elders over the church.

In James 5:16 the elders (plural) of the church (singular) are to be called.

In 1 Peter 5:1-2 the elders (plural) are exhorted to shepherd the flock (singular).

We have therefore seen that the authority in the church of the New Testament did not rest in the congregation or in a man but in a group of men who were commonly referred to as elders. This group of overseers is referred to in three different ways, elders, bishops and pastors. These are inter-changeable terms. The term “elder” (*PRESBUTEROS*), “bishop” (*EPISKOPOS*), and “pastor” (*POIMEN*) all refer to the same person. This is clearly seen in Acts 20:17-38, where all three terms are found. Paul asked the elders (*PREBUTEROI*) to assemble (Acts 20:17). He exhorts them to be on guard as overseers (*EPISKOPOI*) and to shepherd or pastor (*POIMEN*) the church of God (Acts 20:28).

Why are there three separate terms? It appears that though the words could refer to the same group of leaders, each of the terms has a different emphasis. The term elder emphasizes the maturity of the church leaders. The term shepherd (pastor) emphasizes their care for those given to their charge. The term bishop emphasizes their function as overseers. Though there are three separate terms that could be used when Paul addressed the leaders of various churches in his letters he used the term “elders.” Therefore, the leaders of the local church are known as elders.

Elders oversee the church

The function of elders is highlighted by the use of the term bishop (*EPISKOPOS*), which translated means “overseers.” The elder function is to oversee the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are to oversee the church with the loving care of a shepherd and with the maturity of an elder. The elders are therefore to be available to the Lord to protect the church and to guide the church.

We clearly see the protective aspect of the elder function in 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 [The true shepherd] purchased with His own blood.” There are many dangers that confront the church. The leaders are given to the church to make sure that the church does not fall prey to them. There is the danger of becoming half-hearted rather than being wholehearted or falling prey to ignorance and error rather than embracing the whole counsel of the Word of God. False teachers abound and the role of the elders is to bring protection (Titus 1:9-10).

We not only see the protective aspect of the elder function clearly in the Scriptures, but also the guiding aspect. In Hebrews 13:17 it commands the congregation to be subject to their leaders. Obviously, for a congregation to be subject, guidance is being exercised. The elders are to give guidance not only to protect but to lead the fellowship to maturity in Christ. The apostle Paul described this work as labor in Colossians 1:29.

The elders though free to act in any way that would protect the church and lead it to maturity, most likely will concentrate on two activities. The two activities that

appear to be prominent would be prayer and the ministry of the Word. The apostles were concerned that their oversight of the church was being threatened if they were distracted from prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6). The leaders of a church must also give special attention to these two areas.

The elders of Valley Bible Church function in agreement. Yet, it is unrealistic to expect that all our elders will completely agree about every interpretive issue in the entire Bible. The following principles guide us in such cases when disagreement is known are: (1) When the passage is taught, the impression must not be left that the teaching represents the official position of Valley Bible Church; (2) The passage may be taught extensively, according to the beliefs of the one teaching, however, the more attention given to a doctrine or passage, the more necessary it is for alternative points of view to be represented; (3) Any elder can be asked to not teach a particular doctrine or view of a passage by agreement of the other elders. As with any teacher representing Valley Bible Church, elders must not teach inconsistent with the official beliefs of Valley Bible Church. The official beliefs of Valley Bible Church are found in our constitution and our position papers.

The qualifications for elders

While prospective elders should have demonstrated their leadership abilities, there are other basics that we should take into consideration as well.

They must have a desire to function as an overseer (1 Timothy 3:1). Peter tells us that this responsibility should be done willingly (1 Peter 5:2). Not all men desire this work and those that do not obviously should not function in this capacity.

They must have an ability to function as an overseer, taking care of the church of God (1 Timothy 3:4). Therefore, they must be men who make prayer and the ministry of the Word a major focus of their ministry. This is important because these are major activities of an overseer (cf. Acts 6:4). In order to maintain the moral, doctrinal and directional purity of the church they must be able to effectively minister the Word of God to the church and even to those opposing the church (Titus 1:9)

They must be an example as an overseer to the congregation (1 Peter 5:3). This certainly does not mean that they are perfect, but it does mean they must be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2). It means that their lives can be emulated by the congregation resulting in ever increasing maturity in respect to the things of the Lord. It means that there are no glaring faults that would discredit them and undermine their leadership. The scriptures tell us that they are to be above reproach. We recognize that anyone can be accused falsely (Matthew 5:11-12), but the obvious intent is that the elders life would not in fact give a basis for a charge. If an individual charge or charges cannot be established clearly to the church then the person would be considered "above reproach."

Paul gives two different lists of various character qualities that should be considered (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9). These lists are not exhaustive but each character quality that is present on these lists must be considered as well as any

other areas of concern that might be a basis of charge against the candidate. The following is a compilation of the qualifications found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, along with the description of each qualification according to the perspectives of the elders at Valley Bible Church.

a. The husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6)

The husband of one wife literally means “a one woman man” or “a one wife husband.” This does not forbid unmarried men from servings as elders (Paul himself was not married). It means that if the man is married, he must be devoted to his wife. If the man is unmarried he must be the kind of person who would commit to one woman and not be found flirtatious. There must not be any adulterous actions or attitudes present in his life. A man is not automatically eliminated from eldership by a divorce in his past. The qualifications are not emphasized by what the man’s character may have been in the past but rather what his character is currently.

b. Temperate (1 Timothy 3:2)

Temperate literally means “unmixed with wine.” It came to mean “clear headed, mentally alert well balanced and able to make sound judgments.” It is one who does not lose proper physical, mental, and spiritual orientation. An example of this type of usage is found in 1 Thessalonians 5:2-6 where we are directed to be “alert and sober” (temperate) in light of the coming day of judgment.

c. Prudent (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)

Vine says prudent denotes a sound mind, hence self-controlled. The NIV and the Amplified Bible use the same English word to translate the Greek word SOPHRONA. We understand it, therefore, to be speaking of one who thinks before speaking or acting, and then speaking or acting discreetly and appropriately with one’s impulses under control.

d. Orderly (1 Timothy 3:2)

A well-ordered life style that reflects biblical principles and doctrines in matters such as dress, speech, appearance of home and manner of doing business. An orderly man is honorable, decent, dignified, and modest, according to the cultural norms in which he ministers.

e. Hospitable (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)

Hospitable literally means “loving strangers.” A hospitable man has a willingness to reach out in love and to use his resources to minister generously and compassionately to others, without complaint, especially to those who he does not know well.

f. Able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9)

He is a man of the Word, not necessarily a gifted public speaker, but one who knows

Bible doctrine and can use it effectively to exhort and encourage believers and to refute those who contradict the truth of God's Word.

g. Not addicted to wine (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)

This quality describes someone who does not drink to excess or abuse intoxicating substances.

h. Not pugnacious (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)

Pugnacious literally means "a striker." This is a man who does not strike out at people either with his fists or with harsh, angry words, but remains calm and gentle even in difficult situations.

i. Gentle (1 Timothy 3:3)

The word "gentle" in Greek is *EPIEIKES* from *EIKOS*, which means "reasonable." A gentle man is therefore not unduly rigorous. The word is found in secular Greek and is frequently applied to a person who does not insist on the "letter of the law." He is one who will be fair-minded and does not tend to throw the book at someone just because it is in his power to do so.

j. Uncontentious (1 Timothy 3:3)

The word is *AMACHOS*, which literally means "not fighting." This is a man that is peaceful. He is one who is not given to struggle with others, consistently debating, arguing, or quarreling.

k. Free from the love of money (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)

Titus 1:7 describes this quality as "not fond of sordid gain." Money must not control the man's life causing him to be sidetracked from pursuing true spiritual riches.

l. Manages his household well (1 Timothy 3:4)

The word "manage" literally means "to stand before," hence to lead or to attend to. A man who manages his household well is one who provides firm but loving leadership in the home. This good management leads to "keeping his children under control with all dignity" (1 Timothy 3:4). This qualification does not eliminate a man because he has no children. Jesus has no children and yet He is the Great Shepherd. We are not looking at grown children who are not at home and therefore not available for management. We are looking at children who are living in the home and how well are they being managed. A man's management of the church can be seen in how he manages his household.

m. Not a new convert (1 Timothy 3:6)

This refers to a man who has proven himself to be consistent in fulfilling the qualifications. We need to be careful not to recognize an individual for church leadership too quickly. This would be a protection not only for the church but also for the man himself as he might be tempted to be filled with pride.

n. Good reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7)

The man must be recognized by non-Christians in the community as a man of high moral character and proper conduct. He must live in such a way that he brings no dishonor on the Lord or His church.

o. Having faithful children not accused of dissipation or rebellion (Titus 1:6)

The Greek word for faithful is *PISTOS*. This word is most frequently translated “faithful.” It appears to parallel the qualification in 1 Timothy 3:4 which requires that an elder manage his household well keeping his children under control with all dignity. The children of an elder therefore must be faithful to the leadership and authority of their father. This would be manifested by children who are not being accused of dissipation or rebellion. A parallel qualification in 1 Timothy 3:4 supports this referring to children living at home. Older children living away from and independent from their parents are not likely in view in this passage.

p. Not self-willed (Titus 1:7)

To be self-willed is to please yourself. An elder must not stubbornly insist on having things his own way. He is willing to consider others and willing to yield his own rights. He is a man who is responsive to authority (2 Peter 2:10).

q. Not quick tempered (Titus 1:7)

An elder must not be inclined to become angry nor even easily angered. He must not be given to outbursts of anger.

r. Loving what is good (Titus 1:8)

Loving what is good is a fondness for a commitment to what is helpful, beneficial and worthwhile. This type of man is committed to the things that promote the pursuit of righteousness.

s. Just (Titus 1:8)

To be just is to be upright, honest, fair, and impartial in dealing with people. The just man is able to make mature and proper judgments in his relationship with others.

t. Devout (Titus 1:8)

Devout refers to a man’s holy life, his faithfulness to what God would have him to be and do. It involves a commitment to becoming more like Christ in daily life and conduct.

u. Self-controlled (Titus 1:8)

For a man to be self-controlled he must have his passions, appetites, impulses and desires in check.

These lists of qualifications give us invaluable help for evaluating potential elders.

The appointment of elders

Elders were appointed by church planters, such as in Acts 14, or their designates, such as in Titus 1:5. These leaders were not selected by the people who made up the congregation but rather by those that were carrying the responsibility of oversight for that congregation.

Just as parents select a guardian for their children in case of their death and do not leave the responsibility for the choice to the children, neither should the leaders of a church who have been given the charge to watch over the souls of a particular congregation. Therefore, having recognized that the elders are the ones who carry the responsibility for the welfare of the congregation, they would quite naturally also carry the responsibility for the selection of additional leaders.

At Valley Bible Church, once an individual is believed by the elders to be qualified and willing, he becomes a candidate. The elders of Valley Bible Church then notify the congregation that this particular individual is being considered for the office of elder and then the congregation has thirty days to speak to the man if they have any reservation. If the one who expresses the reservation is not satisfied with that conversation and the candidate does not withdraw himself from being considered, then the person with the reservation can then go to the elders with their concern who will decide if it is valid.

The support of elders

The congregation is commanded to be subject to their leaders (Hebrews 13:17). This responsibility is frequently overlooked in most church fellowships. The reason is because the implications of this command are very dramatic. There is no limiting condition found in the New Testament in respect to this command, other than ultimately the elders could not ask anyone to violate a clear commandment found in God's Word and should not conduct themselves in a manner which is self-serving (1 Peter 5:2). The reason why they have been given such great authority is because they have been given a great responsibility. They have been given as their charge the oversight of souls and they will be held accountable.

The congregation is commanded to support their leaders financially (Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 9:1-18; 1 Timothy 5:17). A typical congregation only focuses on the responsibilities of their shepherds toward them. However, it is more important in respect to their own personal righteousness that they focus on their biblical responsibilities, just as the elders need to focus on their responsibilities more so than on the responsibility of the congregation. The biblical responsibility of a congregation is not only to be subject to their elders but also support them. The elders at Valley Bible will not demand from you either submission or support. They have a responsibility before the Lord to present these truths and the congregation has the responsibility to consider these truths before the Lord.

The role of deacons

While elders are the overseers of a congregation, the deacons are the officially recognized servants who serve the church in leading certain church ministries and advise the elders in their shepherding role. As deacons are set apart to manage the ministries within the congregation, the elders are better able to fulfill their primary function of oversight. If the leaders of any group, organization, or nation become too immersed within the mechanics of the operation, they may very well be unable to offer any longer truly effective oversight. Our goal is to have every one of our ministry leaders to be recognized as a deacon of Valley Bible Church.

We see this concern expressed by the apostles in Acts 6 when they gave instruction that seven men be selected to oversee a specific task. The apostles were concerned that they would not be able to properly serve the church in their capacity as overseers if they were distracted from prayer and the ministry of the word. Some people believed them to be the first deacons because the word itself means “servant,” and this is what these men were being called to do. Others do not believe that they were deacons, because they are not specifically called deacons and it does not appear to be an office, as much as a responsibility to perform a short term task. If they are not the first deacons they certainly were the prototype. Therefore deacons are individuals who make it possible for elders to function properly without being distracted.

The qualifications for deacons

Deacons should have demonstrated their servant’s heart in their character and their ministry. Acts 6:3 gives us the following two qualities which the men of good reputation must have in order to serve the task that was entrusted to them

Full of the Spirit: The men in Acts 6 were to be full of the Spirit. In carrying out their tasks they were to manifest their yieldedness to the Spirit of Christ. According to 1 Timothy 3:8-13 certain specific character qualities must be present:

a. Respectable (1 Timothy 3:8)

A deacon must be worthy of respect and honor, serious in purpose and remaining upright in conduct.

b. Truthful (1 Timothy 3:8)

A deacon must not be hypocritical or insincere by saying one thing but meaning another, or representing the same thing differently to different people.

c. Temperate (1 Timothy 3:8)

Temperate literally means not giving attention to much wine. Therefore, he would not be a heavy drinker.

d. Free from the love of money (1 Timothy 3:8)

The pursuit of money should not distract him from ministering to the welfare of the body of Christ. Nor should he be so fond of money or material possessions that he would use dishonest methods in acquiring them.

e. A pure testimony (1 Timothy 3:9)

The deacon should not be holding the truths revealed in the New Testament as theological abstractions, but should be living out those truths in daily life so that his conscience would not condemn him.

f. Of proven character (1 Timothy 3:10)

He has been observed over a period of time and has been found to be a faithful disciple of Christ and His church.

g. Blameless (1 Timothy 3:10)

He must be found to have no disqualifying trait in his life so that his conscience would not be clear.

h. The husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:12)

The husband of one wife literally means “a one woman man” or “a one wife husband.” This does not forbid unmarried men from serving as elders (Paul himself was not married). It means that if the man is married, he must be devoted to his wife. If the man is unmarried he must be the kind of person who would commit to one woman and not be found flirtatious. There must not be any adulterous actions or attitudes present in his life. A man is not automatically eliminated from being a deacon by a divorce in his past. The qualifications are not emphasized by what the man’s character may have been in the past but rather what his character is currently.

i. Good management of his children and household (1 Timothy 3:12)

This individual gives firm but loving leadership in the home, where his sound Christian character and his consistent spiritual oversight should be clearly evident and responded to by his children.

2. Full of wisdom: The men in Acts 6 were to be full of wisdom, able to fulfill their responsibilities prudently and effectively. Deacons need to be able to take charge of responsibilities and carry out those responsibilities wisely. This is supported by the qualification of 1 Timothy 3:10, that they must be first tested. This testing assures that the person is wise and faithful in the carrying out of the ministries which they lead.

Women as deacons

We believe that women can be recognized as deacons as long as those tasks or ministries that they are faithfully ministering in would not be exercising authority over men (cf. 1 Timothy 2:12). There are several reasons for saying this:

The term translated “wives” in the KJV also may be rendered women as it is in the NAS. Since the Greek word for deacon, *DIAKONOS*, was used for both men and women it was necessary to use the term “women” to distinguish the women deaconess from the preceding reference to deacon, which would have been true of men or women.

Pheobe is called a servant, or deaconess, in Romans 16:1.

It would be unusual to state qualifications for the deacons wives when no such requirements are given for the wives of elders, although they have a more responsible role.

We find references to women deacons in the early church. According to the Letter of Pliny, the governor of Bithnia about A.D. 112, the Emperor Trajan tortured two Christian handmaidens who were called deacons.

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