



Elders – a biblical overview

Version 0.2

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1. Introduction

“So who needs eldership?”

Acts 14.21-23 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Titus 1.5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

2. The role of elders

Key passage: Acts 20.13-38

*From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the **elders** of the church. ¹⁸When they arrived, he said to them: ...
²⁸Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**. Be **shepherds** of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”*

In this passage, three words are used interchangeably:

- **Elder** (20.17), from the Greek word *Presbuteros*
- **Overseer** (20.28), from the Greek word *Episkopos* (c.f. *Episcopal* > *bishop*)
- **Shepherd** (20.28), from the Greek word *Poimen* (*pastor*)

2.1. Elders – wise governmental heads of families that lead

Biblically (OT and NT), ‘elders’ were:

1. Family men! Heads of families and tribes, e.g. Exodus 3.16, 24.1, 1 Kings 8.1
2. Governmental men! Rulers and judges, e.g. Joshua 20.1-4
3. Men who fight! Leading God’s people out into battle, e.g. Joshua 8.10
4. Men who seek God! e.g. Joshua 7.2-7, Acts 13.1-3
5. Men who bring counsel and wisdom! e.g. 1 Kings 12.1-8

Lack of leadership is seen as a judgement from God: e.g. Isaiah 3.1-3, Ezekiel 7.26

2.2. Overseers – keeping the big picture

e.g. 1 Timothy 3.1, Philippians 1.1 (NIV uses the word ‘overseer’ in both these verses). *Episkopos* means

1. Presiding official
2. One who keeps an overview, a visionary

Keeping the ‘big picture’ of God’s apostolic purposes for his church requires self-discipline, otherwise elders all-too-often become bogged down in the ‘stuff’ of pastoral church leadership.

2.3. *Shepherds – caring for the people of God*

e.g. Ephesians 4.11, where NIV uses *Poimen*.

1. God as shepherd, Psalm 23, Isaiah 40.10-11
2. Men as under-shepherds, 2Samuel 5.1-2, Psalm 78.70-72, 1 Peter 5.4
3. Trouble for bad shepherds! Jeremiah 23.1-4, Ezekiel 34
4. Jesus as the good shepherd! John 10.1-18

Just 'care'?

Shepherding God's people – being pastoral – can often be wrongly seen as 'conservative care'. But this is far from the truth – the shepherd knows where he is going and leads the sheep there, not just with 'care' but with 'adjustment' from his shepherd's crook! For example:

- John 10.9 – the shepherd leads the sheep into shelter, *and out again*.
- John 10.16 – the shepherd's purpose is more than just caring for the current flock

2.4. *The responsibilities of elders*

To be spiritual men	To pray and wait on God	Acts 13.1-2
	To pray for the sick	James 5.14
To build family	To feed and care for the flock	1Peter 5.2, Acts 20.28
	To visit and encourage people in homes	Acts 20.20
	To exercise hospitality	1Timothy 3.2, Titus 1.8
	To ensure practical provision is made	1Timothy 5
To be examples	To watch own life and doctrine closely	1Timothy 4.16
	To be an example in life, ministry, witness	1Peter 5.3
To govern the church	To guard sound doctrine	2Timothy 1.13-14, Titus 1.9
	To rule the church of God	1Timothy 5.17
	To govern finances	Acts 11.30
To train, disciple and equip	To teach and preach the word	1Timothy 3.2, 4.13, 5.17, 2Timothy 2.24, 4.2, Titus 1.9
	To train a new generation	2Timothy 2.2
	To equip the saints	Ephesians 4.11-13
To deal with problems	To straighten things out	Titus 1.5
	To resolve problems	Acts 15.6f, 22f
	To point out areas of weakness to people	1Timothy 4.6
	To rebuke sin	Titus 1.10-13
To lead the church in mission	To engage in evangelism	2Timothy 4.5
	To refute unbelievers	Titus 1.9
	To send out workers	Acts 15.22
	To work in partnership with apostolic teams/vision	Acts 15.4f, 5.22

3. The requirements of elders

Key passage 1 Timothy 3.1-7 (see also Titus 1.6-9).

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ²Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁶He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (NIV)

To summarise:

- Character
- Family life
- Relationship with others
- Reputation in the world
- Experience of Christ
- Gender
- A call!

4. The restraints of elders

- **A restraint of style:** Servant-leadership not worldly leadership (e.g. Acts 20:18-35, Mark 10.35-45)
- **A restraint of numbers:** plural eldership, not just a lone elder
- **A restraint of headship:** God's pattern is that elders are themselves 'under headship' (e.g. 1 Peter 5.1, Acts 15.19, 1 Corinthians 12.28)
- **A restraint of trust:** Elders are entrusted stewards, not owners – it's God's church, not "the elders' church" (e.g. Titus 1.7)

5. The release of elders

God does not want elders busy with other things, but to be released to the work he has called them to:

- Old Testament, e.g. Exodus 18.13-26
- New Testament, e.g. Acts 6.1-7, 1 Timothy 3.8-13, 1 Corinthians 12.28, Romans 12.3-8

6. The response to elders

What is the right response to eldership?

- Love them!
- Pray for them!
- Follow them!
- Make it easy for them!
- Cover them! (e.g. Noah's sons, Genesis 9:23)