

# THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF ELDERS

## INTRODUCTION:

1. Today, as your region evangelist, I want to present a lesson that marks a historical point in our congregation.
2. The title of the lesson is “The Biblical Role of Elders.”
3. Of course, we have had elders in the Boston church for almost all of its history.
4. However, we believe that the biblical role of elders has one significant step to make in our ongoing process of restoration – to view them as those who direct the affairs of the church, in keeping with 1 Timothy 5:17.
5. Prior to this time, lead evangelists of churches and ministry groups have usually functioned in this leadership capacity, which raises the question of why elders have not functioned in ways that seem to be biblically clear.
6. A little history will help us understand how we got where we are and how the change is needed.
  - Many of our evangelists who helped shape this movement came out of campus ministry backgrounds in what we now call the mainline Church of Christ.
  - One of the real challenges these younger campus ministers faced was trying to work with elders who were often not biblically qualified or biblically functioning, and thus were a hindrance to the ministry.
  - This is not to say that campus ministers did not make many mistakes themselves, through zeal without experience, that contributed to their potential for future overreactions in developing their own ministries.
  - Additionally, when our movement became separate from this mainline group, most disciples were young and few were qualified to serve as elders.
  - This combination of bad experiences with mainline elders and the youth of the movement in its earlier days allowed a pattern to become firmly established, in which there were few elders appointed, and those who were appointed were most often seen to have a role more restricted than the NT teaches.
  - While progress has certainly been made in the Boston church regarding the elder’s role, we have one step to make to achieve the fullness of their role.
7. Let’s develop a biblical understanding of this step by looking at what the NT says about the elder’s qualifications and function.
8. As we begin this study together, it is important to note the evangelists in the Boston church are in total support of the direction we are going regarding the role of our elders.

## BODY:

- I. As Seen In The Biblical Terms Describing Elders
  - A. *Elder* (Greek – presbuteros)
    1. An older person. (See 1 Timothy 5:1 and 1 Peter 5:5 where the word is used simply to denote a person of greater age.)
    2. Who is *older*?
      - a. While the answer would be somewhat relative based on life expectancy in a given culture and on the make-up of the group in

which the person was found, it is interesting to note that Timothy was considered youthful by Paul (1 Timothy 4:12).

- b. Assuming that he was at least 20 when Paul first met him (Acts 16:1ff), he would likely have been in his mid-30's when Paul wrote 1 Timothy.
  3. Therefore, the Elder was an older person who could use his wisdom gained by experience to provide security and direction to the flock of God.
- B. *Shepherd* (Greek – poimen)
1. Translated “Pastors” in Ephesians 4:11.
  2. The shepherd had two primary functions: to lead the flock in the way it should go; and, to watch over the flock to keep any from straying, getting lost or being attacked.
- C. *Overseer* (Greek – episcopos)
1. Translated “Bishop” in the older versions.
  2. The verb form of the word is seen in Matthew 25:36 (“I was sick and you *looked after* me”), and in James 1:27 (“*to look after* orphans and widows in their distress”).
  3. To be an “overseer” involves an examination of, and a providing for, a person’s needs.

## II. As Seen In The Biblical Qualifications For Elders

### A. Primary passages:

#### 1. 1 Timothy 3:1-7

Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. [2] Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, [3] not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. [4] He 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?) [6] He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. [7] He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

#### 2. Titus 1:5-9

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. [6] An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. [7] Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. [8] Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. [9] He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

### B. General categories: (allowing for some obvious overlapping)

#### 1. Personality and character qualities:

- a. Temperate
- b. Self-controlled

- c. Hospitable
  - d. Disciplined
  - e. Not violent, but gentle
  - f. Not quarrelsome
  - g. Not overbearing
  - h. Not quick-tempered
2. Spiritual qualities:
    - a. Not a recent convert
    - b. Loves what is good
    - c. Holy
    - d. Upright
  3. Reputation:
    - a. Good reputation with outsiders (or may fall into disgrace)
    - b. Respectable
    - c. Above reproach
    - d. Blameless
    - e. Not given to drunkenness
    - f. Not a lover of money
    - g. Not pursuing dishonest gain
  4. Teaching skills:
    - a. Able to teach
    - b. Holds firmly to the trustworthy message (thus able to encourage others by sound doctrine and to refute those who oppose it)
  5. Leadership skills: (as demonstrated by his family – he must be able to *manage* his own family well if he is *to take care of* God's family – 1 Timothy 3:5)
    - a. Husband of but one wife
    - b. Manages his own family well
    - c. Sees that his children obey him with proper respect
    - d. His children believe, and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient
- C. Therefore, the Biblical qualifications dictate that the elder be an older, experienced, spiritual brother with children who are disciples. Further, he must be a reputable man even among outsiders, and one who clearly possesses an ability to lead the way and to effectively teach others to do the same.

### III. As Seen In The Biblical Mentions of Elders

#### A. Acts 11:29-30

The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. [30] This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

1. This is the first mention in Acts of elders – the details of their appointments are not given.
2. Although the apostles will be involved later with these elders in dealing with doctrinal matters, the elders here were those overseeing the needs of the flock.

#### B. Acts 14:23

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.

C. Acts 15:1-2

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved." [2] This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

D. Acts 15:4-6

When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them. [5] Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." [6] The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

E. Acts 15:22-23

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. [23] With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.

F. Acts 16:4

As they traveled from town to town, they delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey.

G. Acts 20:17

From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.

H. Acts 21:18

The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.

I. Philippians 1:1

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

J. 1 Timothy 4:14

Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.

#### IV. As Seen In The Biblical Directives To and About Elders

A. Acts 20:28

Keep 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.

B. Ephesians 4:11-13

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, [12] to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up [13] until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

1. The grammatical structure of verse 11 likely makes pastors and teachers the same office or role; hence, the pastor/teacher.
2. Along with the other offices mentioned, the pastor/teacher is to be in a training and equipping role for the church.

C. 1 Timothy 5:17-20

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. [18] For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." [19] Do not

entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. [20] Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning.

1. Elders are to direct the affairs of the church – how they do this in relationship to other biblical roles must be determined.
2. Those whose work included preaching and teaching would most likely be recognized as evangelists as well, although all elders are to be to some degree pastor/teachers.
3. The double honor, in context, seems clearly to refer to financial support.
4. The evangelist Timothy is here given the responsibility to consider charges against an elder and to rebuke those who sin. (How the evangelist and other elders work together on this one is not herein specified.)

D. James 5:14

Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.

E. 1 Peter 5:1-4

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: [2] Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; [3] not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. [4] And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

1. The flock is *under the care* of the elders, since they serve as *overseers*.
2. Their leadership role focuses on their *example* to the flock and not on simply positional authority (Matthew 20:25-28).

F. Two Special Passages (in that they do not mention elders specifically, but clearly include them because of the content)

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. [13] Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other.

2. Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

## CONCLUSION:

1. As announced in the recent apology letter from the overseeing team, we will no longer use the designation of region elder and congregational elder.
2. Hence, all seven of our present elders will serve the church as a whole, although they will continue to focus on their roles in their home regions as well.
3. These men are Gordon Ferguson, Jack Frederick, Tom Jones, Tracy Larr, Ken Ostrowski, Wyndham Shaw and Clarence Webster.
4. All of these have been appointed either in a congregational setting or a region setting, but no matter what that appointment setting, they will now function as elders for the congregation.
5. Since they are best known within their region ministry, it is understandable that this group would be most involved in their selection process.
6. However, because they are known by those outside their home regions, and because they will now be serving the whole church, we wanted to give any

- disciple the opportunity to work through any relational problems with them on an individual basis before they are commended as a group to the entire church.
7. If you have any unresolved relational issues with any of them, please go to them personally in keeping with the instructions of Matthew 18:15. In the event that such a meeting does not resolve the concerns, ask another elder or leader to go with you in a further effort to gain the desired resolution. Any needed resolution process should be completed by April 30.
  8. The plan is to then present them as a group in a congregational service on May 4<sup>th</sup>.
  9. We believe that God has led us to this step of restoring the role of elders to their biblically specified responsibilities and functions, and we believe that he will bless them and the church in a way that shows his approval of this step.
  10. As we move forward from this point, we now have a collective group of elders from varied backgrounds and experiences, some on the ministry staff and some not, all of which provides understanding and connections to our membership in ways not experienced in the past.
  11. Surely the future is as bright as the promises of God!
  12. May he use all of us like never before, and may we have the humility to give him all of the glory for it!