

ELDERSHIP

So I exhort the elders among you, as fellow elders and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

— 1 Peter 5:1-4

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

Elders are biblically-qualified men who “shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.”¹ They are servant-leaders given to benefit and build up the body. 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 [Acts 20:17-18, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2]... There are not elders, and then pastors, and then bishops. Rather, an elder = a pastor = a bishop. — Robert H. Thune²

These terms point to the various roles and responsibilities of an elder.

The term elder describes the man “with reference to his dignity and standing (older); bishop describing the man with reference to his function and duty (oversight)... The chief role of the pastor is feeding the flock through teaching, a role clearly assigned to bishops/overseers in 1 Timothy 3:2 (“An elder must be ... apt to teach”) and to elders in Titus 1:9 (“he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict”). This suggests that pastor is another name for elder and overseer.” — John Piper³

In addition, the Bible tells us that elders should be men. Since elders are to protect the church from those who would harm it, men are called to step into this role for the benefit of women as an act of servant leadership. Male eldership is not intended to lower women, but to raise them as valuable and worth fighting for.

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

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

³ Quoted in Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 24

MARKS OF AN ELDER

CALLING

Called to Jesus

An elder, first and foremost, must be a follower of Jesus. He is marked by devotion, spiritual vitality, and a life of repentance. (1 Peter 5:1; 1 Corinthians 11:1)

Called by Jesus

An elder is 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 be 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.

Sense of Self

An elder knows his strengths and weaknesses, gifts and fears, gold and shadow. (Romans 12:3)

CHARACTER

The New Testament gives us specific qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. Elders are to have godly character, setting an example for the church to follow.

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.”
— Robert H. Thune ⁴

They 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 elder, in that order.

⁴ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 35

COMPETENCY

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. — Robert H. Thune ⁵*

Feed (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9; Ephesians 4:11-16)

Elders are charged with teaching and preaching the Bible. They guard the doctrine and beliefs of the church. They have a responsibility to train and equip the church for the work of ministry and mission.

Lead (1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:4-5)

Jesus is the Senior Pastor of the church, and underneath his authority, elders have the primary leadership within the local church. They are leaders in their home and church. They lead the church by “*exercising oversight... not domineering over those in [their] charge, but being examples to the flock.*”

Protect (Acts 20:29-31; Titus 1:9)

Elders are given to protect the church from all harm. They guard the church from false teachers, division, and sin. They keep watch over the souls under their care.

Care (Acts 20:28)

Elders are to care and pray for the church, bringing them to Jesus and working for their good. They guide the church into following Jesus and living on mission in our city.

CHEMISTRY

Each local church should be led by a team of elders who together carry the burden of ministry. There will be difference in gifting and calling among the eldership, such as an elder who leads the elder team as a “first among equals.” Regardless of specific gifting and calling, the elders lead the church together as a team of pastors.

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,

⁵ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 57.

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. — Robert Thune ⁶

A true biblical eldership is not a businesslike committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church. — Alexander Strauch ⁷

A healthy eldership team is marked by communion in Christ with one another and with the church. They are united in doctrine, philosophy, mission, and relationship. (John 17:20-21; Acts 1:14-15; Acts 2:14; Acts 2:42-47)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Gospel Eldership by Robert Thune

Biblical Eldership by Alexander Strauch

Elders and Leaders by Gene Getz

resources.frontlinechurch.com/eldership

⁶ Thune, *Gospel Eldership*, 21.

⁷ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 31.