

The Eldership: An Introduction

INTRODUCTION:

1. From the beginning of man's history, leaders have always been important in God's plan.
 - A. Early on God revealed Himself and His will to fathers like Abraham so they would **lead** their families in His way.
 - B. We also find that without proper leadership, people are left to their own, which leads to sin and chaos, as often was the case during the time of the Judges (Judges 21:25 – “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”).
2. Leaders within God's plan continue to be important today.
 - A. And the leadership God has provided for His people today is the eldership, which by instruction and example is shown to be vitally important for the growth of the church.
 - B. Yet, many churches of the Lord, including this one, do not have elders, and that is something to be concerned about.
 - C. This **does not mean** that this church and others like it are **un-scripturally organized**, but instead that they are scripturally incomplete in their organization, seeing elders cannot be appointed if there are not at least **two men** who are **qualified** for the position.
 - D. Yet, if a congregation ignores its duty to appoint elders, or has members who fight against the idea, or if there is a lack of spirituality among the members to the point that none of the men are working to become qualified for the position, then there are other problems to address.
3. But this is not who we are. For, I know this congregation is aware of its need for elders, wants elders, and that is why I am preaching this series of lessons on elders—I was asked to do so.
4. In this lesson, I would like to introduce the subject of elders by briefly considering:
 - A. The terms used in the N.T. to designate those who hold this office in the local church.
 - B. The work assigned to this office.
5. My goal in this is to put before us the basics of the eldership as a foundation upon which to build as we discuss in detail their qualifications, etc., in the near future.

BODY:

I. Terms describing the office – Elders

- A. Defined: (*presbuteros, presbyteros* – 4245, which is why elders are sometimes called *presbyters*) **Vine's** – “...an old man, an elder...”; **Thayer** – *elder*
 1. It is used in the N.T. of...
 - a. Age (1) where one is said to be older than another (i.e., “older son” – Luke 15:25); (2) where one is *well advanced in life* (i.e., “old men shall dream dreams” – Acts 2:17).
 - b. Rank or position of responsibility – **Thayer** – used this way among the Jews concerning those of the Sanhedrin; also leaders who managed public affairs and administered justice (Matt. 16:21)
 - c. Those who oversee a local church – **Vine's** – “in the Christian churches, those who, being raised up and qualified..., were appointed to have the spiritual care of, and to exercise oversight over, the churches” (Acts 14:23); **Thayer** – “those who presided over the assemblies (or churches). The NT uses the term bishop [overseer – rp], elders, and presbyters interchangeably”
- B. The term *elder* indicates a man of older age, a man of maturity.
 1. **Side note:** The young men who call themselves *Mormon elders* have no biblical justification for wearing that title.
 2. Being an elder does not simply mean that you hold this position because you are an *older Christian*.
 - a. I address this because some erroneously teach/believe that being an **elder** is *not an official office or position* to hold in the local church, but a *state of life*.
 - b. An elder is not just an older man, but an *appointed* position based on God-given *qualifications*.
 - i. Scripture:

- i) Acts 14:23 – “When they had **appointed elders** for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”
 - ii) 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”
 - iii) How and why Paul would have elders **appointed** is beyond reason if this is a state of life that a Christian automatically enters by becoming older, or elderly.
 - ii. Also, these appointments are based on **divine qualifications**, which age does not necessarily provide (Titus 1:5-7ff.– “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, ⁶ namely, **if** any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷ For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain...”).
 - C. Command and example show there is to be a *plurality* of elders in a local church.
 - 1. **Command** – Tit. 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** [give order, command] you”
 - 2. **Example** – Acts 14:23 – “When they had appointed **elders** for them in every church”; 20:17 – Paul “called to him the **elders** of the church” at Ephesus.
 - D. So, a local church eldership consists of at least two older men, not young men, who based on their meeting the biblical qualifications are appointed to that office.
 - **II. Terms describing the office – Overseers [Bishops]:**
 - A. Defined: (*episkopos* – 1985 – the Episcopal Church gets its name from this term)
 - 1. **Vine** – lit. “an overseer” (*epi* – “over,” *skopeo* – “to look or watch”)
 - 2. **Thayer** – *an overseer*, a man charged with...seeing that things...done by others are done rightly...guardian, superintendent; the superintendent, **elder**, or overseer of a Christian church”
 - 3. **Mounce** – an inspector, overseer; a watcher, guardian; literally refers to someone who “looks over” or “watches over” a group of people. In the NT...of those who have been appointed as “**overseers**” or **elders** in the church (**these two words are essentially synonymous in the NT**).
 - a. So, when you see elder, think overseer, and when you see overseer, think elder.
 - b. This is seen in Paul’s words to Titus concerning appointing elders (Titus 1:5-7 – “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, ⁶ namely, if any man is **above reproach**, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷ For the **overseer** must be **above reproach** as God’s steward...”).
 - 4. In the few times this term is found in the N.T., it refers to **spiritual oversight**.
 - a. Used of Christ as the *Overseer* of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25 – “For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and **Overseer** of your souls.” – ESV).
 - b. Used of the position of an *apostle*, specifically referring to the apostleship of Judas, and translated *office* for clarity (Acts 1:20 – “For it is written in the book of Psalms, ‘Let his homestead be made desolate, And let no one dwell in it’; and, ‘Let another man take his office [episkopē].”). NASB has note: “Lit position as overseer.”
 - c. Used of the position and work of an **overseer of the local church**.
 - i. 1 Tim. 3:1 – “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the **office of overseer**, it is a fine work he desires to do.”
 - ii. Phil. 1:1 – “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons”
 - B. Only the **elders** are revealed to be the **overseers** of the local church.
 - 1. Scriptures:

- a. Acts 20:17, 28 – “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church...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 purchased with His own blood.”
- b. 1 Pet. 5:1-2 – “Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² shepherd the flock of God among you, **exercising oversight** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness”
- 2. Thus, the term **elder** refers to the *age* and *dignity* of the office, while **overseer** describes the specific *work* an elder is to do.
- C. Necessary conclusions we must reach concerning overseers:
 - 1. Because the terms elder and overseer are used *interchangeably*, describing different aspects of the same office, *the same qualifications apply to both* (see again Titus 1:5-7ff. above).
 - 2. Because each congregation is to have a *plurality of elders*, each church is to have a *plurality of overseers*.
- **III. Terms describing the office – Shepherds/Pastors:**
 - A. Defined: (*poimēn* – 4166) **Vine** – “a shepherd, one who tends herds or flocks”; **Thayer** – *a herdsman, esp. a shepherd*
 - 1. Used of those who herd/oversee literal sheep (Luke 2:8).
 - 2. Used of the work of Christ (1 Pet. 2:25 – “For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the **Shepherd** and Guardian of your souls.”).
 - 3. Used to describe the work of elders/overseers of a local church (1 Peter 5:1-2 – “So I exhort the **elders among you**, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:² **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”).
 - a. So, elders have a shepherding position, which indicates as we have seen in the parable of the lost sheep that they must care about the sheep’s wellbeing and want to do what is best for them.
 - b. Note that elders as shepherds requires that they be **among the sheep** and know them, their personality, and needs, having **direct interaction** with them.
 - c. I might add that one of the definitions contained the idea of “to nourish,” to provide what is necessary for growth and life of the sheep.
 - B. Although I hate to chase a rabbit again, there is need to address the confusion related to the religious world’s use of the term “shepherd/pastor,” which they apply to their preacher.
 - 1. The term *pastor* means *shepherd*.
 - a. The problem with this title is that the **elders** are the only ones instructed to be the *shepherds/pastors* within the local church (1 Pet. 5:1-2 – “Therefore, I exhort the **elders among you**, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² **shepherd** [pastor] the **flock of God** among you, **exercising oversight** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness”).
 - b. Much the same thought is presented in Acts 20:28.
 - 2. So, evangelists and preachers are those who proclaim, or herald, the message of Christ
 - 3. Being *pastors/shepherds* describe the *work* of caring and protecting the local church specifically given to the **elders** of the local church.
 - a. They are not the same and do not necessarily do the same work.
 - b. Therefore, to give the name *pastor* to a *preacher* is to misapply the biblical term.
- **IV. The work of elders:**
 - A. Described in their being overseers and shepherds. So, we will not rehash that.

- B. Elders are to **protect** the spiritual condition of the local church (Acts 20:28-31 – “**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 purchased with His own blood.²⁹ I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;³⁰ and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.³¹ Therefore **be on the alert**, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears.”).
 1. A local church needs elders so they can “be on guard” or “be on the alert” to assure that the church is safe from those who would destroy it through false teaching.
 2. Note that they do this work as **stewards**, protecting, shepherding, and overseeing **God’s church, God’s flock**.
 3. Therefore, elders are to lead, direct, and protect as God’s word directs them to do so.
- C. Elders are to **rule** the local church.
 1. Paul makes this point while addressing possible payment for elders’ work (1 Tim. 5:17-18 – “The elders who **rule well** are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.””).
 2. We see this rulership in the instructions for member to **obey** the eldership (Heb. 13:17 – “**Obey** your leaders and **submit** to them, for **they keep watch over your souls** as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”).
 - a. Too many elderships miss this point, being more focused on physical issues than keeping watch over the souls, or the spiritual condition, of their sheep.
 - b. This should not be, seeing elders will **give an account** concerning their fulfillment of their duties.
- D. Elders are to be **examples** to the local church (1 Pet. 5:1-3 – “Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but **proving to be examples to the flock**.”).
 1. Sheep are followers.
 2. Therefore, elders are to show the sheep where to go or how to live in pleasing fashion for the Lord.
 3. To help accomplish this, elders have Jesus, the good shepherd, as their *example*.
 - a. John 10:11 – “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.”
 - b. Jn. 10:14 – “I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me.”
 - c. Jesus as the good shepherd exemplified the characteristics of sacrifice, interaction, and familiarity that are vital to the shepherding role of elders.
- E. Elders **tend to the needs** of the sheep.
 1. We see this when brethren in Judea were faced with a famine (Acts 11:29-30 – “And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the **relief** of the **brethren** living in Judea.³⁰ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the **elders**.”).
 2. So, each eldership in the churches in Judea that had needy members received the money and *distributed it to the members as each had need*.
- F. Elders perform their work within the **confines of the local church** of which they are members.
 1. Peter told elders to “shepherd the **flock of God among you**, exercising oversight” (1 Pet. 5:2).
 2. Many churches of Christ today violate this limitation in their oversight by...

- a. Overseeing several “campuses” that worship in different places, with different members, preachers, treasuries, etc., believing the combination of them is their “church.”
 - i. There is no way various campuses worshipping in various places is what Paul meant by overseeing **the flock of God among you**.
 - ii. A single eldership cannot be “among” the sheep meeting at various places.
- b. Overseeing “church plants,” or churches they help start in other cities, etc. For, an eldership in Cookeville is not **among** the sheep of a church in Nashville, Knoxville, etc.
- c. Becoming a sponsoring church eldership, or an eldership that takes upon itself the oversight of the work of “churches of Christ” so as to make it possible for churches to act collectively, to act as one, and “do far more than a local church can do on its own.”
- d. Elders functioning in these ways have left their role of biblical elders and are treading down the path of Romanism, as was done in the early centuries of the church.

CONCLUSION:

1. From this study we have seen...
 - A. That God wants *elders* [plural] to be appointed in the local church, men who are older, mature, and meet His qualifications.
 - B. These men are *shepherd* and *oversee* His sheep, His people, doing this work according to His word with the care, knowledge, and close interaction with his sheep.
 - C. That the work of elders is...
 - i. To protect the flock from those who would destroy it with false doctrine.
 - ii. To rule the congregation, while watching out for the souls of the members.
 - iii. To be examples to God’s flock among them.
 - iv. To tend to the physical needs of the flock.
 - v. To be limited in scope to the one flock of God among them.
2. Because we need elders in this congregation...
 - A. I encourage all the men here to consider these words, especially those who are younger, or those with children still in their home and work to meet these qualifications.
 - B. I remind you of the words Paul told Timothy (1 Tim. 3:1 – “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.”).
3. If you are not a Christian, the invitation of the gospel is open to you to day to F-R-C-B-LF.