

Church Leadership: Part 2

The Elder: His Role and Responsibilities

Last Sunday I stated a need to constantly be looking for qualified men to appoint to the office of elder in this congregation. However, they must be approved by you, the members of this congregation before they can be appointed to this office.

I. Three Important Words That Pertain To This Office.

There are six words used to designate the office we are considering. The terms **elder, pastor, bishop, overseer, shepherd, and presbyter** all designate the same office in the church, according to the NT.

A. "Elder"

Paul told Titus to *"appoint elders in every city..."* (Titus 1:5). At the end of Paul's first missionary journey, Acts 14:23 tells us that he and Barnabas had *"appointed elders in every church..."*

Our English word elder comes from the Greek word *presbuteros* and it means simply "one who is older." It was used in the general sense (anyone who was older) and the specific sense (the office of elder). In the specific sense it appears in Acts, 1 Tim., Titus, James, and 1 Peter.

Since an elder is one who is older, a reasonable question is "how old is an elder to be?" The New Testament doesn't give a minimum age. Rather, it points to his life experiences. Titus 1:6 tells us he must be old enough to have children. 1 Tim 3:6 says he must not be a new convert. 1 Tim 3:4 indicates he must be old enough to have proven himself to be a good manager of his family.

B. "Overseer" or "Bishop"

Acts 20:28 says, *"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."*

Both words (overseer and bishop) are translated from the Greek word *episkopos*. The NASV uses overseer, the KJV, bishop. Both refers to one who oversees, who sees that things are done and done rightly, it refers to a guardian, a superintendent. While the word elder indicates the maturity of the man, the word bishop or overseer refers to the **nature** of the work he does within the flock.

C. "Pastor" or "Shepherd."

These words are used only once in the NT as a designating title, as opposed to 18 times for the word elder or overseer. But that doesn't make them unimportant. The word pastor is about shepherding. The pastor or shepherd takes care of the flock. Sheep are his primary business. In God's flock that is Christians. He tenderly cares for them.

II. Six Specific Responsibilities of the Elder

A. First, He Is To Shepherd God's Flock. 1 Peter 5:1-4, *"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, shepherd [other translations say "feed," or "tend"] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."*

Right after I moved to Sumter, the Elders and I were working through a series of difficult situations involving people with problems in the congregation. It was a bit exasperating at times. In the middle of all of it someone left a coffee cup on my desk that shows a guy with a shepherd's crook out in the middle of a flock of sheep. The guy has this stressed-out look on his face. The caption reads, "Knee deep in sheep." That is the place of the pastor or elder. He isn't a boss who only meets with other bosses behind closed doors, though some of his work will involve meeting in private with the other shepherds. Most of the time, he's out among the Lord's sheep.

Jesus said of a good shepherd is *"..the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out."* (Jn 10:3). A good shepherd knows the sheep by name! Later, describing his own shepherding example, Jesus said, *"I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."* These verses suggest plenty of "people contact" for the elder.

At certain times of the year, when the shepherd was in the mountains, shepherding was a dangerous occupation. To defend the flock the shepherd sometimes had to risk his life. This is a hands-on work, this work of a shepherd. If a man isn't willing to get his hands dirty, so to speak, dealing with the problems of people, he shouldn't take the office. A second responsibility of the elder is

B. To Be an Example to the Flock, Not Lording It Over Them. Reading from 1 Peter 5 again, *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; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock."*

An Elder cannot use his position with a heavy hand. He cannot use his office to get his own selfish way or press his own personal convictions, or his family's convictions, by force. When he takes the office, he leaves selfish desires and personal agendas behind. He lives for the good of the sheep. This is one reason why there is a plurality of elders in the NT church. It provided a check and balance over one man's personal agenda becoming too self-centered.

One of the interesting things about the shepherds of Palestine was that they always **led** the sheep. They did not drive them. The shepherd was out in front of his flock. If there was danger ahead, he stood between the danger and the sheep. If they were afraid, the way he dispelled their fear was to move ahead into the danger himself. The sheep followed because they trusted him, not because he forced them.

The "do as I say, not as I do" person is barred from the office of elder! So is the one who tends to be a tyrant or a dictator. One of the qualifications we will look at is that he cannot be "self willed." Elders are not without authority, but the **greatest authority they carry is that of a good example.** The people follow them because they respect them. Within the elder's area of responsibility is also the need to

C. Teach And Exhort

An Elder is a teacher by his words and by his example. In this way he feeds the flock. Must an elder be a great public speaker? That would be helpful, but not necessary. Much of his work will be done one-on-one and in small groups. He must, however, be apt (that is, able) to teach. We'll look more closely at that next time. His responsibility is also to

D. Stand Against False Teaching and False Teachers. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus in 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. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert..."*

The shepherd of Palestine carried something called a "rod". The rod was a club, usually cut with a root ball on one end. In this end were embedded sharp slivers of bone or metal. The shepherd could hurl this weapon with deadly accuracy over the heads of the sheep. Predators knew not to get too close.

Paul told Titus *"For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers... who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach..."* (Tit.1:9-11). It takes a man of knowledge and courage to do that. The Eldership isn't a place for the timid or those who are unsure of the authority of God's Word, or those who are unfamiliar with the Bible. The elder is also to

E. Manage God's Church

Paul told Timothy that the elder must be one who *"manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)"* (1 Tim 3:4-5)

An elder is a thinker and a planner. His daily thoughts are with the flock and their needs. Elders are also forward thinkers and planners.

F. Visit and Pray For The Sick James 5:13-15 says, *"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praises. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him."*

Back in Sumter, a sister was in the hospital with heart issues. She called me and asked me to bring the Elders to the hospital with their oil and pray over her. Now, this was a first for me. I'd never seen oil used at a hospital bedside, but it was used that night. We each prayed in turn, the oil was applied to her forehead as she requested and she is still with us today, just got an email from her!

Conclusion

With a job description like I have just given you, you're probably wondering why anyone would want the job of elder - especially since in most congregations these men serve without pay!

I'll close with Hebrews 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."*