



ELDERS AND DEACONS

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith... Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” [Hebrews 13:7, 17](#)

We have seen how essential the Ephesians 4 ministries are as they lead and serve in the body of Christ. In this session, we will look at those who are called by God to particular positions of leadership and service in the local congregation. Our society increasingly balks against authority in all its forms, and does not think of servanthood as something virtuous. We may, therefore, need to adjust our thinking as we approach this subject, and we would do well to start by focusing on the ultimate model of leadership and servanthood.

CHRIST—THE SERVANT LEADER

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder...” [Isaiah 9:6](#)

“...Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.” [Ephesians 5:23](#)

Jesus came not only to be our Savior, but also to be our Lord and to exercise a real rule in our lives. However, though it might seem like a contradiction, He also came to serve:

“...the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” [Matthew 20:28](#)

The Church is built on Jesus, the foundation and chief cornerstone ([1 Corinthians 3:11](#), [Ephesians 2:20](#)), and should reflect Him in every way. His nature should especially be seen in those holding positions of responsibility in the local church. Later in this session, we will look at how servanthood is exemplified by deacons, but first we will look at those who lead the congregation.

LEADERSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

As already noted in this course, there is much confusion in the Church today when it comes to leadership roles and titles. We saw in the last session that even the familiar term *pastor* is not actually used in the New Testament to refer to those who lead the local congregation. That responsibility is given to elders, also called overseers.

However, *elder* is yet another term that has often been misunderstood and misapplied. Many churches have “elders” who just operate as a board, elected by the congregation to serve a term of office, during which they meet occasionally to make administrative decisions. In many cases, they have little or no involvement in actually leading, teaching, and caring for the flock. They leave that to the “Pastor,” the “professional” whom they (as one of their administrative decisions) will hire to handle the “spiritual” aspects of the life of the church—and whom they will fire if the job isn’t done the way they like it!

The leadership of the local church, as described in the New Testament, was by a plurality of elders who were deeply involved in the practical and spiritual care of the people. However, before examining what Scripture shows us about church eldership, let’s look at elders in Israel prior to the birthing of the Church.

ELDERS IN SCRIPTURE

Elders are mentioned throughout the Old Testament. The term quite literally referred to aged or older men, but came to be used beyond that to refer specifically to those recognized as wise, experienced, and of proven character, and who were, therefore, looked to as leaders in:

1. The family or tribe ([Deuteronomy 5:23](#))
2. Civil government ([Exodus 3:16-18](#); [1 Chronicles 11:3](#) and [Joshua 20:4](#))
3. Religious life ([Leviticus 4:15](#); [2 Kings 19:2 - NIV 1984](#); [Isaiah 37:2 - NIV 1984](#))

In the New Testament, it is clear from the Gospels and Acts that elders still had a similar status and role in the life of the Jewish community. The Greek word translated as “elder” is *presbuteros* which, like its Old Testament counterpart, conveyed the concept of maturity and character. It is, therefore, not surprising that this term was adopted by the newly-birthing community of Christians to refer to its leaders.

ELDERS AS OVERSEERS

As mentioned above, the other term used in the New Testament for church leaders is *overseers*. This translates the Greek word *episkopos*, a compound of *epi*, meaning “over,” and *skopos*, meaning “to look/watch, peer about, oversee.” The word “bishop” is derived from *episkopos*, (i.e., *piskop* became “bishop”), and in many denominations has come to refer to a hierarchical, regional position. However, in the New Testament, *episkopos* is interchangeable with *presbuteros* as a term for the leaders of the local congregation. For example, in [Acts 20:17](#), we read that Paul sent to Ephesus for the “elders” of the church, whom he then addresses (in [verse 28](#)) as “overseers.” One could say that “elder” emphasizes who the person is, and “overseer” what the person does.

“REMEMBER YOUR LEADERS, THOSE WHO SPOKE TO YOU THE WORD OF GOD. CONSIDER THE OUTCOME OF THEIR WAY OF LIFE, AND IMITATE THEIR FAITH...”

Hebrews 13:7



QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERSHIP

Much of the Church today would consider the necessary qualifications for leadership to come in the form of certificates from seminaries or other academic institutions. This is not what we see in the New Testament. Following are the two passages of Scripture that set out most deliberately and clearly the qualifications for an overseer/elder:

“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded [i.e., clear-headed, thoughtful], self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome [lit. peaceable], not a lover of money [lit. not covetous]. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? He must not be a recent convert [lit. novice], or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.” [1 Timothy 3:2-7](#)

“...appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers [lit. are faithful] and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant [not self-willed] or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” [Titus 1:5b-9](#)

These requirements relate to **character**, **capability**, and **confirmation**.

CHARACTER — God is not looking for executives to run a business, but for mature men of integrity who will care for and lead His family ([1 Timothy 3:4-5](#)), so it is not surprising that character takes prominence over gifting when appointing elders. The overriding requirement is that an elder be “**above reproach**.” In the above passages, Paul gives specific examples of this requirement.

CAPABILITY — Though good character is essential, elders must also be able to fulfill certain responsibilities. The areas of ability listed by Paul can be summarized as follows:

- **SOUND DOCTRINE** — An elder must hold firm to sound doctrine and encourage others to do so, rebuking those who contradict it. This requires him to be skilled in correctly handling Scripture (see also [1 Timothy 1:3](#); [2 Timothy 2:2](#); [Titus 2:1](#); and [2 Timothy 2:15](#)).
- **COMMUNICATION** — An elder must be able to teach others—encouraging, comforting, instructing, training, correcting, and rebuking (see also [2 Timothy 2:24-25](#) and [3:16](#)).
- **LEADERSHIP** — An elder must be able to lead, having demonstrated this by how he manages his own household. He must not be a novice, but should have a history of faithfulness in what has been entrusted to him (see also [2 Timothy 2:2](#)).

CONFIRMATION — Elders should have a good reputation and be respected both within the congregation and in the wider local community ([1 Timothy 3:2, 7](#)).

THE APPOINTMENT OF ELDERS

In [1 Timothy 3:1](#), we read that “**if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task**.” However, elders are not self-appointed on the basis of their own sense of call. Nor are they “democratically” elected on the basis of their popularity. Scripture shows us that there is a process by which a man comes to this position:



THE HOLY SPIRIT ANOINTS

“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers,”
Acts 20:28a

When looking at the Ephesians 4 ministries, we saw that it is God who appoints those who are to serve Him in key roles (1 Corinthians 12:28) and that Christ gives these gifts to the Church (Ephesians 4:11). It is not surprising, then, that God plays the primary role in raising up leaders in the local congregation.

THE APOSTLE APPOINTS

“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.” Acts 14:23 (NIV 1984)

The appointment to eldership will be by, or at the direction of, the apostle who serves that church. His apostolic vision enables him to see the hand of God on the emerging elder. His shepherding engagement with the local church enables him to hear the heart of the people. These are aspects of his anointing as a wise master builder.

“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.” Titus 1:5 (NIV 1984)

Incidentally, the biblical pattern shows that elders continue in relationship with, and remain accountable to, the apostle. One cannot have a biblical eldership without biblical apostleship.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLURALITY

It is important to note that in both the Old and New Testaments, eldership is always a plural concept (e.g., Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1 and James 5:14). Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a sole elder placed over a church. On one level, this just seems like common sense. No one man is gifted or strong enough to be able to adequately care for and minister to an entire congregation on an on-going basis; we have already considered the adverse consequences for all concerned when someone tries.

However, God’s heart for plurality in leadership is more than just a practical concern. An essential characteristic of God is His triunity. He Himself is plurality manifesting in oneness. His intent is to be reflected on the earth by a Church which is one, though comprised of many. The Church will be brought to this state as it is equipped by Ephesians 4 ministries, working together in unity. On a local congregational level, it is matured and shaped by the example and care of a team of elders working together as one.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUALITY

In many elder-led churches, the practice is to designate one as the “lead” or “senior” elder. The main thought behind this is that, even among a group that seeks for consensus in decision-making, there will inevitably be occasional impasses which will require someone with recognized authority to determine a way forward. However, Scripture says nothing of the role of a “lead” or “senior” elder, and our concern is that this practice diminishes true equality in the way elders function. Many an eldership has started with good intentions to function in plurality, only to devolve into an unbiblical structure reminiscent of the “Pastor” and “Associate Pastor” model.

Some will argue that a true equality among elders is impractical and unworkable. Without a genuine and mutual submission to the Holy Spirit, we would agree. However, as is so often the case in the Church, we believe that it is the intention of God to demonstrate something of His manifold wisdom through eldership functioning in equality and agreement. In real terms, this requires a level of humility and yielding as the Holy Spirit leads through one and then another as He sees fit. With regard to occasional impasses as mentioned earlier, it would be the apostle's job to step in and bring help and direction at these points.

GIFTING AND RESPONSIBILITY

Though there should be governmental equality in an eldership, we should expect to see different degrees of gifting and responsibility in the elders. For example, all elders must be able to shepherd and teach the people of God; however, their level of gifting in these areas will vary and most will not be shepherds or teachers in the Ephesians 4 sense.

In [1 Timothy 5:17 \(NIV 1984\)](#), we read that **“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”** This seems to imply that, though there should be governmental equality in an eldership, there will be some elders who are particularly given to directing the affairs of the church. It certainly indicates that preaching and teaching will not be the primary work of all elders. Since **“double honor”** here refers to financial reward, it is probably reflecting the fact that, while many (perhaps, most) elders will fulfill their function in the church while retaining secular employment, some will be released and resourced to work for the church. Consequently, some will take more responsibility than others for the day-to-day administration, the shepherding care, the teaching and preaching, etc.

Indeed, some elders may be (or may become) recognized as apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds or teachers, and may combine their local eldership involvement with a wider Ephesians 4 ministry. For example, Peter was, of course, an apostle, but he was also an elder of the church in Jerusalem ([1 Peter 1:1, 5:1](#)).

THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

[Hebrews 13:17](#)

Elders carry responsibility not just for the welfare and direction of the congregation as a whole, but for each individual. Jesus is concerned with every area of your life (not just your “spiritual life”), and so are elders. They may, at times, bring very clear correction and direction to you. If you want to become part of a local church committed to New Testament practice, you must ask yourself whether you are willing for its elders to have this degree of involvement and authority in your life.

To bring this into perspective, however, we must recognize that a father directs his toddler quite specifically at first, but expects to see in the child a growing ability to know—and willingness to do—the right thing. Similarly, a new Christian, unfamiliar with the teachings of God's Word, may need specific direction in many areas. However, a godly leader's intention will be to bring that believer to a level of maturity in Christ where he is able to know—and willing to do—what is right before God.

A good parent doesn't discourage questions, and you should feel free to share with your elders any concerns you may have regarding their direction or counsel. Also, just as good parents rejoice to see growing initiative, you do not need the permission of the elders before making every decision, or taking any step in serving the Lord. They will, however, be interested to know what you are doing in order to offer you counsel, encouragement, etc.

RESPONDING TO AUTHORITY

[Romans 14:12](#) tells us that “each of us will give an account of himself to God.” However, [Hebrews 13:17](#) shows that church leaders will also give an account of how they took care of the flock in their charge. Elders, therefore, take their responsibility very seriously. Their aim is to please God and to be good stewards of those He has entrusted to their care.

It is also interesting to note from [Hebrews 13:17](#) that we are to obey our leaders so that their work will be “with joy and not with groaning,” and that the latter “would be of no advantage” to us. Our willing submission is not for the purpose of exalting them, but rather for our own maturity and growth. As John Calvin points out when writing about this verse, “if the salvation of our souls be precious to us,” then we should consider with high regard “those who watch out for it.”

Having looked at what the Scriptures have to say about elders, let us now consider deacons.

DEACONS

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:” [Philippians 1:1](#)

Deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning “servant, waiter, attendant, or minister.” Of course, every member of the church is to serve the whole in one way or another, but clearly the term *deacon* is reserved in Scripture only for some.

Although not specifically named as such, many consider Stephen and the other men chosen in [Acts 6](#) to be the first deacons. This is because they were appointed to relieve the apostles of the responsibility to “wait on” (Greek verb, *diakoneo*) tables, thereby enabling the apostles to give their attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word ([Acts 6:1-7](#)).

QUALIFICATIONS FOR DEACONS

These seven men were chosen on the basis of being “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” ([Acts 6:3](#)). However, when considering the qualifications for deacons, attention is usually given to [1 Timothy 3:8-13](#). The requirements there are surprisingly similar to those for elders, and can again be summarized as character, capability, and confirmation. However, it is important to note that the ability to teach and defend the faith is not a requirement, and unlike elders, their function in the church is not governmental.

THE APPOINTMENT OF DEACONS

In [Acts 6](#), the deaconing role emerged from a practical need that was causing problems in the church and threatening to take the leaders away from their primary responsibilities. We might, therefore, conclude that deacons are not merely appointed for the sake of having them, but to meet particular needs that arise from time to time.

Secondly from [Acts 6](#), we might conclude that people are appointed as deacons when their ability to serve stands out beyond the normal. The deaconing role has sometimes been thought of as a less ‘spiritual’ function, one that can be left to more “practical” types. This is certainly not the basis on which the Seven were chosen. Indeed, it requires servants who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to produce the sort of fruit subsequently seen in that instance:

“And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.” [Acts 6:7](#)

Therefore, as with elders, we must first look for the anointing of the Holy Spirit when appointing deacons. This must be seen and confirmed by the congregation, who must also be aware that the candidates fulfill the requirements set out in [1 Timothy 3](#). The elders will then pray for them and lay hands on them, as the apostles did with the Seven.

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF DEACONS

Deacons operate on behalf of the elders and are accountable to them. Their responsibilities in the church are not general, but are limited to their designated area of service, which may be administrative (e.g., organizing aspects of the life and ministry of the church, handling the finances, etc.) or more shepherding (dealing with specific needs, working with homegroups, children’s work, etc.). Though they do not carry governmental authority, their responsibilities will no doubt include administering and directing others in areas of service. Because they are known to be acting on behalf of the elders, and because they are respected for who they are and what they do, they will receive the willing co-operation of those working with them.

A NURTURED CHURCH

Jesus is referred to in [1 Peter 2:25](#) as “the Shepherd and Overseer” of our souls. He has fully provided for the maturing and equipping of His Church by giving His Word, His Spirit, and the Ephesians 4 ministries. However, He did not stop there. He has brought an intimate care to each local congregation by establishing elders and deacons to lead and serve His people on a daily basis.

Be thankful for them and be determined to make their work as easy as possible. They need your love, help, and prayerful support!

RECOMMENDED READING

1. *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch