

Shepherds Under God

Elders Who Joyfully Govern
God's Flock



STUDENT WORKBOOK

§ Shepherds Under God
*Elders Who Joyfully
Govern God's Flock*

STUDENT WORKBOOK

Bethlehem College and Seminary Press

720 13th Avenue South

Minneapolis, MN 55415

612.455.3420 | 612.338.6901 (FAX)

bcspress@bcsmn.edu | bcspress.org

Copyright © 2016 by Bethlehem College & Seminary Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, modified, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright © 2007 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



Shepherds Under God

Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock

STUDENT WORKBOOK

Table of Contents

Course Syllabus		1
Lesson 1	Biblical Eldership: Scriptural Mandates and Sanctified Wisdom	3
Lesson 2	Leadership in the Local Church: God, Christ, and the Word	9
Lesson 3	Elders in the First Century: Pattern and Precedent	21
Lesson 4	Delegated Authority: Elders Govern the Church	31
Lesson 5	A Ministry of the Word: Elders Teach the Church	43
Lesson 6	Equipping the Saints: Elders Train the Church	53
Lesson 7	Watch Yourself: Elders Serve as Examples	65
Lesson 8	A Family Man: Elder Qualifications in the Home	77
Lesson 9	Above Reproach: Elder Qualifications in the World	89
Lesson 10	Local Dynamics: Elders and the Congregation	101
Lesson 11	Proven Pragmatics: Elders in the Modern Church	113
Lesson 12	God's Undershepherds: The Importance of Biblical Eldership	121



Shepherds Under God

Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock

SYLLABUS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Shepherds Under God: Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock is a 12-week course that examines the Bible's teaching on the presence, responsibilities, qualifications, and importance of elders in the local church. The course is primarily designed for the training of current and prospective elders. It aims to refresh and challenge the student's vision of godly church leadership through inductive study of the Word, careful reflection on ministerial practice, and thoughtful interaction with Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership*, the teaching of John Piper, and various other pastors and theologians. The course concludes with a consideration of pragmatic issues, seeking to apply biblical wisdom to contemporary church life.

Syllabus

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This course is designed to accomplish specific objectives. A student who successfully completes this course should be able to

- ▷ magnify the worth of God in a more meaningful and personal way by treasuring him in his heart above all else. We recognize that this, the ultimate objective of the course, is impossible apart from the grace of God in the working of the Holy Spirit, who exalts the risen Lord, Jesus Christ.
- ▷ understand the Scriptures more fully as a result of searching them diligently throughout the course.
- ▷ give a biblical and reasoned defense for the continuing leadership role of elders in the local church. A student should be able to demonstrate from Scripture that a plurality of qualified elders leading each local church is God's

design and intention, and not merely the practice of the early church.

- ▷ articulate the role and responsibilities that God has entrusted to elders in the local church. In other words, a student should be able to sketch an elder's job description.
- ▷ articulate the qualifications that Scripture sets forth for those who aspire to eldership.
- ▷ evaluate his own church's policies and practice with regard to eldership.

REQUIRED TEXTBOOKS

- ▷ An English version of the Bible, preferably the *English Standard Version* (ESV)
- ▷ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Revised and expanded edition; Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth, 2003)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are expected to prepare for Lessons 2–12 by completing the lesson pages in sequential order. Therefore, for each lesson, a student should read the Introduction and the Lesson Objectives. Then the student should read the remainder of the lesson, answer the first three questions contained therein, complete the required reading, and answer the final two questions.

Biblical Eldership

1

Scriptural Mandates and Sanctified Wisdom

§ INTRODUCTION

One of the causes of the weakness of the American church is the weakness of its spiritual leaders. John MacArthur contends,

Whatever the leaders are, the people become. As Hosea said, “Like people, like priest” (4:9). Jesus said, “Everyone, after he has been fully trained, will be like his teacher” (Luke 6:40). Biblical history demonstrates that people will seldom rise above the spiritual level of their leadership.¹

Yet this reality may be grounds for hope as well. If the Lord would be pleased to renew and refocus the spiritual leadership of a church, then it is likely that revival will come to the entire church. God is pleased to revive and lead his people through the leaders whom he has appointed.

This course will examine the subject of biblical eldership. Our hope is that this resource will be a means by which the Lord brings blessing to you, your church, and its leaders.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- state initial thoughts on what the Bible does and does not prescribe concerning biblical eldership.
- understand the leadership structure and vision of his own church.
- internalize sober warnings from Scripture concerning the importance of leadership.

¹ John MacArthur as quoted by Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (revised and expanded; Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 2003), 70. All quotations used by permission.



Those who conceive of musical improvisation as completely free and spontaneous composition are mistaken. For example, when improvising, a jazz soloist, must remain mindful of the chord progression upon which he is playing. There is some scope for creative expression, but pleasant and skillful improvisation is guided by an underlying structure and must stay within certain musical boundaries.

We would contend that contemporary biblical eldership is analogous. Christian eldership today is guided by certain fixed biblical principles. Yet there does remain some scope for wise, imaginative, and differing expressions of eldership in various contemporary contexts.

Benjamin Merkle comments on the kind of spirit this improvisation requires:

*Although some aspects of church government are clearly set forth in Scripture (e.g., teaching is the responsibility of the elders and not the deacons), other aspects are less clear (e.g., how church leaders should be selected). As a result, at certain points we must allow for some flexibility, while acknowledging that our personal preferences should not be put on par with Scripture. It is necessary, therefore, that we approach the issue of church government with humility and with a teachable spirit.*²

Phil Newton concurs with Merkle's assessment:

*The polity framework sketched in the New Testament does not give every detail; rather, it leaves some things to the wisdom of the local churches.*³

John Piper also articulates the mixed nature of contemporary biblical eldership:

*Church government really is a mingling of biblical principle with practical, cultural, historical, and local dynamics. We need to be honest about that and not absolutize our little systems.*⁴

One of the aims of this course is to provide students with a clear understanding of the fixed Scriptural mandates that inform our practice of eldership today, and

² Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 21. All quotations used by permission.

³ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI; Kregel, 2005), 151.

⁴ John Piper, "Biblical Eldership Lecture 1b," accessed online at desiringGod.org. The wording is modified slightly.

what areas remain open for the application of sanctified wisdom.

1. As you start this course, what would you say are some of the fixed Scriptural mandates that inform our practice of eldership today? What areas remain open for the application of sanctified wisdom?

A LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SURVEY

This course will involve inductive study of many biblical passages related to church eldership but also careful reflection on ministerial practice. Therefore, as you start this course it is important to have a good grasp on how leadership in your local church is structured and exercised. If your church has a constitution or other documents describing the practice and policies of your church's leadership, it would be helpful to become familiar with these documents if you are not already.

You may also find that some of the roles and responsibilities of your church leadership are understood but unwritten. Perhaps there are also aspects of leadership that are unclear, or points for which the church's written description of leadership does not match how the leadership actually functions.

2. How is your church governed (both theoretically and in actual practice)? Who are the various leaders, and what are their roles and responsibilities? Describe your church's practice of leadership. You may use organizational charts if that seems helpful.

🌀 A TEACHABLE AND SOBER SPIRIT

An honest and penetrating assessment of one's own church leadership can be difficult and unsettling. It requires a teachable spirit, a spirit that is open to receiving instruction from God's Word and correction from God's Spirit.

Proverbs 11:2 says, 'When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but with the humble is wisdom.' The wise person is characterized by humility. . . . Humility, in turn, is foundational for the other aspects of godly wisdom because humility is teachable and open to change and growth. The proud person does not like to admit his errors and his need for growth. But the humble person is open to counsel and reason, and ready to be corrected and follow truth.⁵

Furthermore, such an assessment will not likely occur unless there is a certain sober comprehension of the importance of local church leadership. Consider the following warnings from the Old Testament:

Hosea 4:1–9

¹ *Hear the word of the LORD, O children of Israel,
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.
There is no faithfulness or steadfast love,
and no knowledge of God in the land;*

² *there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.*

³ *Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish,
and also the beasts of the field
and the birds of the heavens,
and even the fish of the sea are taken away.*

⁴ *Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.*

⁵ *You shall stumble by day;
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.*

⁶ *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;*

⁵ John Piper, "Get Wisdom," accessed online at desiringGod.org

*because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.*

*⁷ The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
I will change their glory into shame.*

*⁸ They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.*

*⁹ And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways and
repay them for their deeds.*

Malachi 2:1-9

¹ And now, O priests, this command is for you. ² If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the LORD of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart. ³ Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. ⁴ So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the LORD of hosts. ⁵ My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him. It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. ⁷ For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.

⁸ But you have turned aside from the way. You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the LORD of hosts, ⁹ and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways

but show partiality in your instruction.

3. According to these two passages, what was the relationship between Israel's priests and the people?

Although a Christian elder in many ways does not function among God's people as an old covenant priest did, we will see that the ability to influence and the responsibility to lead are parallel. It is a sobering thought that the character of our congregation, in both strengths and weaknesses, is at least partially determined by the character of its leadership. Therefore, as leaders, when we identify shortcomings and failures in the congregation, we may be seeing reflections of our own shortcomings and failures. May God grant his grace to all of us.

Leadership in the Local Church

2

God, Christ, and the Word

§ INTRODUCTION

identifying inappropriately or unhelpfully with the leaders of a church is nothing new. The Corinthian spirit of factious loyalty toward human leaders — “I follow Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas” — was as much a problem in the first century as it can be today. To counteract this distorted view of human leadership, Paul magnified the power of God through the gospel and the centrality of God’s Spirit. Paul boldly asserted,

“When one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Corinthians 3:4–7).

This is a lesson that leaders need to learn as much as those who follow them. It is so easy to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. Therefore we begin our study of biblical eldership with a reminder as to who holds the real authority and power within the local church.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the students should be able to

- ▷ describe who provides the ultimate leadership in each local church.
- ▷ explain how God governs the local church.
- ▷ reflect upon how leadership is presented in his own church.



In a course focusing on human leadership in the local church, it is imperative to start here: each and every local Christian church belongs to God. It can be a serious mistake to identify a church too closely with a single leader or group of leaders. A local church does not belong to them. It is God's church. God is the one who ultimately creates, sustains, upholds, nourishes, directs, perseveres, and rules each and every church on planet Earth, whether that church is a handful of persecuted Christians meeting in secret or a church of thousands with massive resources and a high profile.

This simple but critical truth is reinforced by the way in which Paul commonly refers to the church. Consider the following passages:

1 Corinthians 1:1–2

¹ Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints

1 Corinthians 10:32–33

³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

1 Corinthians 11:16

¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

1 Corinthians 11:22

²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

1 Corinthians 15:9

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle,

because I persecuted the church of God.

2 Corinthians 1:1

¹ Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia

Galatians 1:13

¹³ For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it.

1 Thessalonians 2:14

¹⁴ For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews

2 Thessalonians 1:4

⁴ Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

John Piper comments on this recurring description of the church:

From the phrase “God’s church” I would make the first point that the church belongs to God. The church is not man’s creation and it is not man’s possession. It is God’s.⁶

Notice from the Scripture passages above that Paul sometimes refers to the “churches (plural) of God.” So it is not just that the universal Church (singular) belongs to God, but each local congregation also belongs to him.

⁶ John Piper, “He Must Manage His Household Well,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

1. Why might it be important to start our study of biblical eldership with this point (that each local church belongs to God)?

§ HEAD OF THE CHURCH: CHRIST

After observing Paul's consistent pattern of referring to the Church or churches "of God," we find in Romans 16:16 a striking (but not surprising) variation.

Romans 16:16

¹⁶ *Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.*

There may be in this verse a subtle Trinitarian indication that each local church also properly and equally belongs to Christ, the Son of God. Furthermore, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus famously promises to build *his* church.

Matthew 16:18

¹⁸ *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

So we may also rightfully assert that the church belongs to Christ. The supremacy of the Son in all things and over the church is beautifully expressed in Ephesians 1:20–23.

Ephesians 1:20–23

²⁰ . . . [God] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his

right hand in the heavenly places, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

John Piper reflects on the central role that the church plays in the worldwide reign of Christ:

God aims to fill the universe with the glory of his Son, Jesus, by making the church the showcase of his perfections. Or, to put it another way, and include the idea of body: God means to fill the universe with the glory of his Son by putting the church on display as the embodiment of his Son.

. . . “[God] put all things in subjection under [Christ’s] feet” — so that as sovereign ruler of all he might assert his truth and right and power and wisdom in all the universe and fill all things with his kingly glory.

Yes, all of that, but not without the church. The verse goes on: “[God] put all things in subjection under his feet, AND GAVE HIM AS HEAD OVER ALL THINGS TO THE CHURCH.” God did not exalt Jesus and subject all things to him and then simply say, “Now go ahead and fill the universe with your glory; fill all things with yourself.” Instead he raised him and exalted him and subjected all things under him and then made him one with the church, as head to the body, and said, “Now, my Son, you and those with whom you are united as head to body, go forth in the universe and fill it with all that you are in your body. Let everything, from the highest heaven to the lowest hell, be filled with a revelation of your glorious perfections in the form of a chosen, destined, blood-bought, called, justified, holy, glorified, and infinitely, everlastingly satisfied people, your body, the church of the living God.”⁷

Paul employs the metaphor of Christ as the head of a body a few other times in his letters.

Ephesians 4:15–16

¹⁵ Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it

⁷ John Piper, “His Body: The Fullness of Him Who Fills All in All,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

builds itself up in love.

Colossians 1:17–18

¹⁷ And [the Son] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

John Piper's thoughts on Christ's headship:

The church is like a body that gets its leadership and its nourishment from its head, Jesus Christ. The church is not a mere human organization. It is not a mere organization because it is an organism, a body. And it is not merely human, because its head is divine; the life he gives is supernatural life. So the way a church is run should not simply copy the way a human organization is run. There should be structures and practices that let Christ the head govern, lead, and nurture his church. Jesus Christ is the living head — the leader and the sustainer — of the church, his body.⁸

As John Piper suggests in the quotation above, the headship of Christ should inform the structures and practices of the church. In each local church it should be clear who the ultimate authority is. The church's proper response to Christ, the head of the church, is to submit to his leadership.

Ephesians 5:22–24

²² Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³ For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴ Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

⁸ John Piper, "Who Are the Elders?," accessed online at desiringGod.org.

2. In what ways does your local church communicate that even the elders (or leaders) of the church are nourished and directed by Christ? In other words, how do (or should) the elders of your church make it plain to the congregation and others that they submit to the headship of Christ?

GOD GOVERNS EACH LOCAL CHURCH THROUGH HIS WORD

When Jesus was forming the first Christian churches by his Spirit in Jerusalem and around the Mediterranean, he could guide and direct these new churches through his direct representatives, his chosen apostles. New believers in these churches were fed and governed by apostolic instruction. As Acts 2:42 states, the believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.”

As the apostles began to depart from the scene, however, the word of God that they had spoken remained with the Church. Paul’s speech to the elders at Miletus, as recorded by Luke in Acts 20:18–35, reflects upon this transition and how the Church would survive without direct apostolic oversight. In this speech it is significant that Paul commits the elders of the church to the word of God.

Acts 20:32

³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

If the elders care for the flock, who cares for the elders? If Paul commits the church into the care of the elders, into whose care does he commit the elders themselves? The answer is given in verse 32: “And now I commend you [or entrust you] to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

So the answer is that God cares for his shepherds by the word of His grace. “I commit you to God and to the word of his grace.” I don’t commit you to a bishop. I don’t commit you to a denomination. I don’t commit you to a committee or a congregation. I commit you to God and to the Word of his grace. God is your

shepherd. And his Word is your green pasture and your still waters.

Of course, ALL the flock have God as their shepherd and ALL the flock feed on the Word of his grace — not just the elders. But there is a difference between the flock and the elders. The difference is at least this: to the flock God gives the added resource of shepherds who teach the whole counsel of God, and to the shepherds God has given the added responsibility of searching out and teaching the whole counsel of God.

So when Paul commits the elders to the Word of God's grace, he doesn't commit them to a private, privileged access; he commits them to a special responsibility. The sheep must have the Word of grace in order to live by it. And so God gives shepherds to feed the flock of God. But the shepherds too must have the Word of grace in order to live by it. But God assigns to them the special responsibility of feeding themselves in a more direct manner both for their own soul and for the sake of the sheep. The flock has the added benefit of going to the shepherds for feeding. The shepherds have the added responsibility (and privilege) of preparing the food first hand from the Word of God's grace.⁹

Elsewhere in the speech as Paul recounts his teaching ministry he refers to “the gospel of the grace of God” (20:24) and “the whole counsel of God” (20:27). In a very real sense Paul's words were the words of God, as 1 Thessalonians 2:13 makes clear.

1 Thessalonians 2:13

¹³ And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

Therefore Paul can also entrust Timothy to “the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me” (2 Timothy 1:13).

2 Timothy 1:13

¹³ Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

Paul's words — and by extension, all the inspired apostolic words — came to have a special place of authority in the first-century local churches because they

⁹ John Piper, “I Entrust You to God and to the Word of His Grace,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

were the words of God.

Second Thessalonians 2:15 then becomes a significant verse because Paul equates his spoken words with the words of his letters.

2 Thessalonians 2:15

¹⁵ So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter.

In the churches he founded and beyond, the letters of Paul became a means by which God governed. Paul's letters are quickly recognized as authoritative Scripture (see 2 Peter 3:15–16). And of course, what we know as the Old Testament Scriptures are also a means through which God saves, instructs, corrects, trains, and equips his people.

2 Timothy 3:14–17

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

In time, the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments were recognized as God's Word, the canon of Holy Scripture. Therefore it is right and proper to claim that, together with the Holy Spirit, the Bible is the primary means by which God governs his church today.

3. Again, why might it be important to include this point (the authority of Scripture) in our study of biblical eldership?



REQUIRED READING

Biblical Eldership, pages 85–98 (Chapter 5)

4. Strauch contends that the American church has been especially slow to apply the virtues of humility and servanthood to church structure and leadership (87). Do you agree with Strauch's assessment? In what ways have you seen power mishandled by elders or other church leaders? And how might humble, servant leadership work its way deeper into your leadership and the leadership of your church? Record your reflections below.

5. Strauch warns us that a group of elders “can become a self-serving, autocratic leadership body” (95). Why is this so wrong?

..... § ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ John Piper, “Biblical Eldership: Shepherd the Flock of God Among You,” an online seminar at desiringGod.org
- ▷ John Piper, “The Essential and Prominent Place of Preaching in Worship,” an online conference message at desiringGod.org
- ▷ John Piper, “How to Give the Bible Functional Authority in Your Speech and Writing,” an online sermon at desiringGod.org

Elders in the First Century

3

Pattern and Precedent

🔗 INTRODUCTION

Human leadership is practiced in wildly diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in the Christian church today. Some churches are led by a single pastor, some by a board of deacons, some by a team of elders, some by a paid pastoral staff, some by itinerant charismatic leaders, and some not at all.

Does God intend for churches to invent their own forms of leadership and governance? Does God intend for churches to be structured according to the latest successful business practices or social-scientific theories? Or has God provided sufficient and clear teaching on church leadership in his Word?

The Apostle Paul declares that “God is not a God of confusion but of peace” (1 Corinthians 11:33) and that in the local church “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 11:40). Therefore we may assume that God has not left his Church without instruction regarding church leadership nor without structure. This lesson will examine the pattern and precedent for church leadership that God has established in the Bible.

🔗 LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- describe the pattern of plural eldership found in the New Testament.
- defend the idea that the terms “elder”, “overseer”, and “pastor” refer to the same office.
- evaluate the use of leadership titles in his own church.



STUDY GUIDE

The first mention of Christian elders in the New Testament and in the history of the early church is a somewhat unremarkable one.

Acts 11:29–30

²⁹ So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Apparently the elders of the church in Judea would be responsible for the reception and distribution of this financial gift from Antioch. Luke's offhanded reference to "elders" appears to assume that his readership will understand what an elder is and does. If elder leadership in the Church was not a universal practice, one would expect that Luke would have elaborated upon this reference.

One of the reasons that elders in the Christian community would have been a familiar and understandable occurrence was that there was a precedent for them in the Old Testament. Benjamin Merkle explains:

In the Old Testament, the term for elder (zaqēn) refers to (1) someone who has entered old age or (2) a leader of the community who performs various functions. Of the more than 180 occurrences of this term in the Old Testament, about two-thirds refer to a respected community leader, whereas only one-third are used as a reference to age. . . . Those who were known as "the elders" were not appointed to such a position by a higher authority but were ascribed authority by the people of the community, who deemed them worthy of respect and honor. Thus, a man became an elder by his moral authority, which was acquired by heredity, experience, knowledge, or wealth.¹⁰

So Christian elders as "moral authorities" within the earliest churches could have been a natural development arising out of ancient Israelite society. Nevertheless, Merkle cautions us not to read too much into this parallel.

While the Old Testament usage of the term clearly had some influence on the early church, it would be wrong to say that the New Testament church patterned its leaders after these ancient predecessors. Although their functions overlap at times,

¹⁰ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 61.

*there is not a one-to-one parallel.*¹¹

The precise origin of Christian eldership remains shrouded: Did Jesus give his disciples instruction regarding elders after he was raised from the dead (Acts 1:2)? Was the creation of the office an apostolic and Spirit-led response to a critical need for leadership (cf. Acts 6:1–4)? Did the office develop after the church in Jerusalem was first persecuted and scattered (Acts 8:1)? It is not for us to know. What is clear, however, is that the leadership of a local church through elders quickly became the dominant pattern in the early church. Acts 14:21–23 is an important text illustrating this pattern.

Acts 14:21–23

²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The appointment of elders (plural) in every church (singular) is mentioned in this summary statement without explanation. Again, if this were a foreign or controversial practice, one would assume that Luke would not have simply summarized Paul's ministry in this way.

Later in the book of Acts, Paul calls for the elders from the church of Ephesus, a location not included in the generalized description of Acts 14:21–23. Again this indicates that the presence of elders could be expected in every Christian church.

Acts 20:17

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

Paul's address to the Ephesian elders, which will be studied in this course from multiple angles, presumes that their role would continue beyond the death of Paul and into the indefinite future. It seems as if the pattern had become a

¹¹ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 67.

precedent.

1. Is your church governed by a plurality of elders? If not, do you know why? Some claim that the presence of elders in the early church is merely descriptive and not prescriptive. What do you think of that assertion?

🔗 ELDERS ELSEWHERE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In addition to the references to Christian elders in the book of Acts, elders are also mentioned in several other places across the New Testament. Consider these passages from Titus, James, and 1 Peter.

Titus 1:5

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you . . .

James 5:14

¹⁴ 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.

1 Peter 5:1–2

¹ 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. . .

These references were written at different times, to and from different locations. This indicates again that a plurality of elders leading a local church was a

commonly known and accepted practice throughout early Christianity.

Paul mentions the office in the opening address of the letter to the Philippians. (We will argue, below, that the terms “overseers” and “elders” refer to the same office.)

Philippians 1:1–2

¹ Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Notice once again the pattern of plurality of elders for a single church. There is no reference in the New Testament to a church being led by a single elder; rather, a plurality of elders is consistently mentioned and assumed.

The concept of shared leadership is a common theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, leadership was shared by the elders of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve apostles to lead the church. In addition, the early church appointed seven men to assist the apostles by caring for the church’s widows (Acts 6:1–6). This pattern of plurality was continued with the establishment of the Christian eldership.¹²

¹² Merkle, *40 Questions*, 161.

2. What benefits might there be to a shared leadership of the local church rather than a solo leadership? Try to list and explain at least three such benefits.

🔗 AN ELDER BY ANY OTHER NAME

You will notice that Philippians 1:1 does not mention “elders and deacons,” but rather “overseers and deacons.” The English words “elders” and “overseers” translate two different Greek terms: πρεσβύτερος (*presbuteros*, from which the English word “Presbyterian” is derived) and ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*, from which the English word “Episcopalian” is derived). Do these different terms refer to two distinct offices within the early church? There is good reason to think that they do not. Consider the following passages, underline every title or descriptor that is used for a Christian in a position of responsibility.

Acts 20:17, 28

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. . . . ²⁸ “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

1 Timothy 3:1–5; 5:17

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? . . . ¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor,

especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Titus 1:5–9

⁵This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹He 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.

Hebrews 13:17, 24

¹⁷Obey 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. . . . ²⁴Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.

3. List below each of the terms you underlined. Assuming that these terms refer to a single office, what does each term contribute to our understanding of biblical eldership?

Of the terms you identified, “elder” and “overseer” are the most commonly used. Benjamin Merkle offers four compelling reasons for why these terms refer to the same office:

The first reason to view the elder and overseer as representing the same office is that the terms are used interchangeably. There are three texts that clearly demonstrate this usage (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1–2). . . .

A second reason that supports the view that the terms refer to the same office is that Paul never mentions the qualifications for elders. If elder and overseer are two separate offices, then it would seem reasonable to expect Paul to give the necessary qualifications for each office. . . .

A third reason for equating the two terms is that both elders and overseers have the same function — ruling/leading and teaching. . . .

A final reason for equating the elder and overseer is that nowhere in the New Testament are the three offices (elder, overseer, and deacon) mentioned together. This suggests that the three-tiered ecclesiastical system that later developed in many churches is foreign to the New Testament.”¹³

Merkle then poses an obvious but helpful question:

If the two terms represent the same office, then why was it necessary to employ both terms? The reason could be explained by the general use of the terms: elder is more a description of character, whereas overseer is more a description of function. It appears that originally various congregations preferred one term over the other. The Jewish congregations apparently favored the term presbuteros, while the Gentile congregations favored the term episkopos. Over time, however, these two terms came to be used in the same congregations and could be used interchangeably since they referred to the leaders of the congregation. It is likely that both terms remained due to the important connotations each term carried. The term presbuteros conveyed the idea of a wise, mature leader who was honored and respected by those of the community. The term episkopos spoke more to the work of the individual whose duty it was to ‘oversee’ and protect those under his care.”¹⁴

It is interesting to note that the term “pastor,” or “shepherd,” is only used once as

¹³ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 79, 80, 81

¹⁴ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 82–83.

a title for a Christian “office.”

Ephesians 4:11–12

“ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. ...

In this occurrence the term “pastor” is grammatically joined with the term “teacher” so that the best translation might be either “pastor-teacher” or “shepherd-teacher.” In this case, the New Testament seems to use the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” interchangeably and synonymously.

REQUIRED READING

Biblical Eldership, pages 35–45 (first part of Chapter 2)

▷ Stop reading at “First Among a Council of Equals: Leaders among Leaders”

4. In this section Strauch describes three practical benefits of shared leadership. Put these three benefits into your own words and then try to think of one or two more potential benefits of shared leadership. Record your thoughts below.

Biblical Eldership, pages 174–180 (last part of Chapter 8)

▷ Start reading at “Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (1:1)”

5. What titles are employed for designating the leadership in your church? Are the terms “elder” and “pastor” always applied to the same group of men? What understanding of local church leadership does your nomenclature reflect, and what potential misunderstandings may your nomenclature cause?

The further reading for today’s lesson is Strauch’s brief reflection on leadership terminology. In this section Strauch contends,

Much of our church vocabulary is unscriptural and terribly misleading. Words such as clergyman, layman, reverend, minister, priest, bishop, ordained, and ministerial convey ideas contrary to what Jesus Christ and His apostles taught. . . . Most of our churches are in desperate need of language reform.¹⁵

FURTHER READING

- ▷ *Biblical Eldership*, pages 31–34 (last part of Chapter 1)
- ▷ Start reading at “Clarifying Our Terminology.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), Questions 6–9, 21, 26–28
- ▷ *Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2005)
- ▷ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life: 32–40*
- ▷ Bobby Jamieson, “Why New Testament Polity Is Prescriptive,” an online article at 9marks.org

¹⁵ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (revised and expanded; Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 34.

Delegated Authority

4

Elders Govern the Church

§ INTRODUCTION

There is a question that naturally flows from the previous two lessons: If God, Christ, and the Word bear the ultimate and foundational authority in the local church and yet God has established a pattern and precedent of elders to lead the church, then what authority has God granted to these elders?

This question becomes especially pertinent in the American church of the early 21st century, which is part of a broader culture that is suspicious of and often rejects any form of authority. As Timothy Witmer observes,

The concept of authority is one that is increasingly alien to modern culture, and there may be any number of reasons that church leaders may shrink away from exercising authoritative shepherding leadership. It is important before moving on to what shepherds do that it is clearly understood that leaders have both the right and responsibility to exercise shepherding care.¹⁶

Elders should humbly but unapologetically assume the authority and responsibilities God has granted to them. For an elder not to lead with authority is no sign of modesty but an indication of the elder's ignorance, cowardice, or incompetence. This lesson will explore the concept of delegated authority and will sketch the elder's basic role within the local church.

¹⁶ Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2010), 75.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain how the authority of the elders is both substantial and derived.
- ▷ articulate what the primary task of elders is.
- ▷ describe what is intended when the shepherding metaphor is applied to eldership.



Elders are granted real authority in the local church. This is made clear in 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, a passage that does not mention elders explicitly but describes a function that can only properly belong to the elders (cf. 1 Timothy 3:4–5 and 5:17; passages below).

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

¹² We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

The members of the church are to respect those who are “over” them in the Lord. The language in Hebrews 13:17 is even stronger.

Hebrews 13:17

¹⁷ 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.

The words “obey” and “submit” are potent words indicating that the elders have an authority in the church that appropriately calls for obedience and submission. They will have to give an account to God for the souls for whom they were responsible. Thus, we ought not minimize the authority and responsibility that is invested in the elders of a local church.

Nevertheless, Benjamin Merkle offers a crucial qualification:

The authority of the eldership comes from God and not from the congregation. Although the congregation affirms the elders’ calling and authority, theirs is an authority with a divine origin. Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit made them overseers (Acts 20:28). They were called and given authority by God and not by man. . . .

It must be pointed out, however, that the elders’ authority is not absolute. They derive their authority from the Word of God, and when they stray from

that Word, they abandon their God-given authority. . . . The authority that the elders possess is not so much found in their office but in the duties they perform. That is, the elders are not to be obeyed simply because they are elders. Rather, they are to be obeyed because they have the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the congregation. . . . But when their shepherding and teaching stray from Scripture, their authority as shepherds and teachers is no longer binding on the congregation.¹⁷

At this point you ought to recall Lesson 2 and what was observed there about leadership in the local church. An elder does have real authority, but his authority is an authority delegated by God and Christ and one that is dependent upon the Word of God.

Consider the following passages from 1 Peter:

1 Peter 2:21, 24–25

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. . . . ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. ²⁵ For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

1 Peter 5:1–5

¹ 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; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one

¹⁷ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 97–98.

another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

1. According to these passages in 1 Peter, who shepherds the church?
Support your answer with textual references.

LEADING/MANAGING/RULING

There is perhaps a single Greek verb that best describes the primary task of the elders: προΐστημι (*proistami*). Paul uses this verb several times in his letters, but it is usually translated in different ways.

Romans 12:6–8

⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads [proistami], with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy,

with cheerfulness.

¹ Thessalonians 5:12–13 (New American Standard Bible)

¹² *But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over [proistami] you in the Lord and give you instruction. . . .*

¹ Timothy 3:4–5

⁴ *[An overseer] must manage [proistami] his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage [proistami] his own household, how will he care for God’s church?*

¹ Timothy 5:17

¹⁷ *Let the elders who rule [proistami] well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*

As you can see, the verb is variously translated as “lead,” “have charge over,” “manage,” and “rule.” The English word that might best encompass all of these nuances is “govern.” “Govern” helpfully implies the authority God entrusts to the elders, and the verb corresponds to the common title “overseer,” which also describes the primary function of the elder. In fact, one might expect that the verb “oversee” would be used more often to describe what an elder does, but it actually appears only once.

¹ Peter 5:1–3

¹ *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 [episkopeo], not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

The primary task of the elders is to govern the church; they are responsible for protecting its purity and cultivating its growth. The primary means through which elders govern is the teaching of the Word. Thus it could be argued that

“governing” is the umbrella task that covers teaching and the various other activities of elders.

2. Do you agree that the primary task of Christian elders is governing the church? If so, why? If not, why not? Can you think of a more basic or comprehensive task entrusted to the elders?

SHEPHERDING

If governing is the primary task of Christian elders, then shepherding is the most important metaphor used to describe this task. Merkle highlights the importance of this metaphor:

Because the people of God are referred to figuratively as “sheep,” those who tend to their needs and exercise leadership over them are figuratively called “shepherds.” Peter exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Peter 5:2). Thus, the elders lead the people of God as a shepherd leads a flock of sheep. This is a significant analogy. Church leaders are not cowboys who drive the sheep. Rather, they are caring shepherds who lead and protect sheep. Furthermore, the shepherd’s primary task is not to run an organization but to care for people’s souls.¹⁸

The verb “to shepherd” (ποιμαίνω; *poimaino*) is used twice in contexts which describe the work of Christian elders.

Acts 20:28–31

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for [or “to shepherd” (poimaino)] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own

¹⁸ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 90–91.

selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ *Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.*

¹ Peter 5:1–3

¹ *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 [poimaino] 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;* ³ *not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

Significantly, the Old Testament describes God as a shepherd to his people.

Psalm 23:1–5

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

² *He makes me lie down in green pastures.*

He leads me beside still waters.

³ *He restores my soul.*

*He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

⁵ *You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

Isaiah 40:11

¹¹ *He will tend his flock like a shepherd;*

*he will gather the lambs in his arms;
he will carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead those that are with young.*

Likewise, the New Testament describes Christ as a shepherd to his people.

Revelation 7:16–17

*¹⁶ They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.
¹⁷ For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.*

So once again we see that elders, as shepherds, should be acting as representatives of God and Christ.

Consider the following passage, which is an extended description of ungodly and godly shepherding.

Ezekiel 34:1–16

¹ The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. ⁵ So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. ⁶ My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them. ⁷ Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸ As I live, declares the Lord GOD, surely because my sheep have become a prey, and my sheep have become food for all the wild

beasts, since there was no shepherd, and because my shepherds have not searched for my sheep, but the shepherds have fed themselves, and have not fed my sheep,⁹ therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD:¹⁰ Thus says the Lord GOD, Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand and put a stop to their feeding the sheep. No longer shall the shepherds feed themselves. I will rescue my sheep from their mouths, that they may not be food for them.¹¹ For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country.¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel.¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD.¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.”

3. What have you learned from Psalm 23:1–5; Isaiah 40:11; Revelation 7:16–17; and Ezekiel 34:1–16 about this important metaphor of shepherding? What does it mean for an elder to shepherd God’s people? Record your reflections below.



REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 15–31 (first part of Chapter 1)

▷ Stop reading at “Clarifying Our Terminology.”

4. What are the four categories Strauch uses to describe the elders’ shepherding task? List them below and explain what each one means in literal (i.e., non-metaphorical) terms. In other words, what real-world responsibilities are signaled by each metaphorical category?

Timothy Laniak offers a helpful reflection on the scope of Christian shepherding:

Shepherd leadership is comprehensive in scope. It represents a diverse and changing “role set.” For the sake of convenience we have in places summarized the inter-related pastoral roles as protector, provider and guide. Fundamentally, however, the task of shepherds is determined daily by the changing needs of the flock under their care. “Pastors” are generalists.¹⁹

¹⁹ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shepherds After My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (New Studies in Biblical Theology 20; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 247.

5. How does your church describe the roles and responsibilities of the elders? (If your church does not currently have elders, how are the roles and responsibilities of the leaders described?) How does this job description compare to the four pastoral categories Strauch identifies? In which of Strauch's four categories are the elders of your church strong? In which might they be weak?

The further reading for this lesson includes an exposition of 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13.

FURTHER READING

Biblical Eldership, 161–74 (the first part of Chapter 8)

- ▷ Stop reading at “Paul’s Letter to the Philippians (1:1).”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, Questions 11–12
- ▷ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 40–44
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, chapter 18

A Ministry of the Word

5

Elders Teach the Church

🔗 INTRODUCTION

There is an episode early on in the narrative of the book of Acts that provides a useful introduction to this lesson, even though it does not involve elders per se. The twelve apostles, responding to a legitimate need in the congregation, claim that “it is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables” (Acts 6:2). Again, although serving tables was a legitimate and God-honoring ministry requiring Spirit-filled men, the apostles identified a ministry responsibility that was more pressing for them: “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (6:4).

This lesson will consider the prayerful teaching of God’s Word, which is the primary activity for Christian elders. We hope to demonstrate how this ministry is the natural and logical result of the authority of the Word in the local church (Lesson 2) being expressed through the delegated authority of the elders in their overall calling to govern the church (Lesson 4).

🔗 LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- explain how Paul, Timothy, and Titus may serve as models for elders today.
- explain why the teaching ministry of elders is so important to the church.
- articulate whether and how certain elders may be distinguished from others.



Paul was a man of words and had a ministry of words. The New Testament pictures Paul as an unrelenting speaker: preaching the gospel, proclaiming Christ, teaching, exhorting, rebuking, explaining, persuading, declaring, debating, and testifying. Colossians 1:28–29 summarizes Paul’s ministry well:

Colossians 1:28–29

*²⁸ [Christ] we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.
²⁹ For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.*

Yet Paul was obviously not the only one to have such a ministry in the church. Notice how Paul describes the kind of ministry Timothy ought to have in the local church.

1 Timothy 4:13

¹³ Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.

2 Timothy 2:15, 24–25

¹⁵ Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. . . .²⁴ And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil,²⁵ correcting his opponents with gentleness. . . .

2 Timothy 4:1–4

¹ I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the

truth and wander off into myths.

Paul also describes Titus' ministry in similar terms:

Titus 2:1, 15

*¹ But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. . . .¹⁵
Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no
one disregard you.*

One would presume that these Word-based activities in the local church should not characterize the ministries of these men alone, but would have some relevance to those who would succeed them. This link is explicitly established by ² Timothy 2:1–2.

² Timothy 2:1–2

¹ You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

1. Paul, Timothy, and Titus are nowhere called elders and probably should be regarded instead as an apostle and his apostolic delegates. Therefore, in what way can the ministries of Paul, Timothy, and Titus serve as models for elders today?

🔗 ELDERS AS PRAYERFUL TEACHERS

What we were able to infer from the descriptions of the teaching ministries of Paul, Timothy, and Titus is made explicit in the qualifications for elders given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

1 Timothy 3:1–2

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. . . .

Titus 1:7–9

⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ 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.

Whereas 1 Timothy 3:2 lists “able to teach” as a qualification for elders, Titus 1:9 asserts that an elder “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught.” This statement in Titus is related to the following reflections by John Piper:

As I have watched the movement from biblical faithfulness to liberalism in persons and institutions that I have known over the years, this feature stands out: An emotional disenchantment with faithfulness to what is old and fixed, and an emotional preoccupation with what is new or fashionable or relevant in the eyes of the world.

Let's try to say it another way: when this feature is prevalent, you don't get the impression that a person really longs to bring his mind and heart into conformity to fixed biblical truth. Instead you see the desire to picture biblical truth as unfixed, fluid, indefinable, distant, inaccessible, and so open to the trends of the day.

So what marks a possible wolf-in-the-making is not simply that he rejects or accepts any particular biblical truth, but that he isn't deeply oriented on the Bible. He is more oriented on experience. He isn't captured by the great old faith once for all delivered to the saints. Instead he's enamored by what is new and innovative.

A good elder can be creative. But the indispensable mark when it comes to doctrinal fitness is faithfulness to what is fixed in Scripture—disciplined, humble submission to the particular affirmations of the Bible—carefully and reverently studied and explained and cherished. When that spirit begins to go, there’s a wolf-in-the-making.²⁰

Piper’s reflections on a “wolf-in-the-making” arise from the description of “wolves” in Acts 20:29. Study this verse in context.

Acts 20:17–21, 26–32

¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: “You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, ²⁷ for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. ²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

²⁰ John Piper, “Watch Out for the Wolves Within,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

2. How are the shepherds of the Ephesian church meant to combat these fierce wolves? Support your answer with textual reasoning and references.

Furthermore, it is clear that the teaching of God's Word cannot be done without God's power, which is called upon and granted through prayer.

A pastor who feels competent in himself to produce eternal fruit — which is the only kind that matters — knows neither God nor himself. A pastor who does not know the rhythm of desperation and deliverance must have his sights only on what man can achieve.

But brothers, the proper goals of the life of a pastor are unquestionably beyond our reach. The changes we long for in the hearts of our people can happen only by a sovereign work of grace.

Salvation is a gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Love is a gift of God (1 Thess. 3:12). Faith is a gift of God (1 Tim. 1:14). Wisdom is a gift of God (Eph. 1:17). Joy is a gift of God (Rom. 15:13). Yet as pastors we must labor to “save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). We must stir up the people to love (Heb. 10:24). We must advance their faith (Phil. 1:25). We must impart wisdom (1 Cor. 2:7). We must work for their joy (2 Cor. 1:24).

We are called to labor for that which is God's alone to give. The essence of the Christian ministry is that its success is not within our reach. . . .

Oh, how we need to wake up to how much “nothing” we spend our time doing. Apart from prayer, all our scurrying about, all our talking, all our study amounts to “nothing.” For most of us the voice of self-reliance is ten times louder than the bell that tolls for the hours of prayer. The voice cries out: “You must open the mail, you must make that call, you must write this sermon, you must prepare for the board meeting, you must go to the hospital.” But the bell tolls softly: “Without Me you can do nothing.”²¹

²¹ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals: A Plea to Pastors for Radical Ministry* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2013), 69–70.

§ VOCATIONAL PREACHERS AND TEACHERS

In many American churches a single “pastor” bears the majority load for preaching and teaching. Yet we have seen that all elders are to be able to teach and to have a ministry of the Word within the church. Is there an inconsistency here in our application of biblical principle? Consider 1 Timothy 5:17–18:

1 Timothy 5:17–18

¹⁷ Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”

Two things are fairly clear from this passage: First, these verses make a distinction between certain elders who “labor in preaching and teaching” and other elders who are simply “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2) and should teach in some capacity. Second, the former are worthy of a double honor: the honor that comes with the office of elder (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13) and the “honor” of financial remuneration for their work (cf. 1 Timothy 5:3–10 and especially 1 Timothy 5:18). Benjamin Merkle acknowledges this difference but cautions us against making a “formal distinction” between these two groups of elders.

The distinction that is sometimes made between teaching elders and ruling elders cannot be adequately supported from Scripture. Although Paul singles out some of the elders in the Ephesian church, it is going too far to create a separate office or even to make a formal distinction between two groups of elders. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul is simply acknowledging that some elders, because they have more time, talent, or training, deserve to be compensated for their work in the church.²²

Galatians 6:6 supports the right for full-time preachers and teachers to receive financial compensation for their work:

Galatians 6:6

⁶ Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the

²² Merkle, *40 Questions*, 87–88.

one who teaches.

Paul also provides a fuller reflection on this issue in 1 Corinthians 9:4–14.

1 Corinthians 9:4–14

⁴ Do we not have the right to eat and drink? ⁵ Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶ Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? ⁸ Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? ¹² If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ¹³ Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

Yet once again Merkle warns us against making too much of the difference between elders who devote more time and energy to preaching and teaching the Word — thus deserving financial compensation — and those who do not.

If the term “pastor” refers to the same office as the elder, making a distinction between an elder and a pastor or senior pastor is unwarranted. That is, it is unhelpful and misleading to speak of someone being a pastor and an elder. By creating a “professional” class of elders (i.e., pastors or senior pastors), we create an unhealthy and unbiblical distinction. Nowhere in the Bible are elders who work “full time” for the church given a different title than those elders who also hold a “secular” job. Such a distinction creates an unhealthy dichotomy between the full-time and part-time elders, as well as between the clergy and laity. By speaking of a “senior pastor,” in essence, we have created a third office, similar to what took place

*in the second century with the development of the monarchical bishop.*²³

3. Does your church distinguish between “lay elders” and “vocational elders,” between “ruling elders” and “teaching elders,” or between the “pastoral staff” and the “elders”? If so, do these distinctions obscure the fact that a ministry of the Word ought to characterize all of the elders? If not, how does your church communicate the difference described in 1 Timothy 5:17?

 **REQUIRED READING:**

Biblical Eldership, pages 206–215 (middle of Chapter 9)

- ▷ Start reading at “Honor Due the Elders.”
 - ▷ Stop reading at “Protecting an Elder.”
4. Do you agree with Strauch’s exegesis of 1 Timothy 5:17–18? Why or why not? Do you have any lingering questions about the meaning of 1 Timothy 5:17–18 or the application of this passage in your church? Record your reflections below.

²³ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 21.

Biblical Eldership, pages 45–50 (last part of Chapter 2)

- ▷ Start reading at “First Among a Council of Equals: Leaders among Leaders”

- 5. Do you agree with the biblical support Strauch offers for the principle of “first among equals”? Why or why not? How is this principle fleshed out in your church, if at all?

The further reading for this lesson covers Strauch’s exposition of Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus (Acts 20:18–35), a portion of which you have studied in this lesson.

FURTHER READING

Biblical Eldership, pages 140–159 (last part of Chapter 7)

- ▷ Start reading at “Paul’s Farewell to the Ephesian Elders.”

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, Question 10
- ▷ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), Chapters 13, 19, 25, 28
- ▷ Walter Price, “Balancing Relationships Between Staff and Non-Staff Elders,” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, Chapter 16

Equipping the Saints

6

Elders Train the Church

§ INTRODUCTION

In the previous lesson you were reminded that the primary activity to which elders are called is a prayerful teaching of God's Word. However, it would be wrong to infer from this that the congregation is therefore to assume a merely passive and receptive role in the church. Hearing sound instruction from God's Word is good, but not an end in itself for the congregation.

This lesson will explore one end for which the elders are aiming in their teaching. This dimension to the elders' task was already helpfully introduced by Alexander Strauch in the required reading for Lesson 4. Do you remember reading these important qualifications in *Biblical Eldership*?

We must, however, balance what we have been saying about the elders' ministry with the parallel truth of every-member ministry. Although the elders lead and are officially responsible for the spiritual oversight of the whole church, they are not the total ministry of the church. They are not the ministers. Ministry is the work of the whole church. Ministry is not the work of one person or even one group of people. . . .

The local church is not only a flock; it is also a body of Spirit-gifted, royal priests who minister to the Lord and His people. Thus, the care of the local body is not the sole responsibility of the elders, but of all the members. Each member of Christ's body is equipped by the Spirit to minister to the needs of others. . . . Biblical elders do not want to control a passive congregation. They desire to lead an active,

*alive, every-member ministering church.*²⁴

In this lesson we will unpack these assertions and reflect on an aspect of the elders' ministry that Benjamin Merkle suggests may be "the most neglected . . . in the local church."²⁵

LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ qualify the importance and role of the elders in the church.
- ▷ relate biblical eldership to the church's "every-member ministry."
- ▷ reflect on one aspect of the elders' effectiveness in his own church.

²⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (revised and expanded; Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 29, 30.

²⁵ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 94.



Thus far in this course we have been stressing the authority God grants to the elders in the local church and the importance of their governing and teaching. It is necessary at this point to balance these points with two complementary perspectives.

First we must realize that elders are not the only teachers within the church. Titus 2:3–5 describes older women as teachers.

Titus 2:3–5

³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

Titus 2:3–5 indicates that older women not only *can* be teachers but that they *should* be, even though they cannot biblically qualify as elders (see Lesson 8). Furthermore, Colossians 3:16 pictures every member of the church as a teacher.

Colossians 3:16

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

Incidentally, “teaching” and “admonishing” are precisely the same two terms Paul uses to describe his own apostolic ministry in Colossians 1:28, a verse which we have already considered. So it would appear that in a very real sense, everyone in the Christian community ought to be a teacher of the Word — at least every adult and mature believer.

Furthermore, there is a significant strain in the New Testament suggesting that in one sense Christians have no need for human teachers. This is one of the distinguishing features of the new covenant, as Hebrews 8:10–11 contends

(quoting Jeremiah 31:33–34).

Hebrews 8:10–11

¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Jesus also taught this perspective during his earthly ministry:

Matthew 23:8–12

⁸ But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. ¹⁰ Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. ¹¹ The greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹² Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Paul and John reinforce it:

¹ Thessalonians 4:9–10

⁹ Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, ¹⁰ for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more. . . .

¹ John 2:26–27

²⁶ I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. ²⁷ But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie — just as it has taught you, abide in him.

Thus we have witness from Jesus, Paul, John, and the author of Hebrews

suggesting that in some sense new covenant believers are taught by God, Christ, and the Spirit, and have no need for human teachers (including elders).

Now it would be wrong to infer that these passages contradict all the passages we studied in previous lessons. Nevertheless, we likewise should not let those previously studied passages negate the force of what we are reading here.

1. How should the six passages above (and especially Matthew 23:8–12) qualify our understanding of biblical eldership? What might result from failing to give these passages their due force?

· **ANSWER.** *These passages should first impress upon us that, while elders are called to a special teaching role within the church, they are by no means the only teachers in the church. If a church fails to grasp this, then the “laity” will become merely passive recipients of teaching rather than recipients of teaching who then actively engage in teaching and admonishing themselves. This could result in parents becoming overly dependent on the church to provide spiritual instruction to their children, for example. These passages ought also to relativize the honor a church shows to its leaders. In no way should a church ascribe a role or authority to its leaders which in any way threatens to diminish their respect for and reliance upon God. A church can easily become overly dependent upon its leaders, as we will stress below.*

§ AN “EVERY-MEMBER MINISTRY”

Therefore in studying biblical eldership and highlighting its importance, we must not neglect the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. 1 Peter 2:9 is typically mentioned in this regard, and rightly so, but notice also a passage that comes later in the same letter.

1 Peter 2:9

⁹ But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his

marvelous light.

1 Peter 4:10–11

¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

The priesthood of all believers does not solely relate to the status of all believers but also to their function. Whereas the old covenant priests were to relate directly to God and minister to the people on behalf of God, in the new covenant we are all “stewards of God’s varied grace” and are all called to serve each other. This is made very clear in Paul’s extended illustration of this point in 1 Corinthians 12:4–27.

1 Corinthians 12:4–27

⁴ Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ⁸ For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. ¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to drink of one Spirit. ¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And

if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell?¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be?²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”²² On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,²³ and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty,²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it,²⁵ that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

2. How does this vision of an “every-member ministry” as Strauch calls it, inform your own church’s understanding and communication of both service and leadership? In your church are elders part of the body or in effect separate from the body?

Immediately after providing qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1–13) it is significant that Paul then calls the Church, and not the elders or leaders the “pillar and buttress of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:14–15

¹⁴ I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

It is often pointed out that Paul’s letters are mostly written to entire

congregations, and even those letters which address individuals have a wider audience in view (see, for example, the plural pronouns in 1 Timothy 6:21; 2 Timothy 4:22; Titus 3:15). Therefore, every member is responsible for the doctrine and ministry of the church even if the elders bear a particular responsibility.

The ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members in the activity of worship toward God, nurture toward each other and witness toward the world. Internal structures for church governance are not the main ministry of the church, but are the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of ministry.²⁶

🔗 ELDERS AS MOBILIZERS

The preceding two sections lead us to the conclusion that elders ought to govern and teach in such a way that the entire congregation is equipped and energized for ministry. This is, in fact, what Ephesians 4:11–12 plainly states — a passage that is vitally important to our understanding of the role of elders in the local church.

Ephesians 4:11–12

¹¹ And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, ¹² to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. . . .

Given that elders are called both to shepherd the flock and teach the Word of God, the “shepherds and teachers” (which are grammatically conjoined in such a way that “shepherd-teachers” may be a better English translation) can legitimately be identified as the elders of the church in Ephesus. The elders are to equip the saints for the work of ministry.

So who does the work of the church? Not only the elders and deacons. Every member does.

The equipping role that elders should fill is expressed in tangible terms in 1 Timothy when Paul describes the gifting of Timothy for ministry through the

26 John Piper, Biblical Eldership Seminar Notes, accessed online at desiringGod.org.

hands (and prayer) of the elders.

1 Timothy 4:11

" Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Merkle reflects on this task of training that is entrusted to the elders:

The role of the elder as teacher is important, not just for the health of the church in the present, but also for the growth of the church in the future. As a result, it is not enough for the elders simply to be teachers; they also must be purposefully equipping the next generation of elders to minister alongside them or to plant new churches in the community. Too often I have witnessed pastors who preach and teach year after year but, when all is said and done, they have effectively trained and equipped nobody to take their place. It is a sign of an unhealthy church if there is no one in the congregation who can step in the gap and fill the pulpit whenever the pastor is gone. Biblical eldership includes training others to do the task of preaching and teaching. . . .

The task of raising up new leaders in the church does not belong primarily to Bible colleges or seminaries. It is the task of the elders to identify those young (or not so young) men who will be faithful to carry on the gospel message. Unfortunately, pastors are either too busy or too insecure to mentor and disciple other gifted men in the church. Thus, this role of the elder is perhaps the most neglected and therefore the one that must be emphasized in the local church.²⁷

While Merkle's reflections are geared specifically to the training of future elders and leaders, his reflections are relevant to the elders' task of training the entire congregation as well.

3. Do you agree with Merkle that the training role of elders might be the most neglected one in American churches today? How are the elders in your church doing in this area of their ministry?

A church without godly leaders is an endangered church. And a church that does

27 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 93–94.

*not train leaders is an unfaithful church. God gives leaders to his churches for the maturity, unity, and soundness of each local congregation. Without godly, faithful, replicating leadership, churches suffer deeply.*²⁸

REQUIRED READING

Biblical Eldership, pages 109–117 (last part of Chapter 6)

- ▷ Start reading at “Eldership Best Harmonizes With and Promotes the True Nature of the New Testament Church.”

- 4. In your church, who is responsible for leading in worship, administering the Lord’s Supper, pronouncing the blessing, preaching, and baptizing? If these activities are performed by ordained clergymen alone, would you agree with Strauch that this is “dangerously close to the sacramental concept of ordination” (112)? Why or why not?

Sadly it is a reality that in many local churches, even evangelical ones, 20% of the members or attenders do 80% of the ministry. This plague is endemic in the American church and reflects a pervasive “spectator mentality” that many Christians have. Within this mentality being involved at church is limited to attending Sunday morning services and other events during which churchgoers are entertained and enlightened, as if they were attending a sporting event or the theater. If any contribution is made to the church, it is primarily conceived of in the form of money, so that church workers are paid to do ministry and the rest of the church is released from this “burden.” What is sad about this state of affairs is that the apathy or incompetence of the vast majority of the congregation is a direct reflection of the leadership’s failure to train and mobilize the saints for the work of ministry.

²⁸ Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 11.

5. What percentage of your church's congregation is involved in active ministry of some kind? If the percentage is relatively low, to what do you attribute this? Does the lack of congregational ministry reflect a deficiency in the leadership?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ John Piper, "Why the Saints Minister to the Body," an online sermon at desiringGod.org
- ▷ Garrett Kell, "Raising Up Elders: Four Foundational Principles," an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Garrett Kell, "Four Ways to Equip New Elders," an online article at 9marks.org

Watch Yourself

7

Elders Serve as Examples

§ INTRODUCTION

During his earthly ministry, not only did the Lord Jesus lead, teach, and equip his disciples, he also perfectly modeled a life of obedience to God. In fact, Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and the training of his disciples would have been totally undone if he had not lived a sinless life.

Elders are sinful men who will inevitably make mistakes and need to ask for forgiveness. However, like Jesus, elders are to serve as examples for those they are leading. This task of modeling Christlikeness is not optional; it is an essential and indispensable aspect of the elders' calling.

Therefore this lesson will examine the biblical exhortation to elders to watch themselves. Elders must be ever vigilant not only over the congregation but also over each other and themselves.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- relate the Pauline theme of imitation to the work of elders.
- describe how the Miletus speech of Acts 20 develops the theme of imitation.
- integrate an emphasis on joy (and Christian hedonism) into an understanding of an elder's leadership.



The theme of imitation in Paul is well-known and widely attested. Paul summarizes his basic exhortation within this theme to all believers in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

The following five passages are some of the key texts in the theme of Pauline imitation. As you ponder these passages, underline all the material related to the specific character traits or activities that Paul commends for imitation.

1 Corinthians 4:6–17

⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! ⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

¹⁴ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them

everywhere in every church.

1 Corinthians 10:32–11:1

³² *Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,*
³³ *just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. ^{11:} Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*

Philippians 3:12–17

¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained. ¹⁷ Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.*

1 Thessalonians 1:4–7

⁴ *For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you,*
⁵ *because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶ And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷ so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia.*

2 Thessalonians 3:6–13

⁶ *Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. ⁹ It was not*

because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. ¹⁰ *For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.* ¹¹ *For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.* ¹² *Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.* ¹³ *As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.*

1. Review the material you underlined and then record a summary list of character traits and activities that Paul commends for imitation. Include textual references.

- ▷ humility (1 Cor 4:6–7)
- ▷ hard work (1 Cor 4:12)
- ▷ blessing when reviled (1 Cor 4:12)
- ▷ enduring persecution (1 Cor 4:12)
- ▷ entreating when slandered (1 Cor 4:13)
- ▷ seeking the interests of others (1 Cor 10:33)
- ▷ single-minded focus and perseverance (Phil 3:12–14)
- ▷ a right reception of the word with joy (1 Thess 4:5–6)
- ▷ industry (2 Thess 3:6–12)
- ▷ persistence in doing good (2 Thess 3:13)

A question to ask here is whether elders ought to provide an example in all these character traits and activities just as Paul does. Can elders say with Paul, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ”? Can you legitimately say this to another believer?

PAY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO YOURSELVES

In Lesson 5 we saw that Paul, Timothy, and Titus, though technically not elders, nevertheless provide a model for elders to follow with regard to their teaching ministry. In a similar way, Paul, Timothy, and Titus also model for today’s elders a commendable life of faith. We have already considered some of the notable passages in which Paul urges believers to imitate his conduct. Now we will

briefly consider the same theme in the lives of Timothy and Titus.

¹ Timothy 4:12, 15–16

¹² *Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. . . .*

¹⁵ *Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.* ¹⁶ *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

Titus 2:7–8

⁷ *Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity,* ⁸ *and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us.*

This theme can also be observed in Hebrews, but from the perspective of the congregation:

Hebrews 13:7

⁷ *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.*

Finally, we may return to Paul's Miletus speech in Acts 20 to examine this passage once more, this time from the angle of imitation.

Acts ^{20:17–21}, ^{28–35}

¹⁷ *Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.* ¹⁸ *And when they came to him, he said to them: "You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, ²¹ testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .*

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. ³¹ Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. ³² And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. ³³ I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. ³⁴ You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities and to those who were with me. ³⁵ In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

John Piper makes an observation about the opening words of verse 28:

Verse 28 starts, "Take heed to yourselves." . . .

It's not surprising that Paul says this first, is it? He spent half his message talking about his own life and work. The point was: it matters what kind of person the elder is, not just what he believes. So the first command to the elders is to watch over themselves. Robert Murray McCheyne said, "What my people need most from me is my personal holiness." I think Paul agrees. That's why it comes first: "Elders, take heed to yourselves. Your first duty to the church is to be a certain kind of person."²⁹

²⁹ John Piper, "Watch Out for the Wolves Within," accessed online at desiringGod.org.

2. Why is it so important for an elder to be able not only to teach but also to serve as an example of godliness? Support your answer with textual references from the four passages in this section.

GOVERN JOYFULLY

The subtitle of this course is *Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock*. This subtitle recognizes that good elders must pursue their joy in God through their calling as elders. If an elder governs and teaches without a heart that is filled with love for the people he serves, then ultimately his leadership will be draining and ineffective, and will not bring glory to God as it should. Thus the joyful inner

disposition of the elder is essential to his ministry in the church.

This principle is seen most clearly in 1 Peter 5:1–5.

1 Peter 5:1–5

¹ 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; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Note the emphasis in this passage on the manner in which elders ought to shepherd the flock: “willingly”, “eagerly”, and as “examples to the flock”. John Piper comments on this passage:

“God loves a cheerful pastor.” Notice how hedonistic these admonitions are. Peter does not admonish pastors to simply do their work, come what may. Perseverance through the hard times is good. It is essential! But it is not all that is commanded of pastors. We are commanded to enjoy our work!

Peter condemns two motives. One is “compulsion.” Don’t do your work under constraint. This means the impulse should come gladly from within, not oppressively from without. Parental pressure, congregational expectations, fear of failure or divine censure — these are not good motives for staying in the pastoral ministry. There should be an inner willingness. We should want to do the ministry. It should be our joy. Joy in ministry is a duty — a light burden and an easy yoke.

The other motive Peter condemns is the desire for money (“not for shameful gain, but eagerly”). If money is the motive, your joy comes not from the ministry, but from the stuff you can buy with your salary. This is what Lewis calls mercenary. The ‘eagerness’ of ministry should not come from the extrinsic reward of money, but from the intrinsic reward of seeing God’s grace flow through you to others. . . .

So the command of the apostle Peter is to pursue joy in the ministry. It is not optional. It is not a mere unexpected result. It is a duty! To say that you are indifferent to what the apostle commands you to experience is to be indifferent to

the will of God. And that is sin.

Phillips Brooks, an Episcopalian pastor in Boston a hundred years ago, caught the spirit of Peter's counsel to pastors:

I think, again, that it is essential to the preacher's success that he should thoroughly enjoy his work. I mean in the actual doing of it, and not only in its idea. No man to whom the details of his task are repulsive can do his task well constantly, however full he may be of its spirit. He may make one bold dash at it and carry it over all his disgusts, but he cannot work on at it year after year, day after day. Therefore, count it not merely a perfectly legitimate pleasure, count it an essential element of your power, if you can feel a simple delight in what you have to do as a minister, in the fervor of writing, in the glow of speaking, in standing before men and moving them, in contact with the young. The more thoroughly you enjoy it, the better you will do it all.³⁰

This may also be why the first elder qualification Paul lists in 1 Timothy 3 is that a prospective elder should aspire to the office and desire the task.

1 Timothy 3:1

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

John Piper offers a clarification on aspiration:

In order to find reliable men to serve as elders, the first thing we need to look for is men who desire this "noble task." We want men who have a heart for it, who "aspire to the office." This, in my experience, is not as straightforward as it sounds. Some men may "want the office," but their wanting is really lust for power, and so they are not fit. Conversely, some men who are fit for the office think that wanting it shows pride, ungodly ambition, or impoliteness.³¹

Not only is the elder commanded to pursue his own joy, but he must pursue his own joy in the joy of his beloved brothers. Paul describes his ministry as one that works for the joy of others.

2 Corinthians 1:24

²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your

³⁰ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (revised edition; Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2011), 127–128.

³¹ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 51.

joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

Philippians 1:24–26

²⁴ *But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.*

²⁵ *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,* ²⁶ *so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

Thus Piper declares:

*The elders exist for the joy of the church. They should never forget that. If there's an unhappy church, something's wrong with the elders.*³²

This same issue is expressed from the perspective of the congregation in Hebrews 13:17:

Hebrews 13:17

¹⁷ *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.*

3. Why would it be of no advantage to the congregation if the elders kept their watch without joy? In other words, it would obviously be of no advantage to the elders or leaders to serve with groaning, but why would this also be of no advantage to the church?

³² John Piper, “Biblical Eldership Lecture 1a,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.



Biblical Eldership, pages 239–252 (Chapter 11)

4. After carefully reading Strauch's exposition of the three adverbial contrasts that indicate the wrong and right ways to shepherd (pages 245–248), what was one thing you learned or that was a helpful reminder? Record your thoughts below.

5. What does 1 Peter 5:4 (“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”) contribute to our understanding of biblical eldership?

The further reading for this lesson is Strauch's exposition of Hebrews 13:17.

🔗 FURTHER READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 265–273 (Chapter 13)

🔗 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ John Piper, “How Elder-Shepherds Prepare to Meet the Chief Shepherd,” an online sermon at desiringGod.org
- ▷ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Chapters 8, 24, 27

A Family Man

8

Elder Qualifications in the Home

§ INTRODUCTION

Thus far we have examined the biblical precedent for elders governing each local church (Lesson 3) and the various roles and responsibilities that elders bear (Lessons 4–7). Now we must turn our attention to what kind of men qualify to fulfill these roles and responsibilities.

What kind of man will understand the authority that God has delegated to him, all the while being mindful that he himself is a man under authority? What kind of man does God intend to govern his people and shepherd his flock? What kind of man will teach effectively, be able to equip and mobilize others, and serve as a compelling example?

It is vital to comprehend that the elder qualifications found in Scripture are not arbitrary, oppressive, or unrealistic. Rather they are intended to be used in evaluating whether a man may carry out the office of elder faithfully and fruitfully. When viewed in this way the biblical qualifications for eldership can be seen as an expression of God’s love and concern for prospective elders and his Church.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- explain why 1 Timothy 2:12 prohibits a woman from becoming an elder.
- interpret the qualification that an elder must be “the husband of one wife.”
- list potential parallels between parenting children and shepherding a church.



A basic qualification for an elder is that he must be a man. We are well aware that this is a contentious and debated assertion, but we believe that there is clear and substantial biblical support for it. Unfortunately this course does not have the scope to ground this assertion in much detail. That must be the aim of other resources, and there are many good ones. (See the list of additional resources at the end of this lesson.) Therefore this section will provide a brief argument for male eldership here, and the required reading will go into further detail.

A straightforward reading of Titus 1:5–6 and 1 Timothy 3:1–5 indicates that an elder must be a man, since it is assumed that he is a husband and father.

Titus 1:5–6

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

1 Timothy 3:1–5

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

Furthermore, it is likely that 1 Timothy 2:12 teaches that a woman is not to be an elder.

1 Timothy 2:11–14

¹¹ Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. ¹² I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. ¹³ For Adam was formed first, then

Eve; ¹⁴ and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor.

Consider John Piper's exegesis of this verse.

[I]t's not likely that Paul is saying in 1 Timothy 2:12 that every kind of teaching is forbidden to women [given the examples of Eunice and Lois in 2 Timothy 3:14, and Priscilla, in Acts 18:26]. There are examples of them teaching younger women [Titus 2:3-5], teaching children, and in some way teaming up with their husbands to give private instruction when someone is confused or uninformed like Apollos [Acts 18:26]. Those are just some examples. Is it possible to generalize, then, about what Paul does have in mind here when he says, "I do not permit a woman to teach"? I think the safest thing to do is let the next phrase guide us. The next phrase is, ". . . or exercise authority over men." "I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over men."

Instead of letting the word "teach" mean anything we want it to mean or think it might mean, it's safer to say, it probably means a kind of teaching that somehow relates to authority. Teach and exercise authority go together. So at least one general thing we can say about women teaching is that Paul forbids it when it is part of the exercise of authority over men.

That leads us to [another] question, namely, what is this "authority" referred to in verse 12?

The key that unlocks this door is a very interesting observation. When you read the rest of 1 Timothy about the role of elders in the church, what you find is that the elders had two basic responsibilities: they were to govern and they were to teach. You can see this in the qualifications of 3:1-7, but the easiest place to see it is in 5:17, "Let the elders who rule [or govern] well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching."

Elders rule or govern, and elders teach or preach. Back in Acts 20:28, you may recall, the elders in the church at Ephesus were called by the Holy Spirit and made "overseers" and charged with "pasturing" or feeding the flock, that is, teaching the whole counsel of God.

I don't think it's coincidental that what Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:12 is that he does not permit a woman to teach and exercise authority over men. He is saying in essence: I do not permit women to fill the office of elder in the church. The elders are charged with the leadership and instruction of the church. That's a summary of their job. So when Paul puts those two things together and says, "I do not permit a

woman to teach or exercise authority,” the most natural sense is, ‘I do not permit a woman to assume the office of elder in the church.’³³

1. From what you have studied thus far, does Piper’s argument ring true? Why or why not? What lingering questions do you have (if any) concerning this question?

Some argue that Paul’s prohibition 1 Timothy was limited only to the church in Ephesus and does not have any enduring application. Again, though debated, the way in which Paul grounds his practice in the creation order (1 Timothy 2:13–14) clearly points to God’s complementary design at creation and therefore to universal application.

A ONE-WOMAN KIND OF MAN

One may notice that after the general qualification that an elder must be “above reproach,” the next qualification listed in both Titus 1:6 and 1 Timothy 3:2 is that an elder must be “the husband of one wife.”

Titus 1:5–6

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

1 Timothy 3:1–2

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach. . . .

The Greek is μιᾶς γυναῖκος ἀνὴρ (*mias gunaikos anēr*), which can be literally

³³ John Piper, “Manhood, Womanhood, and the Freedom to Minister,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

rendered as “a one-woman man.” But what does this phrase mean? Does it mean that all elders must be married? Benjamin Merkle explains why this is not a good interpretation of the phrase:

This interpretation should be rejected for the following reasons. First, the focus of the phrase is not that a man is married but that he is faithful to his “one” wife. The Greek literally reads, “one-woman man,” with emphasis placed on the first word, “one.” Second, Paul clearly teaches that singleness has many advantages over being married. In 1 Corinthians, Paul even encourages singleness, explaining how those who are not married are able to serve the Lord with undivided attention (7:32–35). Third, Paul could have written that an elder must be a man who has a wife (which is different from saying he must be a “one-woman man”). Fourth, this qualification would eliminate Paul, Timothy, and the Lord Jesus Himself from being eligible to serve as elders. Fifth, to be consistent, we would have to require men to have more than one child since Paul indicates that a potential elder must manage his “children” (plural) well. Rather, this phrase should be understood as merely reflecting the common situation of the time because most people were married. It was simply the norm that men married, and there was no need to highlight the exception.³⁴

Another possible interpretation is that this requirement should be understood solely as prohibiting a man from being an elder if he is an polygamist. Again, this interpretation is probably incorrect. Note a similar phrase that Paul uses in 1 Timothy to describe a widow worthy of financial support from the church.

¹ Timothy 5:9–10

⁹ *Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband [literally, “a one-man woman”]*
¹⁰ *and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work.*

If the phrase “one-woman man” only indicates that an elder must not be a polygamist, then the phrase “one-man woman” should indicate that a supported widow must not be a polyandrist. But polyandry (having more than one husband) was so strongly rejected by both first-century Jews and Romans that

³⁴ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 124–125.

it seems unlikely that this qualification would have to be spelled out by Paul in 1 Timothy 5:9. Rather the context seems to indicate that a widow who has been a “one-man woman” is a woman who was faithfully devoted to her husband while he was alive. Sexual fidelity is in view; monogamy is assumed.

Therefore the most likely interpretation of “one-woman man” is that an elder must be faithful to his wife in a monogamous relationship. This would obviously exclude men who are polygamists, promiscuous, or who commit homosexual acts. Since we have already argued that this qualification does not necessarily exclude single men, perhaps it is best to understand this qualification as designating men who conduct themselves with sexual purity and fidelity. Elders are to be one-woman kind of men, even if they currently are unmarried.

2. Although perhaps a matter for speculation, why do you suppose that this qualification (“the husband of one wife”) comes first in each list after the qualification “above reproach”?

FATHER TO A FAMILY AND A FLOCK

We then come to those elder qualifications that deal with the elder’s quality as a father.

¹ Timothy 3:1–7

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his

children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Titus 1:5–9

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ 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.

There are lots of questions that could be asked here, a prominent one being whether or not Titus 1:6 requires that an elder's children must be Christians as the ESV suggests ("his children are believers"). The Greek term is a form of the word πιστός (*pistos*), which could also be translated as "faithful." Although there can be reasonable differences on this matter of interpretation, the perspective that this course (as well as a number of modern translations, including the NET, HCSB, and NKJV) adopts is that this requirement refers to the general conduct of an elder's children and not to their eternal state. There are at least three good reasons to adopt this interpretation.

First, the clause "his children are *pista*" (Titus 1:6) parallels the idea in 1 Timothy 3:4 that an elder's children are "submissive." It is possible for a child to submit to parental authority without saving faith, so this parallel suggests that "faithfulness" rather than "belief" is in view. Second, the subsequent clause in Titus 1:6, "not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination," likely explicates what is meant by "his children are faithful." Debauchery or insubordination would imply that a father is not managing his own household well, but a child's failure to believe the gospel cannot always be

traced to a deficiency in parenting. Finally, knowing that faith is a gift, it seems unreasonable to require an elder's children to be believers if his own godly parenting is no guarantee of their faith.

For these reasons it seems as if the requirement is that an elder's children must not be wild or defiant to such a degree that it calls into question the elder's ability or effort as a father. Simply put, an elder must be a good dad.

*What you're looking for as a church when you assess a man for the office of elder /pastor is evidences in his children and in his marriage that he is a good, loving, strong, organized, and thoughtful manager. You want to see that he knows how to both bless, love, kiss and hug a child as well as discipline a child so that they learn appropriate reverence and obedience.*³⁵

Of course it is also important how an elder achieves the compliance of his children. Are his children freely and lovingly respectful, or are they cowed into submission?

*A godly father does not seek to crush the spirit of his children, forcing them into submission by harsh discipline. Rather, he relates to them with dignity and seeks to nurture their hearts.*³⁶

There are many more aspects of an elder's parenting that could be discussed. A helpful place to start would be to identify the many ways in which an elder's task is similar to a father's. Recognizing the parallels that run between these ministries could prove useful in understanding the biblical qualifications expressed in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 and Titus 1:6.

35 John Piper, "Why Does Having Disobedient Children Unfit a Man for Church Leadership?," accessed online at desiringGod.org.

36 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 114.

3. List as many similarities as you can think of between how the Bible describes the role of a father and how the Bible describes the role of an elder. [Hint: Look on desiringGod.org for a conference message by D.A. Carson titled “The Pastor as Father to His Family and Flock.”]



REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 51–66 (Chapter 3)

4. Strauch claims that “those who try to justify women elders find little help from the examples and teachings of Jesus and the Twelve” (55). What support does he offer for this statement?

Consider 1 Corinthians 11:2–16. Underline all the support that Paul provides for his instructions concerning headship and submission.

1 Corinthians 11:2–16

² Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you. ³ But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.

⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head, ⁵ but every wife who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, since it is the same as if her head were shaven. ⁶ For if a wife will not cover her head, then she should cut her hair short. But since it is disgraceful for a wife to cut off her hair or shave her head, let her cover her head. ⁷ For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. ⁹ Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ That is why a wife ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. ¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; ¹² for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears

long hair it is a disgrace for him,¹⁵ but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.¹⁶ If anyone is inclined to be contentious, we have no such practice, nor do the churches of God.

Strauch claims that 1 Corinthians 11:2–16 is “a superb example of how Paul supports his instruction on headship and submission with weighty theological and biblical reasons rather than with cultural-social patterns or adaptation to unique circumstances.”³⁷

Bruce Winter, however, in his book *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* makes the case that cultural context should be included in our interpretation. He notes that “a woman whose hair was cropped or shorn had been publicly humiliated as an adulteress,”³⁸ and that “if it was shameful [at that time] for a wife to be shorn or shaven, then the only alternative was to wear the marriage veil.”³⁹

5. Based on your reading of 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, do you agree with Strauch? Why or why not? Do you think that Winter’s inclusion of cultural context in his interpretation is appropriate or helpful? Why?

The further reading for this lesson is Strauch’s exposition of three elder qualifications related to an elder’s marriage and family. Please read these sections if you are interested in more detailed commentary on these qualifications.

FURTHER READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 189–193, 199–200, 229–232

- Read the section entitled “The Husband of One Wife.”
- Read the section entitled “A Man Who Manages His Household Well.”
- Read the section entitled “Having Children Who Believe.”

³⁷ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 47.

³⁸ Bruce W. Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: The Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

³⁹ Winter, *After Paul*, 133.

..... § ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, Questions 16–20
- ▷ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Chapters 10, 16
- ▷ Bruce Ware, “Why Is Defending Male Headship Important for Church Health?” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, Chapter 15

Above Reproach

9

Elder Qualifications in the World

§ INTRODUCTION

Hebrews 12:14 exhorts all Christians to “strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” The holiness mentioned in this verse is not the holiness we have in our initial justification when we are first united to Christ. Rather, this holiness is the holiness that is the result of progressive sanctification, the product of the Spirit’s work in our life.

John Piper comments on holiness of this kind,

There is a faith-sustained holiness that Paul wants his converts to have on the day of Christ — the day of his return, when the dead in Christ will be raised. This holiness (which he also calls “blamelessness” and “guiltlessness” and “being above reproach” and “purity”) is certain through God’s faithfulness, contingent on persevering faith, and dependent on human agency.⁴⁰

To this description Piper could have added “and should be exemplified by a local church’s elders.” As we have already seen, elders are to serve as examples of Christian maturity and holiness. In this lesson we will continue to consider this function of biblical eldership by studying the remaining elder qualifications listed in 1 Timothy and Titus.

⁴⁰ John Piper, “Will We Arrive Blameless on the Day of Christ?” an online article at desiringGod.org.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ explain why being “above reproach” might introduce each list of elder qualifications.
- ▷ describe what is meant by elder qualifications of particular interest to the student.
- ▷ discuss the qualities of spiritual leadership.



In both lists of elder qualifications the elder's reputation is highlighted.

¹ Timothy 3:1–7

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Titus 1:5–9

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ 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.

In assessing a prospective elder's reputation it is important to ask unbelievers who are familiar with the elder about his character.

“Outsiders,” or non-Christians, often seem to be better judges of character than those in the church. Neighbors, coworkers, or relatives may actually spend more

time with the person than his fellow church members.⁴¹

Thus, one reason why an elder “must be well thought of by outsiders” is that these outsiders might have a more accurate view of the elder’s true character than what can be seen by those within the Church. Yet there are additional reasons why an elder’s public reputation is important. Consider the following passages and underline all the material that concerns the world’s perception of Christians.

1 Timothy 2:1–4

¹ First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ² for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³ This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴ who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Titus 2:1–14

¹ But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine. ² Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. ³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. ⁶ Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled. ⁷ Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, ⁸ and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us. ⁹ Bondservants are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, ¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present

41 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 113.

age,¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

1. Can you discern any relation between 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Titus 1:5–9, 1 Timothy 2:1–4, and Titus 2:1–14? In other words, do the latter two passages clarify at all why an elder’s reputation might be highlighted in the former two passages?

6 QUALITY QUALIFICATIONS

We now turn to a consideration of the elder qualifications that pertain to a man’s overall integrity and character, both within his family and within the wider world. It is important to take note of what is included in the relevant lists in 1 Timothy and Titus, and to also take note of what is not included.

*Holding a seminary degree does not make a person morally qualified to be an elder. Churches need to be concerned about the moral life of a potential elder more than the institution a person attended.*⁴²

Here are the passages once again:

1 Timothy 3:1–7

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard,

⁴² Merkle, *40 Questions*, 122.

not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Titus 1:5-9

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ 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.

The qualifications we have not yet considered in some way are listed in the table below. Those qualifications that are found in both lists in identical form are underlined with a solid line. Those qualifications that seem to have a close conceptual parallel are underlined with a dashed line.

1 Timothy 3:2–3

sober-minded

self-controlled

respectable

hospitable

not a drunkard

not violent

gentle

not quarrelsome

not a lover of money

Titus 1:7–8

not arrogant

not quick-tempered

not a drunkard

not violent

not greedy for gain

hospitable

a lover of good

self-controlled

upright

holy

disciplined

2. Of these qualifications, choose three that are of special interest to you. Record them below and also write down any questions you have about each qualification.

The list of elder qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9 are not meant to be exhaustive but rather representative. Elsewhere in 1 Timothy Paul exhorts Timothy to pursue other virtues — virtues which should certainly characterize elders as well.

1 Timothy 4:7–8

⁷ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

1 Timothy 6:11–12

¹¹ But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. ¹² Fight

the good fight of the faith. . . .

Phil Newton has some helpful thoughts on these elder qualifications:

Paul is calling upon elders to simply act like genuine Christians. Outside the need for teaching, none of the characteristics should be unusual among Christians — every believer should seek to be “above reproach.” In a sermon, D. A. Carson said, as I recall, “The most remarkable thing about these characteristics is that there is nothing remarkable about them.” They demonstrate that the elder takes seriously the gospel’s intent of sanctifying a people for God’s own possession (Titus 2:14).⁴³

The “ordinary” qualities listed in 1 Timothy and Titus make sense when we consider that elders are called to serve as examples for the congregation. If elders were required to exhibit certain abilities or qualities that were uncommon or extraordinary (such as an unusual degree of intelligence or a magnetic personality), then this could obscure the picture of holiness that the congregation was meant to imitate.

SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

The moral qualities included in the lists of elder qualifications are certainly a prospective elder’s most important characteristics. However, sanctified wisdom would tell us that certain additional qualities are helpful for elders to possess — qualities that render a man a natural leader in addition to being a moral exemplar. These qualities will help the elder to govern, teach, and train other Christians.

John Piper has reflected on this topic and offers his own summary of spiritual leadership:

“I define spiritual leadership as knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God’s methods to get them there in reliance on God’s power. The answer to where God wants people to be is in a spiritual condition and lifestyle that display his glory and honor his name.

Therefore, the goal of spiritual leadership is that people come to know God and to glorify him in all that they do.⁴⁴

Piper continues, “Biblical spiritual leadership contains an inner circle and an

⁴³ Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 55.

⁴⁴ John Piper, *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, 3. Accessed online at the Desiring God website.

outer circle.” (Ibid, 4) Here is how he describes the inner circle:

Let me emphasize again that it is the inner circle that makes the leadership spiritual. All genuine leadership begins in a sense of desperation; knowledge that we are helpless sinners in need of a great Savior. That moves us to listen to God in the Scriptures and cry out to him for help and for insight in prayer. That leads us to trust in God and to hope in his great and precious promises. This frees us for a life of love and service which, in the end, causes people to see and give glory to our Father in heaven.⁴⁵

The elder qualifications we have studied thus far would be manifestations of this “inner circle” of spiritual leadership. The “outer circle”, then, are those qualities that may characterize both spiritual and non-spiritual leaders. Here is John Piper’s list with tidbits from his descriptions of each:

1. Restless: Spiritual leaders have a holy discontentment with the status quo. Non-leaders have inertia that causes them to settle in and makes them very hard to move off of dead center.

2. Optimistic: Spiritual leaders are optimistic not because man is good but because God is in control. . . . Without optimism, restlessness becomes despair.

3. Intense: Leaders must give evidence that the things of the Spirit are intensely real. They cannot do that unless they are intense themselves.

4. Self-Controlled: Spiritual leaders ruthlessly track down bad habits and break them by the power of the Spirit.

5. Thick-Skinned: At least this much is sure in leadership: If you begin to lead others, you will be criticized. No one will be a significant spiritual leader if his aim is to please others and seek their approval.

6. Energetic: Lazy people cannot be leaders. Spiritual leaders “redeem the time.”

7. A Hard Thinker: It is not easy to be a leader of people who can outthink you.

8. Articulate: It is hard to lead others if you cannot state your thoughts clearly and forcefully. Leaders like Paul aim to persuade men, not coerce them.

9. Able to Teach: It is not surprising to me that some of the great leaders at our church have been men who are also significant teachers.

10. A Good Judge of Character: Leaders must know who is fit for what kind

⁴⁵ John Piper, *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, 3. Accessed online at the Desiring God website.

of work. Good leaders have good noses.

11. Tactful: Combined with his judgment of people's character, a leader's tact will enable him to handle delicate negotiations and opposing viewpoints. His choice of words will be astute rather than clumsy.

12. Theologically Oriented: A spiritual leader knows that all of life, down to its smallest detail, has to do with God. If we are to lead people to see and reflect God's glory, we must think theologically about everything.

13. A Dreamer: We must not only be discontent with the present but also dreaming dreams of what could be in the future. . . . Leaders can see the power of God overshadowing the problems of the future.

14. Organized and Efficient: A leader groans in meetings that do not move from premises to conclusions but rather go in irrelevant circles. When something must be done he sees a three-step plan for getting it done and lays it out.

15. Decisive: A leader cannot be paralyzed by indecisiveness. He will take risks rather than do nothing.

16. Perseverant: We live in a day when immediate gratification is usually demanded. That means that very few people excel in the virtue of perseverance. Very few people keep on and keep on in the same ministry when there is significant difficulty.

17. A Lover: What does it profit a man if he gains a great following and loses his wife? . . . What we need today are leaders who are great lovers.

18. Restful: The spiritual leader knows that ultimately the productivity of his labors rests in God and that God can do more while he is asleep than he could do while awake without God.⁴⁶

3. Identify two leadership qualities from Piper's "outer circle" that you find to be particularly interesting or insightful. Record them below with your rationale for choosing them. Then think of two more qualities that could be added to Piper's outer circle of spiritual leadership. Write them below with a short description of each.

⁴⁶ John Piper, *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, 19–43. Accessed online at the Desiring God website.

 REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 67–83 (Chapter 4)

4. What are the three reasons that Strauch gives for why God demands certain qualifications of church elders? Put Strauch's reasons into your own words.

Read the relevant sections in Strauch pertaining to the three virtues you listed in Question 2. These sections will be found in pages 186–202 or 227–238 or both.

5. What did you learn from your reading of Strauch? Did his expositions answer the questions you listed in Question 2?

The two further readings for this lesson cover the remaining elder qualifications in 1 Timothy and Titus.

 FURTHER READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 186–202 (middle of Chapter 9) and pages 227–238 (last part of Chapter 10)

- ▷ Read all the sections you have not read already

 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, Question 15
- ▷ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Chapters 9, 11–12, 14–15, 17–18
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, 96–100

Local Dynamics

10

Elders and the Congregation

§ INTRODUCTION

At the start of this course we explained that contemporary biblical eldership must express biblical principles in wise and contextually appropriate ways. Whereas previous lessons have dealt mostly with the Bible's clear teaching on the necessity of elders, the nature of their work, and their qualifications to serve, this lesson will begin the transition to more pragmatic and less biblically-defined issues.

This does not mean that we are to think less rigorously about or pray less fervently for guidance in these issues. Neither does it mean that we must abandon Scripture and seek wisdom exclusively from other sources. It does mean, however, that we should hold our views on these issues with less conviction, prepared to be charitable toward those who disagree with us and ready to revise our positions if the Bible, other Christians, reason, or experience persuade us.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- discuss in more detail the relationship between elders and the congregation they serve.
- articulate how decision-making will be conducted in his local church.
- defend a specific process for the selection and appointment of elders in his church.



The question of who has the “final say” in church matters is a complicated one. There appears to be two strains of biblical texts that must both be held in harmony.

First, there are those texts that may suggest that elders hold the final human authority. For example, 1 Peter 5:5 and Hebrews 13:17 speak of members of the church “being subject to” or “submitting to” the elders. This seems to imply that elders, provided that they are leading in accordance with God’s will, possess an authority similar to a father’s authority in the family.

1 Peter 5:5

⁵ Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Hebrews 13:17

¹⁷ 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.

This parallel is strengthened by an elder qualification that we have already studied.

1 Timothy 3:4–5

⁴ [An overseer] must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?

If an elder’s governance of the church is akin to a father’s governance of his family, then again, this would imply that elders must be obeyed by the congregation and not vice versa.

The issue is not that cut and dried, however. There is also a line of texts and biblical reasoning that suggests that the congregation has the decisive human

authority. For example, the process of discipline outlined in Matthew 18:15–18 culminates with the entire church. This could indicate that the whole church is finally responsible for church discipline.

Matthew 18:15–18

¹⁵ If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This position is further developed by Paul Alexander:

The New Testament gives the gathered, local congregation final authority in matters of dispute, discipline, doctrine, and membership. Personal disputes are to be handled according to Matt 18:16–18, where the church gathered is the final court of appeal. Disciplining the unrepentant sinner in Corinth fell under the jurisdiction of the gathered congregation according to Paul in 1 Cor 5:1–13, a passage in which elders are not even mentioned. Paul held the whole congregation in Galatia responsible for the doctrinal purity of the gospel preached in their pulpit in Galatians 1:6–9, and tacitly implicates those who want their ears tickled for “gathering to themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires” in 2 Tim 4:3–4. And the re-admission of the disciplined brother in 2 Cor 2:5–8 is urged upon the whole Corinthian congregation, not just the elders. The final authority [is given to] the congregation in these four areas of church life, even within the context of a properly functioning biblical eldership.⁴⁷

It is also favored by Benjamin Merkle:

The New Testament seems to favor a self-governing model for the church. In the early church, many important decisions — such as selecting leaders (Acts 1:23; 6:2–3), sending missionaries (Acts 13:3; 14:26–27), affirming theological positions (Acts 15:22), carrying out church discipline (Matt. 18:17), and performing

⁴⁷ Paul Alexander, “Book Review: Biblical Eldership, by Alexander Strauch,” accessed at <http://www.gmarks.org/books/book-review-biblical-eldership> on December 2, 2013. Used by permission.

excommunication (1 Cor. 5:2) — were the responsibilities of the local congregation. Additional support is found in the fact that Paul's letters to churches were addressed to entire congregations and not just to officeholders in the church. Finally, the priesthood of all believers and the teaching of Jesus also lend evidence in favor of congregationalism.⁴⁸

In response to these observations it could be asked whether the entire congregation could be the context in which church discipline is exercised without thereby implying that the congregation has final authority in this area. Likewise, one could argue that while the entire congregation is responsible for the doctrinal purity of the gospel, the elders bear a special and particular responsibility in this area.

The distinction between those who place emphasis on the elders' authority and those who place emphasis on congregational authority is sometimes referred to by the terms "elder-ruled churches" and "elder-led churches," respectively. This may not be a hard and fast distinction, however, as many elder-ruled churches actively seek and cultivate congregational participation, and many elder-led churches respect and submit to the leadership of their elders.

In the end, it is perhaps sufficient to reiterate that elders do have a real God-given authority that does not negate or diminish the active participation and accountability of the entire congregation for discipline and doctrinal purity.

1. Which position ("elder rule" or "elder leadership") is more compelling to you? Which position is adopted by your church's leadership, and what practical differences does this make?

48 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 21.

§ DECISION-MAKING IN THE CHURCH

One area in which elder-ruled and elder-led churches may differ is in how church decisions are confirmed. Should elders consult with the congregation but then make and announce final decisions themselves? Or should elders consult with each other and then put recommendations to the congregation, upon which the congregation then votes or otherwise acts?

This is another gray area in which the Bible may offer some guidelines but no explicit instructions.

The most detailed account of a decision-making process in the Church is recorded in Acts 15, the so-called Apostolic Council. Notice, however, that elders and the “whole church” also feature in this discussion.

The council is prompted when Paul and Barnabas are appointed (by whom?) to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders there. The text then states that the apostles and elders gathered to consider this matter.

Acts 15:1–6

¹ But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. ³ So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. ⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. ⁵ But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

⁶ The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

After those gathered reach a consensus recommendation, the narrative

continues,

Acts 15:22–27

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. ²⁴ Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, ²⁵ it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. . . .”

The passage is somewhat vague on the question of who exactly makes the decision. Was the decision agreed upon by the apostles and elders with secondary approval from the whole church? Or is the decision presented as the mutual consensus of the apostles, elders, and the wider church?

Whatever arguments may be made concerning Acts 15:22–27, Acts 16:4 seems to present the decision as that of the apostles and elders.

Acts 16:4

⁴ As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

The biblical description of this process does not intend to answer our questions concerning the particulars of decision-making in the church. Furthermore, the unique redemptive-historical features of this episode make it difficult to see it as providing a prescriptive example for later church practice.

2. How are important decisions made in your church? What role do the elders play, and what role does the congregation play? How would you

justify the roles of each in the decision-making process of your local church?

§ THE SELECTION AND APPOINTMENT OF ELDERS

One particular matter for decision-making within the local church is in the selection and appointment of new elders. Once again, there are different ways in which this process can be carried out.

In seeking relevant biblical passages that address this issue, one might turn to Acts 14:21–23:

Acts 14:21–23

²¹ When [Paul and Barnabas] had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

However, we encounter two problems here. First, is the appointment of elders a function of Paul (and Barnabas?) being an apostle or pioneer church planter? Can their example here be legitimately transferred to elders within an established church? Second, when the text mentions the appointment of elders does this refer to the entire process of selection, examination, and appointment? Or does it merely refer to the formal ratification of candidates whom the congregation puts forward?

Similar interpretive and hermeneutical challenges are present in Titus 1:5–9, although this text may imply that Titus was to be involved in examination of

elder candidates.

Titus 1:5–9

⁵ This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — ⁶ if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. ⁷ For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. ⁹ 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.

Another text to consider on this question is Acts 6:1–6. Notice how the table servants are chosen in this passage:

Acts 6:1–6

¹ Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

Here are Benjamin Merkle's reflections on this issue of selecting and appointing elders:

The assumption is sometimes made that Paul and Barnabas chose the leaders

from among the congregation and then appointed them to their new leadership positions. But based on the pattern found in Acts 6, it is also possible that the respective congregations chose men from among themselves and then Paul and Barnabas “appointed” them as elders publicly. Thus, the pattern in the early church was that the congregation (or a body larger than the apostles) chose the leaders, but the apostles officially recognized and publicly appointed them to their leadership positions.⁴⁹

It is debatable whether Merkle’s assertion in the final sentence of this quotation necessarily follows from the preceding two sentences. What we may conclude with greater confidence is that, if the precise procedure for selecting and appointing elders was vitally important to God, he would have made this issue clearer in his Word. As it is, God *has* left us with clear descriptions of the elders’ tasks and their qualifications. Upon these, then, we must insist.

3. How are elders selected and appointed within your church? Which parts of the process do you consider to be non-negotiable (and biblically warranted), and which parts are the result of thoughtful reflection and prudence?

49 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 39.

We will conclude this section with some further remarks from Benjamin Merkle:

We must remember that one should not be selected for eldership unless he is qualified, and the only way to know whether one is qualified is to examine him. Whether we are convinced that the existing elders should select new elders or we think that is the responsibility of the congregation, somewhere during the selection process, potential elders must be examined. If no examination is made, then we make a mockery of the process. Those who are not qualified should not be appointed as elders.⁵⁰

The best approach is . . . to allow the elders to have a leadership role in the process while, at the same time, allowing the congregation to have a voice in the matter. That is, both the congregation and the elders must be involved in the selection process. The congregation should be involved because the prospective elder will serve the congregation. Thus, the congregation must have a voice in examining and approving the candidates. The elders must be involved because they are the spiritual leaders of the church. To ignore their insights and opinions would be unwise. Whether the congregation votes or not, the main issue is that the elders get the input of the members. . . . It is entirely possible that some people in the congregation have a greater knowledge of and closer personal relationship with a prospective elder and can offer helpful insight in evaluating the biblical qualifications. But it should be the elders primarily who investigate potential concerns, screening the candidates thoroughly.⁵¹

 REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 277–289 (Chapter 14)

4. In this section Strauch quotes Kenneth O. Gangel, “The key to reproducing leadership is to clearly plan for it.” What is your church’s plan for reproducing leaders and especially elders?

⁵⁰ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 180.

⁵¹ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 202

5. Strauch identifies six elements in the appointment process: desire, qualification, selection, examination, installation, and prayer. Which elements in this process are evident in your church? Which elements may be missing or weak?

The further reading for this lesson is a brief reflection on the relationship between elders and the congregation.

 FURTHER READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 291–295 (Chapter 15)

 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, Questions 4, 29
- ▷ Burk Parsons, “Electing Elders,” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, Chapter 34

Proven Pragmatics

11

Elders in the Modern Church

§ INTRODUCTION

This lesson continues our consideration of pragmatic issues related to biblical eldership. While it would be wrong for local churches to pattern their leadership after business models or secular societies, this does not mean that the exercise of biblical eldership cannot be informed by anything other than biblical interpretation. The three issues that we will cover in this lesson can certainly be informed by “best practices.” Therefore we would encourage you to seek out other churches, if possible, to inquire what has worked for them and why.

§ LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- list attitudes and activities that will promote peace and efficiency within elder meetings.
- evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of having terms of office for elders.
- articulate how elders and deacons should interact within their local church.



In order to govern the church effectively, elders must meet to pray, discuss issues, and make decisions. This much seems clear. It is also imperative that elders think and act biblically.

Emotions and preferences often cloud our thinking and cause us to base our decisions on something other than what is revealed in the Bible. In addressing an issue, we might respond, “We have never done it that way before,” or “But his father was my Sunday school teacher,” or “The Smith family might decide to stop their giving.” While the elders should be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of the congregation, ultimately their convictions based on Scripture should drive their decisions.⁵²

It therefore might be helpful for elders to study Scripture together or to read theological books. This habit could strengthen the elders’ biblical orientation and increase their understanding of God’s Word.

But how should an elder meeting be structured? Who should lead the elders’ meeting, and what procedures should be in place to ensure that the meetings are conducted in an efficient and orderly manner? Local churches should think through these questions but will probably come up with different strategies and techniques. Benjamin Merkle, however, offers a warning worth considering:

Voting is often the quickest way to divide an elder board and therefore should be taken as a last measure. It is better to strive to build consensus. If at first there is no unanimous voice among the elders, the more time (and prayer) may be needed to unify the council. . . . Most of the decisions made by the elders should be unanimous decisions so that all members of the board fully support the decision made.⁵³

Merkle also offers the following advice regarding the resolution of disagreements, which are an unfortunate but unavoidable reality:

Elders have to make difficult decisions. The following advice is offered to help elders

52 Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 180.

53 *Ibid.*, 180.

resolve disagreements.

- 1. Pray much. The elders should regularly pray together as they seek guidance from the Lord.*
 - 2. Put away disputes and arguments. The elders must learn to discuss issues without arguing and fighting.*
 - 3. Pacify anger. The elders must be able to control their emotions and their words.*
 - 4. Practice mutual consideration and humility. The elders must not value their own opinions over those of their fellow elders but must be willing to listen and value the input of others.*
 - 5. Proceed by evaluating every issue biblically. The Bible must be the standard by which decisions are made.*
 - 6. Promote consensus. It is best for the elders to make unanimous decisions so that all the elders give their full support.*
 - 7. Prepare to defer. In most cases where an elder does not agree with the majority, he should be willing to defer to and support the opinion of his fellow elders.*
 - 8. Produce and implement a policy in the case of an impasse. As a last resort, the elders need to have a plan for deciding an issue when one or more elders are not willing to defer.⁵⁴*
1. How are elder meetings conducted within your local church? Do these meetings provide time for fellowship, prayer, study of Scripture, and pastoral care of particular church members? Is there anything that could be changed that would make elder meetings in your church more efficient or productive?

54 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 181–82.

🔗 TERMS OF OFFICE?

Another pragmatic issue to reflect upon is the common practice of term limits for elders.

Benjamin Merkle lays out some potential benefits and drawbacks to this policy:

Since the Bible does not specify the length elders should serve, wisdom is needed to apply biblical principles to this issue. Having specified terms allows many men to serve, avoids overworking the elders, and affords a method of releasing ineffective or unqualified elders. Having an unspecified, or indefinite, term removes the unbiblical distinction between professional and lay elders, retains elders who are effective in their service, and encourages congregations to require that the biblical standards be met.⁵⁵

Timothy Witmer argues strongly against this policy:

Practically speaking, when asked about the advantage of term eldership, the most common answer is that “it enables us to rotate ‘bad’ elders off every three years.” What a noble motive for embracing a structure to guide church government! Of course, the problem is that you also rotate the good elders off every three years as well. . . .

Another problem is that, in most cases, term eldership is based on an artificial number of “spots” that must be filled. . . . This often leads to individuals being pushed forward who may not have the calling, gifts, or desire to serve. How should you go about determining the number of elders that your congregation should have? The answer is that only the men who are gifted, called, and qualified should serve in the offices of the church. This is the number of elders your church should have. No more. No less.

A fundamental problem with term eldership is in the matter of shepherding. Rotating elders on and off can disrupt the continuity of shepherding care. Elders may just have gained the trust of their sheep, and then they rotate off the active service roster.⁵⁶

55 Merkle, *40 Questions*, 180.

56 Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader*, 230–231.

2. In your mind, what are the potential advantages and disadvantages to terms of office for elders? Should term limits only apply to elders who are not financially compensated for their work? If you conclude that term limits are unhelpful on the whole, would you advocate for elder “sabbaticals”? Under what circumstances should an elder “step down” from the office?

6 ELDERS AND DEACONS

This course on biblical eldership does not intend to cover the responsibilities or qualifications for deacons, but it would perhaps be helpful to look over the most explicit passage concerning deacons, 1 Timothy 3:8–13, if only to gain a sharper understanding of eldership. We will consider it here alongside the qualifications for overseers (elders) in the verses that precede it:

1 Timothy 3:1–13

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

⁸ Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not

addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.¹¹ Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.¹² Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.¹³ For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

It is often noted that despite the similarities between elder qualifications and deacon qualifications, there is no deacon qualification corresponding to “able to teach” (cf. 1 Timothy 3:2). That is because the governing and teaching of the local church is the primary responsibility of the elders.

3. How do elders and deacons interact in your local church? How do elders and deacons communicate, and how are practical tasks involving both coordinated? What tasks or responsibilities constitute gray areas in which it is not always clear whether elders or deacons should take the initiative? Are there any ways in which the partnership between elders and deacons in your church can be improved and strengthened?

 REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 124–133 (middle of Chapter 7)

- ▷ Start reading at “They Receive and Administer Money”
- ▷ Stop reading at “Elders of the Gentile Churches”

4. Should elders be responsible for the financial administration of the church? Why or why not?

5. Does the Bible justify interchurch organizations or courts that have authority over the local church? Support your answer.

The further reading for this lesson is an exposition of James 5:14.

 FURTHER READING:

Biblical Eldership, 253–263 (Chapter 12)

 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- ▷ John Piper, “What Did Deacons Do?” an online sermon at desiringGod.org
- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*, Questions 22–25, 30–32, 37
- ▷ Matt Schmucker, “How to Separate Deacon Work from Elder Work,” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Eric Bancroft, “Family Size: Lessons for Large and Small Elder Boards,” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Matt Schmucker, “Disagreements and Differences among Elders,” an online interview at 9marks.org
- ▷ Jonathan Leeman, “Elder Meeting Attitudes,” an online article at 9marks.org
- ▷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, Chapter 35

God's Undershepherds

12

The Importance of Biblical Eldership

§ INTRODUCTION

To conclude this course on biblical eldership, we stress, again, the importance of a local church's elders to its health, growth, and future preservation. Yet we must be wary of the temptation to love the biblical vision of local church eldership more than we love the actual exercise of that ministry in a church full of redeemed sinners.

Jonathan Leeman offers wise counsel that can be easily applied to a vision of what biblical eldership should be:

We can love our vision of what a church should be more than we love the people who comprise it. We can be like the unmarried man who loves the idea of a wife, but who marries a real woman and finds it harder to love her than the idea of her. Or like the mother who loves her dream of the perfect daughter more than the daughter herself.

This is an implicit danger for all of us who have learned much from God-given books and conferences and ministries about "healthy churches." We start loving the idea of a healthy church more than the church God has placed us in . . .

One theologian helped me understand an important aspect of gospel love by distinguishing between giving of yourself and giving yourself. When I give of myself to you, I give you something that I possess like my wisdom, my joy, my goods, or my strengths generally. Of course, I don't really risk losing anything in the process, because I gain praise for such giving. Indeed, I can give all that I have, even my body to the flames, and have not love. When I give myself, however, I don't just give something that I have, I give my whole self. I identify my self with your self. I start

giving attention to your very name and reputation because I view them as united to my own. Any glory that I might have becomes yours, and all the glory that you have is the glory that I most enjoy. It's mine, too!

This is how we should love one another within a church, because this is how Christ has loved us. We don't just embrace one another; we rest the weight of our identities upon one another. We share one another's glories and sorrows. . . . Nothing's business in the church. It's all personal, because the gospel is personal. He died for you, Christian. He died for me. So that we might represent and look like him. (Yes, he remains the final focus of our love for one another, just as his love for us was given so that we might love the Father — the final focus of his love.) If all Christians should love like this, we who are pastors and elders most certainly should.⁵⁷

So let us remember to love the actual church in which we serve, for God will be glorified and the church will be truly cared for when elders love those they govern and teach.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

After completing this lesson, the student should be able to

- ▷ describe what ought to happen when an elder fails in his responsibilities or violates the church's trust.
- ▷ explain why the church is precious and should be cherished.
- ▷ relate biblical eldership once more to the glory of God.

57 Jonathan Leeman, "Love the Church More Than Its Health," an online article at gmarks.org (gmarks.org/journal/love-church-more-its-health). Used by permission.



It is a sad and tragic reality that some Christian elders will fail in their ministry. As ones who are accountable to God for their role and responsibilities, failure is a serious matter.

James 3:1

¹ Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

What ought a church and its elders do when an elder fails? 1 Timothy 5:19–25 addresses this potential situation.

1 Timothy 5:19–25

¹⁹ Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. ²¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. ²² Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. ²³ (No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) ²⁴ The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. ²⁵ So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.

We will study this passage in greater depth as a part of the required reading for this lesson, but for the moment, consider what ought to be done when an elder does not acknowledge his sin or repent of his errors. What may the other elders do in this unfortunate circumstance?

There are situations where an elder may become divisive and because of his pride and selfish ambitions, refuse to step aside. To deal with this potential problem, it is wise for every elder (including present elders) to sign an agreement that if the other

*elders believe he should resign, he will abide by their decision.*⁵⁸

1. What mechanisms does your church have in place to remove an unfit elder from his office if he refuses to resign from his position? What failings would constitute grounds for a public rebuke, and what failings would constitute grounds for an immediate removal from office?

The potential failure of a church's elders calls for prayer, both from the elders and from the congregation.

"In light of all the responsibilities given to spiritual leaders and the congregation, the pastor who is the author of Hebrews asks his readers to pray for him and the other spiritual leaders in the church. "Pray for us," he implores, so that they might conduct themselves honorably as Christians, elders, and leaders [Hebrews 13:18]. . . .

Simply put, then, not only does the church need spiritual leaders, but spiritual leaders also need the church and its prayers. Kent Hughes states this clearly from his years of Christian service.

How different the modern church would be if the majority of its people prayed for its pastors and lay leadership. There would be supernatural suspensions of business-as-usual worship. There would be times of inexplicable visitations from the Holy Spirit. More laypeople would come to grips with the deeper issues of life. The leadership vacuum would evaporate. There would be more conversions.⁵⁹

58 Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 305. Used by permission.

59 Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, 93–94.

§ THE PRECIOUSNESS OF CHURCH

To love the church as he should, an elder may meditate on the preciousness of the bride of Christ.

Ephesians 5:25–30

²⁵ Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶ that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷ so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. ²⁸ In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, ³⁰ because we are members of his body.

One picture that elders should have in their minds as they go about their work is, “I am serving the bride of Christ; I am laboring to remove spots and wrinkles; I am laboring to enhance this glory, this splendor.” And every time [the work] seems to be small and low and nitty-gritty, pause, close your eyes, pray, and say, “Lord, remind me that this body of people I’m serving is more important than the US Navy or the Pentagon or the Senate or the entire House [of Representatives]. This is the bride of Christ.”⁶⁰

Notice the strong emotions that are stirred up when Paul considers that the Church is a virgin betrothed to Christ:

2 Corinthians 11:1–3

¹ I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will

60 John Piper, “Biblical Eldership Lecture 1a,” accessed online at desiringGod.org. The wording is modified slightly.

be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

The preciousness of the Church is also evident from Acts 20:28:

Acts 20:28

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

John Piper reflects on the motivations contained in this verse:

The first incentive for the elders is that the flock they are to serve cost God the blood of his Son. Notice the end of verse 28: “to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son.”

It’s clear that Paul wants the elders to be shocked by this. The argument is plain: if God almighty—sinless and free and high above all things — was willing to shed the blood of his Son for a sinful, messed up, unworthy church, then the shepherds must be willing to pour out blood, sweat, and tears in season and out of season for the flock of God. . . .

An elder who is not willing to pour out blood, sweat, and tears for the faith and holiness of the church of Christ does not know the worth of the blood of the Son of God.

The second incentive Paul gives to the elders is that they have been chosen for this work by God not themselves. Verse 28 says, “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The Holy Spirit chooses who should be the elders in the church.

It’s hard to imagine incentives that are more gigantic, more powerful, and more awesome in scope than these two. The sheep are gathered by the blood of God’s Son. And the shepherds are given by the call of God’s Spirit. How can they not pour themselves out with every ounce of energy and life that they have for the faith and holiness of the church!⁶¹

Other metaphors for the Church could also be pondered. Galatians 4:16–20 portrays the Church as God’s precious children:

Galatians 4:16–20

¹⁶ Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? ¹⁷ They make much of you, but for no good purpose. They want to shut you

61 John Piper, “Watch Out for the Wolves Within,” accessed online at desiringGod.org.

out, that you may make much of them.¹⁸ It is always good to be made much of for a good purpose, and not only when I am present with you,¹⁹ my little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!²⁰ I wish I could be present with you now and change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

2. Do you feel the same passion for your local church as Paul does for his churches? Why or why not? How might you cultivate a deeper love for your local church?

THE GLORY OF GOD IN THE CHURCH

Finally, and briefly, we must remember the astounding place of privilege that the Church occupies in the plan of God. Consider the following verses from Ephesians 3:

Ephesians 3:8–10, 20–21

⁸ To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things,¹⁰ so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. . . .

²⁰ Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

3. How should these verses motivate elders in their labors on behalf of the Church?

 REQUIRED READING:

Biblical Eldership, pages 215–224 (last part of Chapter 9)

- ▷ Start reading at “Protecting an Elder.”

4. Why might 1 Timothy 5:19 be a needed provision for a properly functioning eldership?.

5. What is one new insight you gained from reading Strauch's exposition of 1 Timothy 5:19–25? Record the insight below.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

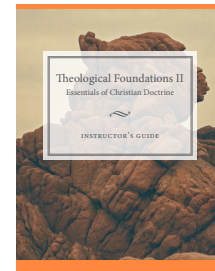
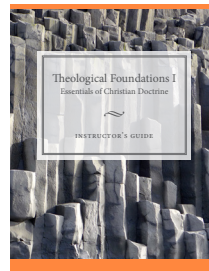
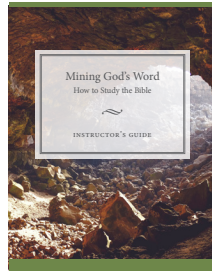
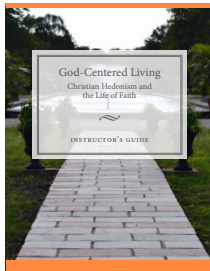
- ▷ Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, Questions 1, 33
- ▷ Phil A. Newton, *Elders in Congregational Life*, Chapters 7 and 8

Shepherds Under God

Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock

Shepherds Under God: Elders Who Joyfully Govern God's Flock is a 12-week course that examines the Bible's teaching on the presence, responsibilities, qualifications, and importance of elders in the local church. The course is primarily designed for the training of current and prospective elders. It aims to refresh and challenge the student's vision of godly church leadership through inductive study of the Word, careful reflection on ministerial practice, and thoughtful interaction with Alexander Strauch's *Biblical Eldership*, the teaching of John Piper, and various other pastors and theologians. The course concludes with a consideration of pragmatic issues, seeking to apply biblical wisdom to contemporary church life.

**ALSO AVAILABLE FROM
BETHLEHEM COLLEGE & SEMINARY PRESS**



 **Bethlehem**
Education in Serious Joy

Bethlehem College & Seminary Press | bcspress.org | bcspress@bcsmn.edu



JOHN PIPER, CHANCELLOR

Spreading a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ by equipping local churches with God-centered, theologically sound resources.