

SHEPHERDING ELDERS

I. The Terms Used When Referring to an “Elder”

- A. “**Presbuteros**” – This word is used to refer to:
 - 1. The oldest of two or more persons (Luke 15:25; John 8:9).
 - 2. A person advanced in age (Acts 2:17).
 - 3. The forefathers in Israel (Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3,5; Heb. 11:2). Many of these were the heads or leaders of tribes and families, as were the seventy who helped Moses (Num. 11:16; Deut. 27:1).
 - 4. Members of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin (Matt. 16:21; 26:47).
 - 5. Those who managed public affairs in various cities (Luke 7:3).
 - 6. Those found qualified and willing to serve as leaders in local churches.
- B. “**Episkopos**” – This word is usually translated “overseer” (KJV: “bishop”) and refers to an elder in the church (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5-9).

II. Significant Facts about Elders in the Church

- A. Elders, under the apostles, were the New Testament church’s primary leaders.
- B. These elders were always men (as in Jesus’ choice of the 12 and Paul’s emphasis in 1 Tim. 2:11-14).
- C. The consistent pattern of the NT was shared oversight and pastoral leadership by a team of men, all regarded as pastors (“shepherds”), who were equal in position, authority and responsibility (Acts 14:23; 15:6,22; 20:17,28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet. 5:1; Jms. 5:14).
- D. There is no distinction in the NT between a “pastor” and an “elder”. They were one and the same person (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-3).
- E. Although elders acted jointly as a team or council of equals, not all were equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience or dedication. So, while retaining the same rank as the other elders, some stood out and were more involved in certain aspects of a church’s leadership (as Peter, James and John among the apostles, or James in the Jerusalem church).
- F. The earliest elders were appointed by apostles (Acts 14:23) or apostolic representatives (Titus 1:5) who laid hands on them as a symbol of approval and commissioning (“ordination”) (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; Titus 1:5).
- G. Elders who did a good job were deemed worthy of financial support (“double honor”) (1 Tim. 5:17-18).

III. The Role and Responsibilities of Elders in the Church

The primary, over-arching responsibility of an elder was to shepherd (“pastor”) and oversee (supervise, watch over) a flock as one entrusted with its welfare (1 Pet. 5:2; Heb. 13:17; Eze. 34:1-16). Faithfully executing this job included the four duties of protecting, leading, feeding and caring for a flock’s many practical needs (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 17ff).

- A. Protecting – especially from false teachers who need to be debated, refuted and rejected (Acts 20:17,28-31a; Titus 1:9-2:1; 3:9-10; Acts 15:6ff). This responsibility also included seeking the lost and straying, disciplining sinners, admonishing improper behavior and attitudes (1 Thes. 5:12) and putting a stop to infighting.
- B. Leading / Governing / Directing / Managing (2 Sam. 5:2; Ps. 78:71-72; 1 Tim. 5:17a; Titus 1:7; Heb. 13:7,17) – This role includes clarifying vision, setting goals, making decisions, motivating to action, giving directions, solving problems, correcting failures and bringing about needed changes.
- C. Feeding / Nourishing / Educating – This focuses on the centrality of preaching and teaching God’s word, ensuring that the whole flock is established in the faith (Eph. 4:11-16), growing in obedience (Matt. 28:20; John 21:15,17; Acts 6:4; 20:27; 1 Tim. 3:2; 4:13; 5:17-18; Titus 1:9) and equipped and ready to perform every kind of good work (Eph. 4:11-12; 2 Tim. 3:16-17).
- D. Caring for Practical Needs – This includes showing compassion, assisting the weak, assisting and praying for the recovery of those who have become weak or sick (Acts 20:35; Jms. 5:14), etc. It may include delegating work to the deacons, who are the church’s ministers of mercy (Acts 6:1-6).

IV. Qualifications of a NT Church Elder

The NT position of “elder” was not open to simply anyone who had been a regular part of the church, had a winsome personality or seminary degree, was senior in years or had even served faithfully in some capacity. Rather, elders were called to meet certain standards (characteristically, not absolutely) and to stand out as examples of spiritual maturity to the rest of the church (1 Pet. 5:3) by:

- A. Being above reproach, blameless; not legitimately accusable of any wrongdoing that can stand up to impartial examination; a man of substantial integrity, purity and dignity (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6).
- B. Being the husband of one wife (“a one-woman man”) (Titus 1:6; 1 Tim. 3:2). This means either that he was (1) married only once (not a polygamist or divorced / widowed and remarried) or (2) simply faithful and devoted to his wife. Many conservative commentators (including John Calvin, Charles Eerdman, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Expositor’s Greek Testament, Gene Getz, William Hendriksen) believe it refers to a man who is married to just one woman and entirely faithful to her (which includes his maintaining a high standard of sexual purity).
- C. Being temperate; calm, cool and collected. He keeps a clear head and maintains an alert, steady, sober-minded, sane, sensible and spiritual perspective in most situations (1 Tim. 3:2).
- D. Being self-controlled; not impulsive or self-indulgent (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- E. Being respectable, dignified, appropriately serious and honorable in demeanor, worthy of respect (1 Tim. 3:2,8; Titus 1:7).
- F. Being hospitable and generous with guests (especially with other believers and itinerant workers) (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- G. Holding firmly to the truths of scripture; competent to teach and encourage others with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).
- H. Not being a drunkard or addicted to wine (a practicing alcoholic) (1 Tim. 3:3).
- I. Not being violent or a bully, but gentle. He doesn’t quickly react or lash-out, but is patient and reasonable when provoked (1 Tim. 3:3).
- J. Not being argumentative, hot-headed or quick-tempered; doesn’t “love a good fight” (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- K. Not being fond of money, greedy, stingy or dishonest in how he gets his money (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). Willing to earn his own living, if necessary (Acts 20:17,33-35).
- L. Being a good manager of those who live in his household, with dependent children who are obedient (not wild), respectful and who are believers. (Or: “Being a good manager of his household who keeps his children under control without losing his dignity...”) (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6).
- M. Not being a recent convert (1 Tim. 3:6).
- N. Having a good reputation with those outside the faith/ church (1 Tim. 3:7).
- O. Not being overbearing, arrogant, stubborn or self-willed (Titus 1:7).
- P. Loving what is good, and so being devoted to it (Titus 1:8).
- Q. Being upright, righteous and just; characterized by fairness and doing the right thing (Titus 1:8).
- R. Being holy (set apart for service to God), not still enslaved to any habitual sin or wickedness; pious and spiritually devout, committed to maintaining a close and obedient walk with the Lord (Titus 1:8).

The NT also contains additional qualifications for those wishing to fill the position of “deacon/servant” in the church, which no doubt apply to elders as well. These include:

- S. Not being two-faced, duplicitous or deceitful, but sincere, honest and truthful (1 Tim. 3:8).
- T. Being recognized as full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:2-3). Based on this, the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23) should also be considered essential in a man deemed worthy to lead the Lord’s church. After extracting duplicates found in the above qualifications, that fruit includes:
 - U. Love; a compassionate, caring and demonstrative regard for others’ welfare.
 - V. Joy, rejoicing, gladness.
 - W. Peace, tranquility, serenity.
 - X. Kindness.
 - Y. Faithfulness and loyalty.

V. How the Position of Elder Was Filled

- A. By a man indicating his desire to serve as one, then being tested and found qualified (1 Tim. 3:1-10).
- B. Through being prayerfully appointed to it by an apostle (Acts 14:23), an apostolic representative (Titus 1:5), a body of elders (1 Tim. 4:14) and/or the entire church (as in Acts 6:3 with deacons).
- C. Ultimately, he was recognized as being chosen for the job by the Holy Spirit, Himself (Acts 20:28).