

Chapter Four

ELDERS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Elders are the key to a properly operating local church. Failure here has resulted in church splits, domination of the flock or neglect of the flock and a host of other problems. Every church, every elder and pastor should measure their practice by what the New Testament says.

A. Who the Elders are:

1. These are the men who have the **spiritual leadership** of the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-9; I Tim. 5:17).

2. They are men with a **spiritual maturity** (I Tim. 3:1-7). According to verse 6 they should not be a new convert. They are not necessarily older, but normally someone less than 25 years old is not mature enough for this important responsibility.

3. They are the **overseers** of the church. In Titus chapter 1 we see that the elder of verse 5 is called overseer (bishop, KJ). in verse 7. We see these two terms also in Acts 20:17 and 28. The use of these two titles for the same office has been explained thus: “Elder” (Greek “presbuteros”) was the term used by the Jews. “Overseer” (episkopos”) was the term used by the Greeks.

4. The elders fulfill a **pastoral function** (I Pet. 5:1-4 and Acts 20:17, 28).

5. Those who have **one of the five “gift-ministries”** of Ephesians 4:11 are also elders in a broader sense. Peter in 1 Peter 5:1 and John in his second and third epistles call themselves elders.

6. We see, however, that **apostles and elders are mentioned separately** in Acts 15. In I Corinthians 12:28 apostles, prophets and teachers are ministries “set” in the Church. Later in the verse “governments” (or administrations) are mentioned. This is an eldership function.

From this we may reasonably assume there is a difference of calling, of ministerial responsibility and, consequently, of authority between the eldership in general and the gift-ministries: apostle, prophet, teacher (I Cor. 12:28), evangelist and pastor (Eph. 4:11).

7. Paul indicates **two kinds of elders** in I Timothy 5:17,18. First, there are those who rule well and preach and teach well. In other words, they work full time in the ministry because they are recognized as capable. These should be remunerated. Generally, but not exclusively, these are elders who have a “gift-ministry.” Secondly, there are the elders who for lack of time or desire or because of business obligations cannot devote themselves full time, and so they are not remunerated. Certainly this does not reflect on their ability or spirituality.

B. The Difference Between Elders and Deacons:

- 1.** The deaconship is a position in the church (Phil. 1:1).
- 2.** According to Act 6:1-6 we see that **they were servants**. The word “deacon” comes from the Greek word “diakonos,” which means servant. Note the qualifications of the deacon in I Timothy 3:8-13.
- 3.** The **deacons do not govern the church**. They do not dictate how money is to be spent. They can collect money, but it is for the elders to determine how it will be used (Acts 11:29, 30).
- 4. Deacons may become elders.** Stephen would have had a ministry of prophet, teacher, or apostle. Philip became an evangelist. Their qualifications in Acts 6 show they were qualified to be elders and probably the others also became elders. Timothy, after serving Paul and Silas, also received a gift-ministry (I Tim. 1:18).
- 5.** Any man who feels a call to **spiritual ministry should spend time as a deacon** to prepare him and to prove him (Luke 16:10-12; Mark 10:42-45; I Tim. 3:10). One can do a deacon’s work without the official title.

C. The Place of the Elder in the Church According to the New Testament:

- 1.** There is always a plurality of elders in the New Testament (Phil 1:1; Acts 14:23; 21:18).
- 2.** They are responsible for the financial decisions (Acts 11:29, 30).
- 3.** With the apostles they treated the doctrinal questions of Acts 15.
- 4.** They are responsible for the teaching (Titus 1:5-9; I Tim 3:2; I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7 - assuming that “those who led you” are elders). See also I Thessalonians 5:12.
- 5.** They pray for the sick (James 5:14-16).
- 6.** They are responsible for the oversight of the flock. They shepherd the flock of God (I Peter 5:1,2; Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17 - assuming that the “leaders” are elders).

D. How the Elders are Selected:

- 1.** They should **feel in themselves the call of the Lord** (I Tim. 3:1). In other words, it is the Lord who calls the elders (overseers). Note that it is normal for a man to aspire to this responsibility.

2. They are **appointed by those who hold a gift ministry**, or maybe by other elders. In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas selected the elders. In I Timothy 1:18; 4:14; and II Timothy 1:6 the elders recognized the ministry of Timothy. Then Timothy and Titus were instructed how to recognize and choose the elders, (I Tim. 3:1-7, 14, 15; Titus 1:5-9.)

3. In selecting elders, there are two aspects to keep in mind:

- 1) The selection of a man based on the Bible qualifications.
- 2) The divine selection by the Spirit.

a. The **choice by the Spirit**. In Acts 14:23 we see the leaders of the church praying and fasting before naming the elders. Also before Paul and Barnabas were sent out (Acts 13:1-3) the leaders were fasting and praying. Consequently, a divine revelation of the Spirit was received. Possibly at the time of Timothy's recognition there were prophecies given (I Tim. 1:18). Based on this, it would be wise, at the time of appointing leadership, to wait on the Lord with prayer and fasting until a clear indication of His choice is received.

b. The qualifications listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 show in addition that Paul wanted Timothy and Titus to **use their judgment in choosing elders**. The potential elder should be a man of good character, reasonable ability and an excellent reputation.

E. Qualifications of the Elder: (I Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9)

From the many general qualifications of a man above reproach socially and spiritually we can emphasize the following:

1. He should be **“able to teach”** (I Tim. 3:2). Teaching here should be interpreted in its largest sense of being able to communicate truth effectively. Not everybody has a teaching gift, and not all elders are gifted either. However, teaching or communicating is a priority. It is obvious that the pastor-elder should be “able to teach.”

2. He should be **“the husband of one wife”** (Tim. 3:2). Paul had no wife and probably Timothy was not married either; so celibacy or marriage is not the issue (Matt. 19:12). In lands where polygamy is practiced, the admonition is clearly seen as supporting monogamy. In our land, we may take it as excluding a believer from leadership who divorces his wife and marries another (Matt. 19:3-9).

3. He should **manage “his own household well”** (I Tim. 3:4). A disorderly home, undisciplined children, a neglected wife, or a domineering wife - all this will be reflected in the church directed by such an elder. Such men are unqualified, whatever their other talents may be.

4. He should not be “a new convert” (I Tim. 3:6). Satan’s condemnation was pride. It takes time for a new convert to develop the humility necessary for leadership. What changes new converts into mature, old converts is a series of failures and starting again; of problems and successes; of desperate situations and happy solutions; of temptations and victories. There is no substitute for “proven character” or “experience” (Rom. 5:3,4), and this takes time. Young converts should not be permitted positions of leadership. Too many young men, newly converted, have been pushed into prominence, or they take to themselves positions of leadership before they have proven themselves as deacons (see B-S above).

5. He should have “a good reputation with those outside” (I Tim. 3:7). The other Satanic attack on the elder will be from without. Men who have questionable relationships in the world are wide open prey for Satan’s attacks.

6. He must “hold fast the faithful word...” (Tit. 1:9). The Bible must have a preeminent place in the life of an elder. He should read it much, have it in his heart and mouth (Joshua 1:8). He should have it literally close at hand at all times, and he should know how to use it to help others in need.