

## The Biblical Office of Elders

God ordained and established the church, so we must allow God's Word, not man's opinion, to determine how a church ought to be governed and led. Therefore, when considering the best way to structure and lead a church, we should not first look to the political world, the business world, personal experience, or pragmatic success. Instead, we must ask first, "What does the Bible say?"

For several months, the Executive Board studied and discussed the Bible's teaching on elders in the local church. That was a fruitful and unifying experience, and this document seeks to summarize and explain what we believe the Bible teaches about elders in the local church.

### 1) The terms elder, overseer, and pastor are synonymous in Scripture and refer to the same office

The New Testament uses several different terms to describe the same office: "elder" (*presbuteros*), "overseer" or "bishop" (*episkopos*), and "pastor" or "shepherd" (*poimen*). The terms overseer and elder are used interchangeably within the same context to refer to the same group, and they are given the same qualifications. Furthermore, these elders or overseers are called to shepherd God's people, which is the verbal form of the word "pastor."

**1 Timothy 3:2** – "Therefore an **overseer** must be above reproach..."

**Titus 1:5-7** – "Appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach... For an **overseer**, as God's steward, must be above reproach."

**Acts 20:17-18, 28** – "He sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him. And when they came to him, he said to them: '... Pay attention to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to care for [literally: **shepherd**] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.'"

**1 Peter 5:1-2** – "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: **shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight**."

### 2) Churches are to be led and overseen by a plurality of elders

The term overseer indicates that elders are called to give oversight. This is made more explicitly clear in 1 Timothy 5:17 which says, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor..." Furthermore, shepherds are to lead the flock,

not be led by the flock. In this sense, it is important to recognize that elders do not serve as elected officials who merely represent the interests of their constituency. Instead, elders are called to represent the interests of God as revealed in the Bible.

Also, it is important to note that the New Testament usually refers to elders and overseers in the church in the plural form. In other words, the pattern we find in the NT is that each church was overseen by a group of elders, not just a single elder or pastor.

**Acts 14:23** – “And when they had appointed elders for them in every church...”

**Acts 20:17** – “... he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church...”

**Philippians 1:1** – “... To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...”

**1 Timothy 4:14** – “... when the council of elders laid their hands on you...”

**1 Timothy 5:17** – “Let the elders who rule well...”

**Titus 1:5** – “Appoint elders in every town...”

**James 5:14** – “Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray...”

**1 Peter 5:1** – “So I exhort the elders among you...”

While there is no biblical office of “senior pastor” and thus all elders are formally equal, most churches choose to designate one of their pastors to serve as the “first among equals.” This may be wise and helpful practically, but it is not biblically mandated or forbidden.

### **3) Elders are to shepherd the flock spiritually, not merely manage the church organizationally**

Elders are called to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:1-3), which includes keeping watch over their souls and giving an account (Hebrews 13:17), teaching the Word of God (1 Timothy 3:2), and protecting the flock from false teaching and false teachers (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:28-29). This pattern was first established in Acts 6:1-4 when certain men, who are often considered to be precursors to deacons, were appointed to serve the church in practical matters so that the apostles could devote themselves “to prayer and the ministry of the word.” In other words, though elders also lead the church organizationally by giving oversight, the primary focus of elders is to lead the church spiritually by ministering the word of God to His people.

#### **4) Some elders may be compensated for their ministry**

First Timothy 5:17 says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” In this context, double honor refers to compensation for some of the elders, not all of them.

Therefore, some elders may be fully supported by a church while others may serve as “lay elders,” being employed outside the church while faithfully serving in the church. This is sensible given that additional elders may be appointed based on their spiritual qualifications, and they should not be excluded from that serving in that capacity simply because of their church’s financial situation. Even in Paul’s life, he often chose to provide for his own needs while actively engaging in ministry (Acts 18:1-4; 20:34; 1 Corinthians 9:6-18; 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9), but there were other times he was able to be “occupied with the word” (Acts 18:5).

#### **5) The office of elder is reserved for men only**

While women are essential to the church and serve in many important capacities, the office of elder is reserved for men only. Generally speaking, elders are called to teach and exercise authority, and God clearly states that, within the church, women are not to “teach or to exercise authority over a man” (1 Timothy 2:12). This matter has been discussed in further detail elsewhere.

#### **6) Elders must possess godly character and be able to teach**

The qualifications for an elder or overseer are explicitly laid out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The overwhelming emphasis in these passages is that an elder must be above reproach and demonstrate godly character. This is important because one of the most important ways that an elder leads is by setting an example for others to follow. Hebrews 13:7 says, “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” Similarly, 1 Peter 5:3 says that elders are to be examples to the flock.

In addition to character, the one skill that an elder must possess is the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9). In fact, the ability to teach is the only significant difference between the qualifications for elders and deacons.