

Elder Leadership in the Church
Wolf Bayou Association Workshop
Searcy GB Church, October 2, 2011, 3:00 pm
Presented by John O. Sloan, Director of Pastoral Ministries

I What does the name “elder” mean as a name for church leaders? How do elders fit in congregational governed churches? What is their role in the church?

A First there is the necessity of affirming the priesthood of believers.

In the NT, believers are described as “being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:5). (Hebrews 10:19-22).

B Second basic truth to consider is that God appoints believers for ministry in the church according to His purpose.

In describing the church as one body with many members, Paul likened it to the physical body. And then he makes this statement “But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired” (I Corinthians 12:18). Later in that chapter, he writes “And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues” (vs. 28).

II Biblical passages referring to elders.

A The Lord had Moses appoint 70 elders to share in caring for the Israelites.
Numbers 11:16-17

B In the N.T., three terms are used in referring to the same position of eldership.

All three can be found in I Peter 5:1-2

1 elder – “presbuteros” “In the Jewish and Christian usage, a title of dignity, an elder, meaning persons of ripe age and experience who were called to take part in the management of public affairs”
(Complete Wordstudy Dictionary NT, Spiros Zodhiates, p. 1211).

2 bishop/overseer – “*episkopos*” “In the NT, used of officers in the local churches, overseers, superintendents. . . The term *episkopos*, overseer or bishop, having been

used of Christ as ‘the overseer of souls,’ would be naturally used of those of His ministers who in a special way continued in this work; and it is more probable that the Christian use of the title arose in this way rather than being adopted in imitation of the secular *episkopos* in a city”
(Complete Wordstudy Dictionary NT, Spiros Zodhiates, p. 635, 636).

3 pastor/shepherd – “*poimaino*” The word means to care for, to tend, provide.

C There are various scriptures that give evidence to these three terms having the same meaning as to the office of eldership.

1 Paul’s address to the elders of the church at Ephesus gives clear insight as to the three terms meaning the same office in the local church.

“And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders”
(Acts 20:17 NASB). (*presbuteros*)
ambassadors, seasoned-experienced-persons

“Be on guard for your selves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (*episkopos*, overseers/bishop), to shepherd (*poimiano*, pastor) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

2 The Apostle Peter also uses the three terms in addressing the same office.

“Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as your **fellow elder** and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, **shepherd** the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight** not under compulsion ,but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples of the examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (I Peter 5:1-4).

In his book, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church*, Gene Getz makes these comments;

“So whether we call them elders (a term well-known to Jews) or bishops (a term well-known to Greeks), it matters not, implies Paul. The important issue is what these men were like, what characterized their lives. The title was secondary, their qualifications and functions were primary.”

D There are several references to the office of elders/overseers in the NT

(These scriptures are listed in handout)

E What can we conclude from the way the scriptures speak of elders? Rather than just giving a definition of what an elder is, consider the words of Spiros Zodhiates in his document *Concerning the Government of a Local Church*;

“The elders were formally ordained for the position which they occupied (I Timothy 5:11). They also presided over meetings (proestotes (5:17). This is called ‘ruling over’.” They also preached and taught (I Timothy 5:17) and they received compensation in return for their work (I Timothy 5:18).”

III There are only two ministry positions mentioned in the N.T.

A Although the term deacon is not mentioned in Acts 6:1-7, it is widely accepted that this was the beginning of the office of deacons. Why is this?

The twelve Apostles called the church together and said, “It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to “serve” tables” (vs 2”) “serve” servant, deacon, to serve, wait upon, do anyone a service, care for. Same word is used for deacon.

1 There are two references of deacons mentioned in the scriptures.

(These scriptures are listed in handout)

B The second office often referred to in the NT is that of elders.

This is the focus of this workshop. There needs to be an understanding of the different roles as to elders and deacons as brought out in the scriptures.

For this I turn to the comments of Earl Radmacher in his document *The Question of Elders* that he presented at Western Conservative Baptist Seminary.

As to the four titles given to the officers of the local church in the NT (elder, bishop, pastor, and deacon), Radmacher states “The first three of these all refer to the same office . . ., which deals primarily with governmental leadership of the church. The office of the deacon, on the other hand, concerns the ordered service of the church” (1977, p. 3).

From this it is understood that in the mention of elders, it has to do with leadership in the church. In the mentioning of deacons, it has to do with service in the church.

IV From the scriptures referring to elders, there are three things that can be considered about this office. The church is a not a secular institution, but is the living body of Christ. It has secular responsibilities, but these are secondary to its existence.

1 There are clearly set qualifications for those who are placed in this office.

The qualifications listed for elders is based on servicing ministry, not authoritarian position.

- a In his book, *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch he gives three critically important reasons as to why God demands these qualifications of church elders (p. 70-71).

First, the Bible says that an elder must be of irreproachable moral character and capable in the use of Scripture because he is “God’s steward,” that is, God’s household manager (Titus 1:7) .

Second, the local church elders are to be living examples for the people to follow (I Peter 5:3).

Third, the biblical qualifications protect the church from incompetent or morally unfit leaders.

- b When a church holds to the standards as stated in I Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9; and I Pet. 5:1-3, there will not be a problem as to leadership competence.

will Also, when the underlying leadership qualification set by Christ is followed, there not be a problem with having authority, governmental leadership in the church. (Matthew 20:20-28).

2 Eldership is by a council of elders.

As to the NT churches, there is no reference as to having one pastor. Nor was one elder spoken of as being over the others. This is the multiple leadership concept.

3 Elders are appointed to the office of eldership.

“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust” (Acts :23NIV).

The question is “What is the process for appointing?”

The church leaders and the congregation are involved in the process.

This was the process of choosing the first deacons. Acts 6:3
And, for some churches, it would be similar to that of calling a deacon.

The following is a basic process for consideration.

- a Leadership informs the congregation of the need and qualifications

for elders.

- b Process involves prayer and fasting.
- c The leadership selects candidates and leads them through a preparation process.
- d Those found qualified as candidates are introduced to the church.
- e Period of prayer and fasting as congregations considers the candidates and gives input.
- f Candidates who are proved through the process are presented to congregations for confirmation.

When a congregation is spiritually mature and seeking the Lord's direction, a vote is not a decision of yes or no, but a confirmation of the Lord's leading.

V *How elders fit in a local church structure.*

A The pastor (lead pastor) and a certain number from the congregation set aside for this ministry.

B Elders in relationship to deacons in the local church.

Servant Leaders – Servant Care-givers

V The following are some of the basic concepts of the elder ministry.

- A Oversee the vision and direction of the church
- B Teaching the scriptures
- C Oversee the financial stewardship
- D Provide spiritual counseling
- E Pastoral Care
- F Responsible for staffing positions

VI *Now consider the main purpose of elders that is essential for the spiritual welfare of the church.*

- A Preaching and teaching the Word of God.*
- B Shepherding the congregation, spiritual oversight.*
- C Protecting the congregation through redemptive discipline.*
- D Leading by God's vision for the local church.*

VII How does the council of elders fit into the congregational government of a local church?

Who has the final authority in the church?

- A First, the church has only one Lord. Jesus is Lord of His church.*
- B Second, the priesthood of believers is of the Lord and He indwells the church, not just a council, board, or staff.*
- C Congregational government uses its authority to assign/delegate.*

Scripture on Deacons, Elders, Bishops and Overseers

Scripture on Deacons

Acts 6:3 *"Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them."*

Php 1:1 *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:"*

I Ti 3:8 *“Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.”*

I Ti 3:10, 13 *“They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.”*

Scripture on Elders

Acts 11:29-30 *“The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.”*

Acts 14:23 *“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.”*

Acts 15:2,4,6,22,23 *“This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.*

The apostles and elders met to consider this question. Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter:

*The apostles and elders, your brothers,
To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:
Greetings.*

Acts 20:17 *“From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church.”*

Acts 21:18 *“The next day Paul and the rest of us went to see James, and all the elders were present.”*

I Ti 5:17,19 *“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.”*

Tit 1:5,6 *“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.”*

Jas 5:14,15 *“Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven.”*

I Pe 5:1, 2: *“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve;”*

II John 1: *“The elder, To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth—*

III John 1: *“The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.”*

Scripture on Presbytery

I Tim 4:14 *“Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you.”*

Scripture on Bishops or Overseers

Php 1:1 *“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:”*

I Ti 3:1-3 *“Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.”*

Tit 1:7 *“Since an overseer manages God’s household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.”*

Book Reference on Elders

Biblical Eldership – An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership
Alexander Strauch, Lewis and Roth Publishers

Wolf Bayou Workshop 10-2-11 John O. Sloan, Director of Pastoral Ministries

Quote from Earl Radmacher concerning congregational government and congregational authority.

“Regularly the Scriptures give the church a responsibility together with commensurate authority for conducting their business, i.e., choosing officers (Acts 6:3,5; 14:23), exercising discipline of its members (Matthew 18:15-17; I Corinthians 5:4-5, 13;

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Thessalonians 3:6, 14- 15), sending missionaries (Acts 13:2-3), etc. This does not mean that these churches may not delegate the managing of much or most of their daily activities to those elders whom they have chosen to rule over them, but it does mean that the congregation never relinquishes ultimate authority. And if it should happen that the elders as a group act irresponsibly, the congregation, in assembly, would need to bring them to account.

“At this point, therefore, it may be well to carefully distinguish between congregational government and congregational authority. The congregation has the authority to conduct all of its business in session, if it chooses, but this would make meaningless the choosing of elders and deacons. Obviously, the special qualifications required by Scripture for these offices presume special spheres of leadership. Therefore, the congregation must be careful not to destroy their own efficiency and effectiveness by becoming immersed in the managing or governing for which they have elected spiritually-qualified leaders, and the leaders must be careful not to usurp authority for themselves which rightfully belongs to the congregation as a whole. Their governing is

by guiding, not by directives. I believe that this balance can be preserved when the leaders lead by love, teach by example, and when the congregation exercises proper submission to those whom they have chosen in submission to the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Surely the balance is portrayed in Hebrews 13:7 and 17. May God help

us

to find it in practice” (*THE QUESTION OF ELDERS*, by Earl D. Radmacher, President, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary).