

# Elders Defined

## 1. What is an elder?

Scripture clearly calls for a plurality of leadership in the local church. Whenever Scripture refers to elders it does so in the plural. The New Testament evidence is quite strong that the church is not to be led by a single person. There are different models for elders based upon various understandings of the words used for elders and the passages that call for their ministry in the church. The ministry of elders does not automatically negate congregationalism. Indeed, the ministry of elders can be a wonderful complement to congregationalism. Elders will not usurp the responsibility of the congregation to call church staff, approve budgets, and make decisions concerning property and buildings. A properly functioning elder ministry will add an extra layer of leadership, wisdom, and godly support to the ministry of the church staff.

The New Testament calls for elders to lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort the people of God in sound doctrine, and visit and pray for the sick. Elders are shepherds who share the responsibility of leading and caring for the local church. A plurality of lay / staff elders makes leadership more rooted than if it was entrusted to just one man or just the paid staff. This plurality serves the church well by rounding out the pastor's gifts, making up for some of his deficits, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism.

At Metro East, the implementation of an elder ministry will change very little about our polity. The difference will be that a group of godly laymen will come along side the pastor and staff in an official capacity to share in the leadership of the church. This happens already unofficially. Scripture makes it clear, however, that this role of leadership and shepherding should be officially recognized by the church so that there will be healthy accountability to the body.

- The ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members as they worship God, nurture each other, and witness to the world. Internal governance policies are not the main concern of the church, but the tool to help ensure the proper mobilizing of the people of God for ministry (Eph. 4:11-12).
- God has ordained that the church have officers charged to lead the people of God under the Lordship of Christ (I Tim 5:17; I Thess 5:12; Heb 13:7, 17; Acts 20:28).
- The final court of appeal in the local church in disagreements is the congregation itself guided by God's Word (implied in I Pet 5:3; I Tim 5:19; Matt 18:15-20).
- The local congregation is responsible to call and approve its own leaders.
- The leaders of the church must be godly, exemplary in character, gifted for the ministry given them, and in harmony with the established leadership of the church (I Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Rom 12:6-8; Acts 20:28; Phil 2:2).
- The spiritual qualifications for elders must never be sacrificed for the sake of technical / professional expertise, tenure of membership, or friendship.
- The selection process will be led by a group able to discern the qualifications mentioned earlier and will be passed on to the congregation for final approval.

- The terms of active service will not be determined by the desire to include as many different people as possible in leadership but by a desire to carefully balance the need to have the most qualified leaders with the need to guard against burn out.
- Elders should be treated with honor by the church “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (I Tim 5:17).

## 2. Who can be an elder?

A misunderstanding of who elders are and how they are to function is behind much of the resistance to eldership in many churches. New Testament elders are not CEOs or high status board members. Eldership is not awarded for financial giving, popularity, or tenure of church membership. The Bible requires that elders meet specific moral and spiritual requirements before they are able to serve. Elders must be publicly attested as embodying these qualities (I Tim 3:10). They must be publicly installed in office (I Tim 5:22; Acts 14:23). The congregation must acknowledge, love, and honor those who serve as elders, including financial support for those who are uniquely gifted at preaching and teaching (I Tim 5:17-18).

What is remarkable about the list of qualifications for elders that is found in Scripture is just how unremarkable they are. With the exception of the ability to teach, all of the qualifications are commended to all Christians throughout the New Testament. Also, the list of qualifications for elders is certainly not exhaustive. For instance, regular Bible reading or a disciplined prayer life are not mentioned as qualifications but would certainly need to characterize the life of any elder. So Paul’s intention in I Timothy is to list those qualities that are non-negotiable and that even a pagan would recognize as good. The following list is taken from **1 Timothy 3:1-7**.

### a) Elders are men.

- In I Timothy 2 we are told that it is not God’s will that a woman should exercise authority over a man. Since an elder exercises authority, it seems clear that this is a role reserved for men. The authority structure of the church is to reflect the structure given by God to the family of the husband over the wife as Christ is over the husband.

### b) Elders serve gladly (1 Tim 3:1)

- While a qualified elder is not one who would “lobby” for the position or seek it for personal reasons, he ought to be someone who wants to serve in this vital role. An elder should not have to be pressured to serve. His service should be rendered gladly.

### c) Elders are beyond reproach (1 Tim 3:2)

- This is the quality of life that gives no reason for others to think badly of the church or the Lord Jesus. This qualification is aimed at an elder’s public life. It matters what others think of an elder and he should live in such a way that no one would have reason to assume anything but the best.

d) Elders manage their household well (1 Tim 3:2)

- It is probably not a requirement that an elder be married. Paul was not married. If he is married, it is clear that an elder ought to have a reputation as a good husband and father. Again, the public nature of this man's life comes in view. Some believe the phrase "husband of one wife" prohibits a man who has been remarried after a divorce from serving as an elder. However, the phrase Paul employs is a very general one used commonly in society to refer to a man who had a reputation for being faithful to his wife and does not necessarily have anything to do with divorce. I am, therefore, uncomfortable drawing a strict line on this matter. D.A. Carson believes that Paul is prohibiting polygamy which was common among the social elites of the first century. Carson argues that if the circumstances of a man's divorce have not rendered him beyond reproach then it should not be considered worse than other sins that may or may not render a man beyond reproach.

e) Sober-minded

- The elder's temperance extends to more than just abuse of alcohol. This is not to say he does not have a sense of humor. Rather, he is serious about serious things.

f) Self-controlled

- The elder is one who has mastery over his passions, his words, and his emotions.

g) Respectable

- The elder is not known as a silly person. He conducts himself in a way so as not to offend unnecessarily.

h) Hospitable

- Elders love strangers and are good at making an outsider feel at home. Elders share their home for ministry and do not shrink back from having guests.

i) Able to teach

- This is not to say that elders must be gifted orators. Rather, their grasp of and love for God's Word should be such that they are able to teach it if called upon.

j) Not addicted to alcohol

- This is related to self-control. Elders are not addicted to anything. They are mastered only by the Lord Jesus.

k) Not violent (gentle)

- An elder's temper should be under control. He must not be belligerent or unkind. Elders must be gentlemen.

l) Not quarrelsome

- Closely related to the former, elders must be characterized as peacemakers, not factious or troublemaking. The elder uses his words to build up others. He knows that some thoughts do not necessarily need to be articulated and that arguing is not a sport.

m) Not a lover of money

- This has nothing to do with an elder's income. Rather, the elder should be free from the *love* of money. He should be generous and not *preoccupied* with his financial future.

n) A mature believer

- Elders should not be new believers. If too much responsibility is given to a new believer he may swell with pride and provide the devil a foothold. The church must have enough time to be able to evaluate whether a man is ready for the demanding role of elder.

o) Good reputation

- This is closely related to the point that an elder must be beyond reproach. Here it is explicit that the elder's good reputation extends beyond the borders of the church into the community of the lost. Whatever the standards of decency the world sets, the church's standard should be higher.

### **3. What is the relationship between the elders and the pastor?**

The relationship between pastor and elders can be described as "first among equals." In 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul draws a distinction between those who preach and teach and the rest of the elder body. Since all elders should be "able to teach" he seems to be distinguishing those elders who are set apart specifically for the preaching of the Word. While elders are to act jointly and are certainly equals before the Lord they are not identical in their gifting, responsibilities, biblical knowledge, and leadership ability. This idea of first among equals can be seen in Jesus' relationship with the twelve disciples. He chose and empowered all twelve equally but He singled out three for special attention and responsibility – Peter, James, and John.

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:17-18, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" This is not to say that the elders who are dedicated full-time to the preaching of the Word do all the thinking and decision making for the group. Indeed, *shared* vision, thinking, and decision making is part of the divine logic behind church eldership. While this may not give a tidy role distinction between pastor and elder, neither does the Bible. This is why "first among equals" seems to be more faithful to the biblical ideal than does some pyramidal hierarchy with the pastor ruling from above.

So, the pastor is a full member of the elder body. He is the elder trusted with the task of preaching to the congregation and shepherding the staff on a weekly basis. Because of his full-time commitment he has primary responsibility for casting a vision for the church and establishing the church's philosophy of worship and ministry. He does not, however, reach his decisions in a vacuum. The wisdom of the entire elder body is a needful and trusted ally in all the decisions the pastor makes.

### **4. What is the relationship between the elders and the committees?**

Committees are not prescribed in the Bible. To say that this means churches should not have committees is to argue from silence. Well functioning committees made up of people dedicated to the Lord and to His church can be a tremendous blessing to the church's ministries and an important point of contact between the laity and the elders and staff. In order to aid good communication and provide wise pastoral leadership, one elder will be assigned as a liaison to each standing committee. That elder will offer council and keep the other elders and staff informed about the progress and ministry of the committee.

## **5. What is the relationship between the elders and the deacons?**

The Bible gives us no direct instruction here so we must deal with inferences. The deacons have a clearly defined role as those who make sure the needy members of the congregation (particularly widows and orphans) are being properly cared for. The elders, whose responsibilities include oversight, help ensure the ministries of the church, including that of deacons, are properly discharged.

## **6. What is the relationship between the elders and the church body?**

As I have mentioned earlier, eldership is not a negation of congregationalism. Just as the pastor does not rule the congregation as if they were his subjects, neither do the elders. Rather, the elders are identified by the church, called to serve by the church, ordained by the church, and are accountable to the church. While the elders will have a role to play in advising the congregation in major decisions, the final say will fall to the church. Decisions on staff, building, budgets, and major expenditures will continue to be made by congregational vote.

Some principles that characterize the relationship between the congregation and elders are...

- **Clear Recognition**

The congregation is to recognize the elders as a gift from God for the good of the church. The church, therefore, should delegate to the elders the responsibility of leadership and oversight. Those duties are to be revoked only if it is clear that the elders are acting in a way that is contrary to Scripture. The elders must realize their God-given responsibility to the church to lead well.

- **Heart-felt Trust**

The church should trust, respect, submit to, and protect its elders in accordance with Scripture's instructions in 1 Timothy 5:17 and Hebrews 13:17.

- **Evident Godliness**

In 1 Timothy and Titus Paul makes it clear that the elder's life is to be above reproach. Elders, then, must be willing to have a life that is open to inspection.

- **Sincere Carefulness**

Elders should take great care as men under the authority of God to lead faithfully. Elders must know that the church belongs not to them but to Christ and is, therefore, to be cherished and lead well for God's glory and the good of His people. The elders will give an account to God for the way in which they led.

- **Beneficial Results**

Just as in the family, a humble recognition of rightful authority brings great benefits. In a church, when authority is used with the consent of the congregation for the good of the congregation, the congregation will benefit as God builds His church.

**7. How will elders be nominated and selected?**

Nominations for elder will come from the church body. Those names will be given to the deacons or some other responsible body whose responsibility it will be to select those men who fulfill the biblical requirements. Once the candidates have agreed to serve they will be ordained and installed in their ministry pending congregational approval.

**8. How will disputes be handled?**

The lay elders are not the “customer service representatives” for the congregation. They do not exist to field complaints against the staff or any other church member. The elders will insist that disputes be handled in a biblical fashion following Jesus’ instructions in Matthew 18:15-17. The elders may be approached to handle a dispute only after reconciliation or repentance has been refused.