

TRAINING ELDERS

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What is an “elder”?

The office of “elder” has undergone a significant revival among Bible-believing churches in the last century. While once the domain of Presbyterians only, it has become the dominant polity among evangelical churches. The “elders” are the spiritual leaders and governors of the local assembly of the body of Christ—regardless of nationality, tradition or time period. It is the main biblical office of leadership, after the apostles and their designates. The elders do not rule autocratically but in a careful collaboration with the congregation of active members of a church and in teamwork with other leadership groups for the glory of God and the accomplishment of the stated goals of the church. They are the definers of those goals, and share labor, prayer and counsel as to how those goals should be achieved. Good and frequent communication is the key to a happy partnership with the other leaders in the church. The concept of an “elder-led” church is common now and the office of elder derives from a combination of three NT Greek words each of which brings a different *nuance* to the office of “elder”.

1. Presbuteros πρεσβύτερος older, mature
 - Carry over from the Old Testament, and the most common NT word for leaders
2. Episkopos ἐπίσκοπος watching over, governing, administrative
 - Can be translated “bishop” – second most used word for leaders in the NT
3. Poiménas ποιμήνας shepherding
 - Used only once in the NT in the church office sense (Eph.4:11), though frequently used by Jesus

How do elders serve the body of Christ?

- Teaching
- Leading
- Setting and maintaining the doctrine and theology of the church
- Being life-long learners
- Shepherding and discipling new believers
- Being and remaining “teachable”
- Explorers of genuine humility
- Counseling

- Mentoring and coaching
- Governing and where the “buck stops” in a church
- By being approachable, accessible and unthreatening
- Eager participants and defenders of the ordinances of the church

What does an “elder-in-training” do?

- Meets and functions on equal footing with existing the board of elders in every meeting, participating in discussions, prayer, decision-making, and all the deliberations, explorations and struggles as they come up, experiencing the life of an elder – for a minimum of two years.
- Gets to know each elder and other E-i-T. on a personal basis, learning his own capabilities, limitations, engagement of gifts, etc. and pondering if an how God would make a place for him alongside the other elders.
- Prays seriously about taking on the calling and responsibility of an elder in the church of Jesus Christ.
- Carefully pays attention to his own family’s reaction, adjustment and interest in his being an elder
- Explores and continues developing his own area of focus and his own individual contacts and ministries for the cause of discipleship.
- Accepts functional responsibility for various jobs among the elders, as all elders must do.

Authority

- Authority in the New Testament begins with Jesus Himself. He commissioned His apostles who in turn raised up elders and other leaders. The office of pastor develops early but it was never intended to be a definitive investment of ALL authority in a church. Authority is to be a carefully shared investment. The great English Puritan thinker John Owen put it this way in 1667—a “hotbed” of times when Protestantism was young and when much of modern Protestant ecclesiology and politics were being born:
 - “God communicates this authority by trust, to be exercised by them in His name, to persons that He appoints, that is needed in all things in His churches towards the blessed goals that He has appointed. No man can have any power in His church, for any purpose whatsoever, but that it comes from Him. What is not received from Him is merely usurped.”¹

¹ John Owen, The Works of John Owen, vol. 15 p. 501. Banner of Truth Trust, 1978 (1667)

- Also, certain churches came to be recognized as places of central authority and while that occurred early in church history it was never codified until after the apostles: Jerusalem, Antioch, Damascus, Alexandria, Ephesus, Thessalonica and Rome. Because the elders' authority is such a potent thing for a church to acknowledge, James warns his readers: *Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.* (James 3:1 ESV)

What are their qualifications?

- Numbers 11:16 ff;
- Romans 12; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1st Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1st Peter 5:1-5; Note also Hebrews 13:7, 17
- Must an elder be married?

What are their gifts?

- One can reasonably expect elders, together, to possess giftedness in the areas of communication, leadership, administration, envisioning, prayer, giving, mercy, disciple-making, evangelism and outreach-crafting. Development takes time and other elders should be patient and encouraging to newer elders in giving them opportunities to learn their specific areas of giftedness.

Training protocols

Meeting regularly as a group and team
 Integrity
 Family priority
 Giving
 Keeping confidences
 Dependability
 Courage and faithfulness
 Bible knowledge and competence
 Hermeneutics competence
 Balance
 Wisdom
 Mild-manneredness and respectability
 Reading discipline

- Specific reading list
- Discussion of various books
- Financial support for purchase of books

OTHER QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Can women serve as elders in the body of Christ?

- Titus 2:3-5; 1st Tim. 2:8-15; 1st Corinthians 14:34,35
 - Are the restrictions merely culturally relevant to the first century?
 - Is there a timeless rationale in Paul's thinking to which he appeals?
- POINT: The key question is authority and the setting of doctrine, not exercise of a gift in the area of communicating
- What about the role of "Elder-advisors"?
- Can a woman be gifted for shepherding?
- To what extent can a woman teach in a church?
 - Protocol for discipline
- Women staff? What about women in management positions in para-church ministries?
- Interacting with a radically changing culture

How are elders found?

- The body of Christ and the existing elders should always *be on the lookout* for new potential elders. As mobile as people are today there will always be new people coming into the body of Christ—it should be the responsibility of the current elders to be seeking new shepherds.
- Are elders
 - Elected? No NT examples of this
 - Appointed? Seems to be the NT pattern
 - Compelled? No NT examples of this
 - Requested in prayer?

Why do they need to be "trained?"

- It is fair
- It is a safeguard to the body of Christ
- It gives the time to explore and pray to see IF this is God's will for their lives
- It takes the pressure off for a while, and enhances learning

What if they fail?

- They are given every bit of patience and forgiveness that any Christian deserves
- Finding out that being an elder is NOT for me, is not a failure. It is a discovery.
- Can an elder ever be restored to the eldership after a serious moral failure?

What if they do not complete the training?

Minimum of two years as a trainee

Approval and enthusiastic endorsement by existing elders
Endorsement by the body which he will serve

Ordination ceremony?

What is their “term of office”?

Should elders be happy or cheerful men?
Is their “popularity” necessary?

Are elders “people-persons”?

Are the elders always right? (either individually or corporately)

What is a “board of elders”?

- The Session (Presbyterianism)
- A team
- A confidential and trustworthy brotherhood
- A fraternity of team and ministry leaders, bringing together in one room various ministry focuses

What about “elder emeritus”?

How does the office of elder relate to other church offices?

- Deacon and deaconess
- Trustee
- Treasurer
- Pastoral staff

A careful (and sometimes nervous) alliance
Sharing of Power and Influence
Collaboration and loyalties to other ministries

What about previous experience as an elder in a previous church?

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