

Intro

What comes into your mind when you think of elders, pastors, or church leaders? Is it an abusive leader with unchecked power? Maybe you've been in a church where the pastor kicked you or your friends out of the church without biblical cause. Or maybe you've been in a church where the pastor tried to run your life. Demanding that you give a certain amount to the church or demanding where your kids had to go to school or telling you where you could and couldn't go. If that's your experience, I am grieved you had to go through that. I'm grieved that person was allowed into the pastorate. I'm angered at the damage he did to God's people and the local church. And I ask myself, why did God allow that guy to lead his church? Why didn't God prevent that guy from getting hired? Some things are hidden from us.

Maybe when you think of church leaders, your experience is generally good. You've been blessed by God through godly men he raised up to lead in the local church. They've helped you marriage troubles, they've helped you through trials, they've helped you overcome sin, they've helped you grow into the person you are today. My experience has been generally good. Yeah, I've had leaders where I wondered how did God ever allow that guy to lead a church? I've had leaders whose maturity and doctrinal depth were lacking. But I've been helped greatly by godly leaders God placed in his church. Leaders who've endured my immaturity, leaders who've challenged my mistaken zeal, leaders who prepared me for courtship and dating and marriage and parenting, leaders who've served me in trial, leaders who've encouraged me and given me opportunity to develop my gifts, leaders who've encouraged me in despair, leaders who've helped me to see clearly when my thinking was offline, leaders who've shown me what Christian community can be. Hopefully, right now you're reminded of the numerous ways God has used church leaders to serve your good.

As we consider the leadership of the local church, I want you to remember that:

BIG IDEA: God has provided elders for the health of the local church

READ PASSAGE

PRAY

Body

Passage Focus

Four points on the nature of church leadership. 5th point on the congregation's response to church leadership.

Point 1: Elders model godliness for the flock (Titus 1:5-8)

Explanation

Paul is writing to Titus, apparently an apostolic delegate. Titus is stationed at Crete for two reasons: to get the church in order and to appoint elders in every town (1:5). Verses 6-8 describe the character qualifications for elders.

The general character requirement is "above reproach" which we see in verses 6 and 7. Above reproach means *a person who can't be accused of anything wrong*. Charges can be brought, but they'll be found wanting.

Verse 6 details the elder's home life. 1 Timothy 3:4-5 puts it this way:

1 Timothy 3:4-5 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?

Elders must be “the husband of one wife.” The phrase could also be translated “a man of one woman” as in the ESV footnote. Controversy surrounds two issues. Does an elder have to be married? Can a divorced man be an elder? I don’t take this to mean that marriage is a requirement for elders. Paul and Barnabas were unmarried (1 Cor 9:5-6). And they were planting churches and choosing the people who appointed elders. The issue isn’t needs to be married. The issue is, if married, needs to be a faithful married man. As for the issue of divorce, some take “husband of one wife” to mean can only have been married to one woman meaning any divorced man is excluded from the elder office. Interestingly, this same logic would exclude someone who remarried after the death of their spouse (can’t have been married to more than one woman). As for divorced men, they should be examined on a case by case basis just like remarriage should be. In sum, the issue is sexual purity and fidelity, not needs to be married and not can only have one wife in their lifetime. Above reproach is the point of “husband and one wife.”

There’s another thorny interpretive issue: “*and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.*”

Does this mean a man can’t be an elder unless every one of their children is saved? This would be very hard practically. What if I have a 3 year old? How can we be certain they’re saved? What if the elder’s wife gives birth to a new child? Does the new child force the elder to step down until there’s legitimate confirmation that the infant is saved? Wouldn’t this encourage an aspiring elder to avoid having children? The ESV has a note here: “his children are believers” could be translated “his children are faithful.” Given 1 Timothy 3:4 requires “keeping his children submissive,” not ensuring every child is saved, it’s unlikely Titus 1:6 requires that men who have children who are unsaved are excluded from the elder office. Titus 1:6 says:

and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

The issue is an elder cannot have debauchorous and rebellious children, because he needs to manage his household well, which includes parenting. It’s not that he has to ensure that his children are converted. Given the difficulties of requiring every child of an elder to be saved, given 1 Timothy 3:4 doesn’t require an elder’s children to be believers, and given that a man cannot ensure his children are saved (salvation is a work of God...we can only plant and water, we can’t force growth, we can’t make a child believe), we should take Titus 1:6 to mean: “*and his children are faithful (= obedient and respectful) and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.*”

Again, the issue isn’t needs to have children, or can’t have unsaved children. The issue is above reproach. Elder candidates without children, like elder candidates without a wife, are not automatically excluded. Elders need to be above reproach, and if married or if a parent, above reproach includes managing their household well.

Negative character traits disqualify a man from the elder office:

- 1) Arrogant = speaks of a selfishness with no regard for God’s will or others
- 2) Quick-tempered = explosive lack of self-control, easily provoked, short fuse, fits of rage
- 3) Drunkard = drinks too much, which could lead to quick temper and violence
- 4) Violent = not a bully or given to violence
- 5) Greedy for gain = not using religion for personal gain

On the other hand, positive characteristics are required:

- 1) Hospitable = opens their home to people
- 2) Lover of good = pursues things of virtue
- 3) Self-controlled = prudent, thoughtful, wise; not reckless

- 4) Upright = lives according to God's instruction
- 5) Holy = inward purity that results in outward conduct
- 6) Disciplined = self-restraint and control over emotions, passions, and desires

- Plural but no specific number required
- Elder and overseer used interchangeably = the same office
- Elders are men ("husband of one wife" or "a one-woman man")

Application

The key is elders need proven character, which requires time to observe their life. Not perfect, but an exemplary repenter. Not flawless, but teachable. Not infallible like God, but formed by God. Not ruled by a particular sin, nor lacking in necessary character. No legitimated charges against them that render them unfit. Elders exist to model for the congregation what being Jesus' disciple looks like in real life.

Point 2: Elders teach the flock (Titus 1:9)

Explanation

Three aspects of teaching are highlighted here:

- 1) *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught* = sound in doctrine. Committed to Scripture's authority and all its teachings. Not adding to Scripture. Not subtracting to Scripture. Faithful to the Word of God. This is the foundation.
- 2) *able to give instruction in sound doctrine* = able to give the congregation positive instruction from the Scripture. This assumes knowledge of the Bible, ability to convey truth in an understandable manner, and ability to apply biblical truth.
- 3) *to rebuke those who contradict it* = able to correct false teaching. Grasps biblical doctrines to the point where he can discern a false teaching when he hears it. Able to use Scripture well enough to show why false teachings are wrong, and able to positively set forth a sound doctrinal alternative.

Application

The elder as teacher is a physician and a protector. They use Scripture to guide the saints through difficult waters. They use Scripture to heal the believer from sinful patterns. And they protect the flock by exposing false teachers.

The elder teaches for encouragement and rebuke. They encourage the saints by showing how God's character and promises offer a sure comfort and hope. They rebuke error and show the way out of sin.

An elder has proven doctrinal fidelity. And they must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2). What does able to teach mean?

- 1) ≠ dynamic public speaker (an elder may or may not preach on Sunday mornings)
- 2) = ability to interpret Scripture, explain Scripture, apply Scripture, and refute error
- 3) = ability to lead in a small group or Sunday school setting
- 4) Some elders take on a greater teaching role

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

But Paul's emphasis is not on teaching. It's on character. Character is the prerequisite for teaching. Ability to teach without character ≠ an elder.

Point 3: Elders care for the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4)

READ 1 Peter 5:1-4

Explanation

We'll focus in on "shepherd the flock of God that is among you."

Shepherd means to care for, to look after the people of God. In other words, elders are commanded to perform pastoral ministry. Like a shepherd watches over his sheep. Shepherds were responsible for the survival and welfare of their sheep. They ensured their sheep were fed, sheltered, protected from harm (whether predators or hazardous territories), and cared for their injuries. And they cared for their sheep one-by-one, ensuring each individual sheep made it into the protective fold at night. So a shepherd knows their flock, leads their flock, feeds their flock, and protects their flock. Shepherding involves oversight (5:2), which we'll get to in the next point. But right now we'll focus on caring for God's sheep.

Peter is concerned with how God's people are shepherded:

- 1) *not under compulsion, but willingly* = not because we have to, but because we want to...because we care
- 2) *not for shameful gain, but eagerly* = not for what we can get out of it, but because we want to...because we care
- 3) *not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock* = not becoming an elder to have power and rule over people, but instead being an example of devotion to God, being an example of trusting God in hard times, being an exemplary repentor during failure, and exemplifying the Christian care we'd like to see going on among the flock itself

Application

In what ways can elders shepherd the flock?

- 1) Visitation
- 2) Hospitality
- 3) Feeding with biblical truth
- 4) Counsel (counseling or discipleship)
- 5) Encouragement (trials)
- 6) Warning
- 7) Spending time with the flock = getting to know them (can't care for you if we don't know you)

Character is necessary for elders to have the heart to care for the flock well.

Point 4: Elders lead the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4)

Explanation

"exercising oversight" – 1 Pet 5:2

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

Application

How do the elders lead the flock?

- 1) Public Bible instruction (leading by guiding with truth)
- 2) Structuring the church's activities to facilitate spiritual growth
- 3) Structuring the church's activities to facilitate a flock on mission
- 4) Advising courses of action for the congregation to take by vote (leading by advising)
- 5) By example

Character is necessary for elders to lead the flock well.

Point 5: Honor your elders while holding us accountable

Explanation

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³ and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

1 Timothy 5:19-20 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰ As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.

- an elder's office is contingent on their ongoing manner of life and doctrine

Why do we vote on elders when Titus appointed them?

- A church in the early planting stage without elders isn't the same as an established church with existing elders (elders established = church chooses its own elders)
- Ultimate authority in matters of church discipline rested with the church, not the elders (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:4-5) = precedent for congregational authority
- 2 Corinthians 2:6, referring to church discipline, spoke of "punishment by the majority" = precedent for majority vote
- in Acts 6, it's the whole congregation that chose the first deacons (Acts 6:1-6)

How does a congregation obey their leaders?

Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them." But we're a congregational church where ultimate authority rests with the congregation. How does that work?

- 1) Congregation must trust the elders; elders must be trustworthy
 - 2) Church obeys by following teaching that lines up with Scripture (= congregation needs discernment and elders need to be able to teach)
- elders lead by instructing the congregation like a father counsels their adult children, not like a father orders their young children around
 - elders lead by convincing, not by direct orders (we don't control your lives by our convictions/opinions; e.g., we don't control where to send your kid to school; we don't control your budget)
- 3) Church obeys by supporting the structures created by the elders (e.g., Sunday morning, Sunday school, small groups, etc.)
- charged by God with teaching, the elders exercise oversight of the church's teaching ministry
 - charged by God with caring for the flock, the elders exercise oversight of the church's pastoral care

- congregation delegates aspects of the church's ministry to the elders per God's design
 - 4) Church obeys by voting yes to elder recommendations at quarterly forums
- voting yes to an elders' recommendation is an act of submission
- you should vote yes when the elders' recommendation has biblical warrant
- if the elders are clearly breaching Scripture, or the elders' request cannot be justified biblically, you shouldn't vote yes
- voting yes = honoring the elders' leadership; voting no = holding the elders accountable for going outside of Scripture

So we have a complex arrangement where ultimate authority rests with the congregation, but the elders exercise oversight through teaching and several other tasks. As a congregation, you should by default follow the elders. But you have a responsibility to hold your elders accountable. If we drift from sound doctrine, if our conduct disqualifies us, if we make proposals contrary to Scripture or without biblical support or wisdom, or if we overstep our bounds, it's your duty to hold us accountable. Elders must provide biblical justification for their proposals!

What should this look like? If the elders are failing in any of these ways, it's your duty to bring it to our attention. If the elders accept correction, the congregation has fulfilled its role. If the elders refuse correction, it's the congregation's duty to remove those who have disqualified themselves through their conduct or doctrinal unfaithfulness. But if we elders are faithfully living out our biblical obligations, it's your duty to affirm and support us. Any concerns? Talk with us.

Conclusion

God has provided elders for the health of the local church. Multiple elders in the local church is God's design for your good. So make use of your elders. Get help!

- 1) When facing marriage challenges
- 2) When facing parenting challenges
- 3) When facing relational challenges
- 4) When facing trials
- 5) When needing wisdom
- 6) When you need help witnessing to a JW, Mormon, or Buddhist
- 7) When you're confused by something a "Christian" said on the internet or TV
- 8) When you're struggling to overcome a particular sin
- 9) When you're discouraged

Elders are a gift from God for the local church's good in four ways. First, **Elders model godliness for the flock.** Second, **Elders teach the flock.** Third, **Elders care for the flock.** Fourth, **Elders lead the flock.**

It's your duty to trust and follow the elders. It's our duty to be faithful in doctrine and conduct. We should enjoy your support as long as we maintain biblical fidelity. If we go astray, it's your responsibility to hold us accountable. **Honor your elders while holding us accountable.**