

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ²Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; ³not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. (1 Peter 4:1-4)

The New Testament interchangeably uses three words for Elder. Each is appropriate and significant.

~ **poimaino**—(translated—“pastor;” literally— “shepherd”)—suggests one who feeds and cares for the sheep

~ **presbuteros**—(translated—“elder;” literally— “one who is older”)—suggests the importance of spiritual maturity

~ **episkopos**—(translated—“bishop or overseer;” literally—“one who looks after”)—suggests one who is skilled in leadership

Ideally, an Elder is able to provide both administrative leadership and pastoral care. Realistically, each Elder tends to lean one way or the other. For that reason it is appropriate for Elders to designate within their ranks those who devote themselves to pastoral care and those who devote themselves to leadership.

In the first letter Paul wrote to Timothy, he speaks to a church which already has elders and a church which has problems. This is a church Paul knows intimately, as he spent three years of service with these Christians. Some of their problems include:

- Gender struggles (2:9)
- False teachers who follow the teachings of demons (4:2)
- Legalists who forbid marriage and the eating of certain food (4:3)
- Disruptive members who disrespect the elders and their compensation (4:16)
- Materialism and arrogance (6:6)

Paul's manner of dealing with these problems is to fortify the leadership. He devotes extensive time to Timothy, who is a young evangelist with the church; to deacons and their qualifications; and to the Elders. He speaks little about what Elders do but

much about who Elders are, as if to suggest the right heart is more important than the right job description.

His extensive instruction on this begins in 1 Timothy 3:1. Though brief, this verse offers four important insights regarding the role of an Elder. "What I say is true: Anyone wanting to become an Elder desires a good work."

1. Eldership is an essential ministry. Note the formula at the beginning of the verse. "What I say is true." Paul uses the phrase five times: 1 Timothy 1:15, 3:1, 4:9, 2 Timothy 2:11, Titus 3:8. It signals a trustworthy statement. Patently clear. A believable fact. In the pastoral epistles this formula always precedes important fact. By virtue of this saying, Paul is signifying a vital topic. The early church put a high premium on the calling to church leadership, even though in that era the danger of being a church leader was great! Paul is urging young men to aspire, to long for this task. To aspire to be a church leader is a God-given passion.

2. The Eldership is a limited ministry. The Gateway Church has historically limited the role of an Elder to men. We believe that while men and women are equal in blessing and responsibility, burden, and promise, the leadership of the church falls squarely on the shoulders of men. This seems to be the intent of Paul's instructions to Timothy. He explains that married Elders must be the husband of one wife, an admonition only males can fulfill. His list of qualifying adjectives appears in masculine form. That is not to say women shouldn't have leadership roles and responsibilities or, in our opinion, teach at church gatherings. Jesus honored and elevated women of his time above the norm of his society. So should we with women of our time.

3. The Eldership is a desired ministry. There are two words in the Bible for desire—and both appear in this verse. The first is *oregomi*, which means to reach out after or seek or pursue. It can even mean covet, as it does in 1 Timothy 6:10. The second is *epithumia*, which implies a passion or compulsion. The first word is an outward effort, the second an inward fire. Combine these two words and the result is a combustion of desire— one who pursues leadership with his life because he is driven on the inside. The man desires the Eldership in emotion and action.

Please note: desire is not the only prerequisite, but it is the first prerequisite. The starting point in discovering an Elder is the God-given desire to fulfill that capacity. Elders shouldn't be heavily recruited or coerced. Elders should only be recognized. We shouldn't think that, by giving the title, the service will follow. We shouldn't think that if they aren't pastoring today, they will after being called. We should rather look for men who are already pastoring, already feeding, leading, and caring, and we should acknowledge their gift of leadership.

Elders are Elders before they are Elders. Something is wrong if a person is appointed as an Elder and then says, "Where is my flock and how do I pastor?" Something is right about looking around the church for flocks who follow shepherds saying, "We'd like to recognize you as a shepherd of this church." Men who pastor, pastor before they are given the title. They have a heart for the church and a love for the flock and it is impossible for them not to pastor because they have a desire, a God-given desire to pastor.

"I beg you to shepherd God's flock, for whom you are responsible. Watch over them because you want to, not because you are forced. This is how God wants it. Do it because you are happy to serve. Not because you want money" (1 Pet. 5:2).

The picture here is a willing shepherd. Not one seeking power, not one seeking fame, not one seeking something to fill spare time. (A good Elder has no spare time.) But one who wants to watch over people.

As John MacArthur says: "One who is qualified to be an Elder will be eager to give his life totally to the teaching of the Word of God and the leading of the flock of God, without any thought of gain at all. He will desire the office, pursue being set apart, and devote himself to it. No one will have to talk him into it. It is his heart's passion."

4. The Eldership is an elevated ministry. Not elevated in status, but elevated in terms of responsibility and respect. The word used in 1 Timothy 3:1 for Elder is episkopos, which means leader or overseer. This word was used in the Greek culture to refer to a city manager or inspector, steward. Also among the Essenes, a group of monastic Jews, who had an episkopoi in the Qumran culture. This leader had the duty of commanding, teaching, disciplining, and shepherding the people. Then and today the overseer has a wide range of spiritual responsibility.

- They are responsible for our souls (Heb. 13:17).
- They rule (1 Tim 5:17).
- They preach and teach (1 Tim 5:17).
- They pray (James 5:14).
- They care for the church (1 Pet. 5:1, 2).
- They set church policy (Acts 15:22).

- They ordain others (1 Tim. 4:14).

Considering these crucial responsibilities, we can see why Paul states that being an Elder is “a worthy calling.” The phrase means a noble, excellent, high-quality work. No elder should stoop to be a king. Being an elder is the highest and greatest calling one may have.

For that reason Paul tells the Thessalonians, appreciate those who work hard among you, who lead you in the Lord and teach you. Respect them with a very special love because of the work they do” (1 Thess. 5:13).

This is a good point to pause and ask yourself the questions: Do you respect your Elders with a very special love? Do you honor and elevate them? I know of one Elder who said he dreads going to church because he feels like he carries a spit bucket. When people see him coming, they work up a wad of their most recent complaint or gripe and spit in his bucket.

Sadly, many potential Elders avoid the service, for they have seen how their predecessors have been treated. Elders can’t satisfy everyone. They aren’t called to please you; they are called to lead you. You didn’t elect them, God did.

God has a special honor for these special servants. Peter speaks to his fellow Elders and says “when Christ, the Chief Shepherd, comes, you will get a glorious crown that will never lose its beauty.” (1 Pet. 5:4).

5. Finally, the Eldership is a rigorous ministry. Note Paul says that anyone who desires to be an Elder desires a good work. Not a hobby, club membership, or pastime. Being a good Elder is hard work. Being a lazy Elder is easy. But devoting yourself to the care of the flock is an arduous task. You don’t stop being an Elder when you leave the building. You never have all of the questions answered or the members healthy. You never have a week with just victories and no defeats. But it is a work with great reward.