

What is an elder? In a day and an age where you can find all sorts of churches, it isn't surprising that you can also find all sorts of answers to that question. Some churches view elders as board members or policy makers, whose work is primarily done in meetings. Others see elders as financial officers, working on the budget. Others understand elders as managers or administrators, making sure everyone has spiritual work to do and keeping everyone on task. Others see elders as life coaches or mentors, coming alongside you to diagnose spiritual inefficiencies in your life and helping you maximize your potential.

Views on elders run the gamut from seeing elders as "in-case-of-emergency-break-glass" figures who don't do anything until there is a crisis to be managed or a vote to be taken to spiritual superintendents who oversee your lifestyle and evaluate how you spend your time and money, who your friends are, where you should live and what job you should take. With all this confusion, and with the very real possibility that your view of an elder may be shaped more by your personal history (either positive or negative!) or imported from business or military or political contexts, we need to look to the Bible to understand what an elder is meant to be.

The Biblical role of elder comes from the Old Testament, where the elders are leading men recognized for godliness and practical wisdom. They provided leadership, judged in civil disputes and criminal trials, instructed the people in God's laws, made decisions on behalf of their family, clan, or tribe, and represented their people in religious worship, whether bringing gifts to build the temple, laying hands on atonement offerings, or leading the people in carrying out judicial sentences.

In both Old and New Covenants, we see the elders at work, and read about their qualities and qualifications, but we don't find anything like what we would call a job description. Since the nature of God's people changes from a tribal nation to a spiritual people, not everything from the OC carries into the New, most especially responsibility for civil and criminal sanctions, which Romans 13 tells us belongs to the magistrate, not the elders, but the OT still forms the basis for our idea of eldership.

When we look to the NT, we see a number of metaphors, actions, and qualifications, and by putting these together, we can get a composite picture of an elder, and although we might want more, we trust that God has given us enough information so that we can faithfully understand the character and calling of an elder.

In the NT, elders are referred to by the terms *overseers* and *presbyters*. This is one of the special offices in the Church, as distinct from the general office of member. Elders are fellow-priests who are set apart for a particular service to the body. God requires elders to be men, called to do Adam's work towards the new Eve, the Church as the bride of Christ.

In their service as elders (not in their individual persons!) they represent Jesus and bear His authority, which is why the other royal priests are called to submit to them. They are not the head of the Church; Christ is; but in their role, they act in Christ's name, so that when an elder preaches, he speaks for God; and when he baptizes, God is the one working through him. This is what the Reformed tradition refers to as *ministerial* rather than *magisterial* authority. Elders administer Christ's rule; they are not exercising their own rule, which is why elders must be accountable to the Word of Christ.

Their authority calls on them to apply that Word in particular cases, because the Bible doesn't say rebuke *Tom* or discipline *Sally*, but their authority is fundamentally limited by the bounds of the Bible. If they rebuke Tom, it's because Tom has done something that Jesus said to rebuke, not because Tom did something an elder didn't like! When they call the congregation to worship at 10am, not 9am, or to sing these particular hymns this week, this is their proper role as elders, but they do not have the authority to decide that we're going to watch youtube videos and share funny stories as our worship service. Elders are bound to the Bible in their exercise of leadership.

The key metaphors and roles that describe an elder are: shepherds (1 Pet. 5:2); examples (1 Pet. 5:3); teachers/guardians (Titus 1:9); judges (Acts 15:19; 1 Cor. 6:5-6); intercessors (James 5:14); rulers (1 Tim 5:17); household managers (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

From this we can see that the main function of elders is the spiritual oversight of a local congregation, and they carry out their work by teaching, by instructing, by correcting, and by their own examples. They must not be motivated by compulsion, money, or power; they are called to serve the body willingly and eagerly.

In return, they are promised an unfading crown of glory from the Chief Shepherd, which out to capture the heart and imaginations of every man who loves Jesus, not as a matter of personal pride, but as a matter of being used by God for a glorious and worthy work. Men, do you want to do something glorious for God? Do you want to use your strengths and gifts and abilities in thanks to Jesus for His gift of salvation? Do you want to honor Jesus by adorning His bride? Then aspire to be an elder!

The aspiration to serve must be accompanied by qualification for service, which is where 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 come in. We don't have time to work through each qualification this morning, although I can point you to some very good resources that have helped me understand these tests of godly character.

But one of the most striking things about these lists is that they describe not a perfect super-Christian man, but a faithful man. The only requirement for an elder that goes beyond what is commanded of every faithful Christian man is an aptitude for teaching Christian truth and correcting false doctrine. A shepherd leader must know how to feed God's flock and lead them to pure water, and how to protect them and defend them from wolves, false teachers, false doctrines, and sinful and destructive actions and habits.

When it comes to elders serving in our congregation, our Church Constitution lists a series of responsibilities of elders: in our congregation, elders a) oversee worship so that it glorifies God, b) clarify, promote, and protect Biblical vision and purpose, c) rule and shepherd, d) equip the saints, e) prayer and fasting, f) teaching/preaching/disciple making, g) administration of the sacraments, h) exercising the keys of the kingdom through discipline and restoration, i) prayer for the sick, j) delegate responsibilities to deacons and staff, etc, and k) commission and/or license ministerial students.

That sounds like a lot, and it is, but practically, not all of that work is done every day or week or month. A typical assignment for an individual elder might look something like this: pray for the households under your care every day. Make a shepherding contact with one of those households every week. Meet with an individual or household for shepherding and encouragement a couple times a month. Attend a weekly Bible study and occasionally lead. Lead in worship once a month. Participate in two Session meetings a month. Read a book together with the Session to help you grow and lead as elders once or twice a year. Attend a presbytery meeting once every year or two. Occasionally, intervene to help counsel and guide a family in a time of crisis, which may mean 4-6 hours of meetings in a week for a week or two.

Most of that can be accomplished faithfully in around 4-6 hours a week in a normal week, sometimes less, and sometimes significantly more, like when you take two days to attend presbytery or when a discipline case arises. It is a sacrifice, to be sure, which is why it must be entered into freely and eagerly, rather than by compulsion. But while there is always more work that could be done, when the work is divided among several faithful men, it can be a joy and not a burden.

And so as we look to the life of our congregation, I urge all of the priests to pray that God would raise up elders for this body. Consider men that you would be willing to nominate or support. Get to know men that you may not know as well, so that when the time comes, you can vote with confidence and not in ignorance.

Avoid a perfectionistic spirit – when 1 Pet. 5:5 commands you to be subject to the elders, it is easy to turn the qualifications into a shield that protects you from having to submit: a man who doesn't always agree with you gets labeled quarrelsome, a man who is better off than you must be a lover of money, a man who won't be shaken from his convictions is arrogant. But by this way of thinking, whatever short-term gains come from not having to submit to less than perfect elders lead to a great loss: to protect your freedom from their influence, you endanger your soul. Refusing to submit to less-than-perfect shepherds doesn't result in the church being led only by perfect shepherds; it results in having no shepherds at all, which is far worse for your soul.

And so when Paul sends Timothy and Titus to put the new church plants that he established on his missionary journey in order, he instructs them to appoint elders in every city, choosing from a group of men that have only been following Jesus for a few months, years at best. From this example, we see that it is better to have under-shepherds now than to wait until an uber-shepherd appears.

Robert Watson-Watt was in charge of developing early warning radar in Britain in order to withstand the German Luftwaffe. He was in a sense, a military shepherd. Of course, when dealing with life and death issues, you want your systems to be as perfect as possible, but because the enemy doesn't wait until you are ready, Watson-Watt famously said this: "Give them the third best to go on with; the second best comes too late, the best never comes."<sup>1</sup>

Many churches and even individuals put their souls at risk because they are waiting for the best elder, and the best never comes. Look for faithful men, not perfect men, and trust that Jesus knows what He is doing when He calls mere men to serve as shepherd leaders to the flock of God, exercising oversight as God would have you, as examples to the flock.

So men, seek to serve as elders eagerly and willingly, and all of you, be subject to the elders. And whether you are an elder, or you may become an elder, or whether you are a priestly member called to submit to the elders, all of you, clothe yourself with humility, embracing God's gracious gift of shepherd leaders.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.*

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect\\_is\\_the\\_enemy\\_of\\_good](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perfect_is_the_enemy_of_good)