

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

1. It has been a struggle to teach the function of spiritual church leadership when a church begins a selection process.
 - a. Our focus in Church of Christ -- getting structure right (Biblical form)
 - i. *Plurality of elders in every church w/ deacons to assist them*
 - ii. *So we have had men who wore the titles elder and deacon*
 - b. But we have not always asked more important question, “What are our leaders supposed to do?”
 - c. Because we’ve not always asked that question, we sometimes adopted leadership styles from the world
 - i. *Elders become a board of directors who make decisions behind closed doors & then hand down edicts*
 - ii. *We assume main job is to hire & fire ministers, decide how money is spent, & pass rules for what is done in the church*
 - iii. *At times we’ve acted like nothing can happen in church w/o elders direct authorization because they are the “Authorities”*
 - d. As you select elders ask, “What does scripture say Elders should do?”
2. This question becomes all more important when we come to NT looking for a specific guide for “right” structure of church government
 - a. NT structure ambiguous–frustrating to people who want to go by book
 - i. In Acts, early church was lead by 12 Apostles
 1. *They appointed 7 Men in Acts 6 to serve w/ them but they are not given any titles & did preaching & missionary work*
 2. *Paul appointed elders in mission churches but we are not told much about their function*
 3. *In NT we find prophets, missionary associates of Paul & misc. assorted leaders–most have no titles at all*
 - ii. Most of Paul’s letters give little help in finding the “right” structure
 1. *He writes churches about problems giving information, instruction, correction w/o ever referring to elders*
 2. *Philippians mentions elders & deacons but doesn’t tell us what they did or how they were selected*

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

3. Only 1 Tim. & Titus give information about elders (sparse)
4. At times Paul doesn't fit "Elder-Deacon" structure Eph 4:11-12
 - a. These do not seem to be offices but functions (gifts)
 - b. Do you know of a church that uses Eph. 4:11-12 as structure of leadership?
- b. The focus on leadership in NT is on function not on form
 - i. God brilliantly vague about forms because he knew church would have to be flexible over time as gospel crossed cultural boundaries
 - ii. Scripture implies God is more concerned w/ character & function of people who lead church than w/ church structure itself
 - iii. Elders act differently in small country church v. large city churches
3. The term "overseer" may feel a little odd to you
 - a. We don't use it much do we, although it is a very biblical term?
 - i. In fact, the NT uses 3 words to describe the men who serve as the chief spiritual leaders of a church: elder, overseer, & shepherd
 - ii. While we tend to take turns emphasizing one term over another from one era of the church to another, they are all important terms because they reveal the job description of our leaders
 - b. Words used almost interchangeably 1 Pet 5:1-4; Acts 20:17, 28-29
 - c. 2 "Qualifications" lists use different terms 1 Tim 3:1-2a; Titus 1:5-6a
 - d. While the use of 3 words to describe one role has caused confusion & led to different types of church governance, in NT they are the same people
 - e. We've spent enormous attention on character traits in I Tim 3 & Tit. 1, but at times we've neglected what we are asking these men to do
 - i. While there is no formal job description, imbedded within the 3 titles are roles or aspects of job description of the church's chief servants
 - ii. We need to look at each one carefully before nominating anyone
4. Each word has a different nuance in meaning
 - a. Elder (*Presbuteros*) is the most common of the 3 words in the NT

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

- i. Long tradition behind elders deep in OT & Jewish church heritage
 - ii. Elders were wise patriarchs of village or synagogue (clan leaders)
 - 1. *Gave advice, settled disputes & watched for troublemakers*
 - 2. *Every village had elders—wise old heads consulted about anything of consequence for the village*
 - 3. *Selecting elders for church involved deciding which city elders had character & spiritual maturity to be church elders*
 - iii. Elders did not have “legal” authority, they had power of influence based on their character and experience
 - 1. *They didn’t pass laws or rules in a legal or formal sense*
 - 2. *We get that idea from our culture (nation of laws) not scripture*
 - 3. *You could not get things done w/o support of elders because community listened to their elders*
 - iv. Elders did not rule (like king) they built consensus, enforced community standards, used power of persuasion
 - 1. *They had influence or credibility not “authority” per se*
 - 2. *It was dependent on respect & character not office or law*
 - 3. *Greek words for “Authority” & “Power” not used of elders in NT*
 - v. Elders are wise men who’ve earned respect of their community & whose opinions shape everyone’s opinion (consultants, guides)
- b. Overseer (*Episcopos*) implies more sense of administration (manager)
- i. An overseer is someone who literally keeps an eye out for others
 - 1. *Could be translated guardian--idea of lovingly watching over*
 - 2. *A person who is responsible for other people or a mission*
 - ii. An overseer is not a detached boss, but more of a foreman on job who helps people find their place, do work, & looks after needs
 - iii. “Overseer” unpopular word because of authoritarian elders in past

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

1. *Some claim today elders should have no role in buildings, budget, or decisions about programs*
 2. *Over-reaction--elders have to give an account to God for what happens in church, so they need to know what's going on*
 3. *While good elders delegate most tasks to focus on spiritual needs of people, they need to be informed of church activities*
- c. Shepherd or Pastor (*Poimen*) are people who take care of sheep
- i. Made sure they were fed, watered, protected from elements
 - ii. They nursed wounded, looked for strays, & fought predators
 - iii. Just as David called Lord “shepherd” in Ps. 23, Jesus calls himself good shepherd John 10:11-15
 1. *Shepherds know sheep—live with them & know by name*
 2. *Sheep follow shepherd because they know him and trust him*
 3. *Shepherds lead sheep who follow behind in trust*
 4. *Not cowboys who drive cattle or Sheriffs who enforce law*
 - iv. Shepherds are in the people business (spiritual care)
 1. *Look after flock's needs, go after strays & gently lead back*
 2. *Responsible for what flock is fed in pulpit, class, small groups*
 3. *They should be regularly teaching the church themselves*
 4. *They spend much time in prayer for sheep w/ Chief Shepherd*
 - v. While no shepherd can know every sheep, every shepherd should have an identifiable flock of people who follow him
- d. While each of our church servants need to be competent to function in all three roles, they will not each have the same strengths
- i. Some may be better administrators while other may be better at shepherding or giving advice—but collectively, they need to be able to meet every leadership need the church has

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

- ii. Each leader will have to function in each all 3 capacities are different times, so they all need to have some ability in each area
5. While it is essential that we select men who have the character to represent the Lord, it is equally important that we select men who can do the jobs this role requires
- a. In your private study, you need to look over the list of character traits that Paul says an elder or overseer need to possess
 - i. We need to look at a man's character first, because if he doesn't have right character, he'll do more harm than good no matter how gifted he is at the tasks the job requires
 - ii. Character comes first, but in the end the character test is just a screen test for the larger Question: Who can do this job?
 - b. Paul gave "qualifications" based on what the jobs required Titus 1:6-9
 - i. Create a missionary outpost in a wild & immoral culture 1:12-13
 - 1. *In Ancient world to "Cretenize" meant to lie or cheat*
 - 2. *False teachers stirring up trouble in new churches*
 - ii. Paul calls for elders/overseers to correct problems
 - 1. *Elders to be living models of Christian life in wild pagan culture*
 - 2. *Elders ensure teaching in church promoted healthy Christian living*
 - c. To identify these kind of men, Paul lays out an organized list in Titus
 - i. First he talks about family characteristics in v. 6
 - ii. Second he describes personal characteristics vv. 7-9
 - d. He gives one key word at the head of each list: blameless (v. 6 & 7)
 - i. These kinds of character lists were very common in first century
 - 1. *Often used in hiring employees for leadership positions*
 - 2. *Typically first word in list is key word & rest explained that word*
 - 3. *Obvious in Titus 1 because word repeated before each list*
 - ii. Every other characteristic is an expansion of key word: Blameless

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

- iii. This helps resolve issue of how strictly to interpret characteristics
 - 1. *E.g., every child rebels at little—how much is too much? If it tarnishes his reputation as a father (blamed)*
 - 2. *How Hospitable does an elder have to be? Enough to respected by church & community (blameless)*
- iv. The first focus is on his family life 1:7 (assumes family man)
 - 1. *Must be a one-woman man (Gk)*
 - a. Same phrase used in 1 Tim. 5:9 (faithful spouse)
 - b. In Greco-Roman world men expected to have mistresses
 - c. Must be model of faithfulness to wife—blameless
 - d. Point not # of wives, but what kind of husband he is
 - e. This also points to the importance of the wife as a partner with her husband as a leader
 - 2. *He must be recognized as a good father*
 - a. NIV says “children believe” but Gk “children faithful”
 - i. *In context it probably means faithful to Father*
 - ii. *1 Tim. 3 does not require children to be believers*
 - b. It is best if children are Christians – but not sure God requires that
 - c. Real Issue: blameless—If he isn’t viewed as a good spiritual leader in family, the church will not follow him
 - 3. *Why these restrictions? V. 7a*
 - a. Because he is to be steward of “God’s family” (NIV poor)
 - b. Man’s family is the best test of ability to lead God’s family
 - c. This again points to the importance of the wife as a partner with her husband as a leader

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

- v. Second Vices to be avoided—big problems for elders v. 7b
 - 1. *Self-willed or over-bearing (pushing his own selfish agenda)*
 - a. Can't be a servant leader with those traits--run over church
 - b. Opposite of Christ's model of leadership
 - 2. *Explosive temper—short fuse*
 - a. Elders deal with very frustrating situations & difficult people
 - b. They cannot be losing composure & wounding people
 - 3. *Being drunkard or violent (go together)*
 - a. Do we need this? Not going to pick Otis from Andy Griffith.
 - b. In Crete, you couldn't assume anything
 - c. In Corinth we have people getting drunk in the Lord's Supper.
 - 4. *Not pursuing dishonest gain*
 - a. Will not seek leadership to make money off of the church
 - b. Important since "overseers" in charge of church funds
- vi. Third—Virtues which are essential to being an effective elder 1:8-9
 - 1. *Hospitality —open life & home to others (church met in homes)*
 - 2. *One who loves what is good (support every good work)*
 - 3. *Self-controlled (missing & badly needed in Crete)*
 - 4. *Upright or just (treats others fairly—does the right thing)*
 - 5. *Holy or pious (a spiritual man—not just a good man)*
 - 6. *Disciplined (redundant—very important)*

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

7. *Hold firmly to original gospel message-teacher w/ words & life*
 - a. Responsibility to correct wrong teaching 1:10-11
- e. While no one can claim to be all these things all the time, we need to find men whose conduct & reputation in these matters is blameless
 - i. Respected in church or community as men of high character
 - ii. We are not talking about who a man may have been 15-30 years ago, but who he is today
 - iii. A great elder who is recovering alcoholic (20+ years sober)
 - iv. Paul killed Christians & Peter denied Lord, but both became Apostles
6. This process is not about giving out recognition for a life well lived
 - a. This is about giving people jobs that are critical to the health of this community of faith and the accomplishing of our mission
 - b. Questions to ask yourself in the nominating process
 - i. If I have spiritual struggles who would I want to check on me?
 - ii. If I am gravely sick, who would I want to come pray with me?
 - iii. If I got pulled away into sinful behavior, who would I let talk to me without getting angry, defensive, or feel judged?
 - iv. If I had a question about what the scripture teaches or how to live out some Biblical principle, who would I approach for counsel?
 - v. If I needed advise on how to handle a problem in my marriage or a rebellious child, who would I feel comfortable approaching?
 - vi. When people get crossways with each other at church, who would I ask to bring a peaceful resolution to that conflict?
 - vii. If a Bible class teacher began to teach things I thought were not biblical & he ignored my concerns, who'd I trust to resolve my concern?
 - viii. Who do I want to introduce to people in the community as a leader in our church? Who represents Jesus well?
 - ix. Who do I want to hold up to my children as a model of the life of Jesus lived out in our community? Whose family impresses me?

What Are Elders Supposed to Do? Acts 20:17-31

- c. It would be unfair to expect every candidate to excel at all these things, but these questions will help you identify the kind of person
- d. Don't be deceived into thinking that putting someone in a position of leadership will cause them to suddenly display abilities not seen before
 - i. Look at who is already doing this kind of work
 - ii. Titles don't change people
- e. Don't just nominate good men--important but not enough--pick men who are able to do the work the Lord needs done