

# Often Asked Questions Regarding Elders

## What is the proper understanding of the term elder?

The term, elder, is of Old Testament origin. First used in Numbers 11 and Deuteronomy 27, it was descriptive of the seventy tribal leaders who assisted Moses. It referred to a special category of men who were set apart for leadership. Later, the elders of Israel were specifically involved in the leadership of cities. Their function remained as decision makers--applying wisdom to the lives of the people in resolving conflicts, giving direction, and general overseeing of the details of an orderly society. (See *The Old Testament History Of Elders* for additional information.)

In the New Testament, the Greek word for elder (*presbuteros*), is used about seventy times. *Presbuteros* refers to recognized spiritual leaders.

## How is the term elder used in reference to the church?

*Presbuteros*, the Greek word for elder, is used nearly twenty times in Acts and the epistles in reference to a unique group of leaders in the church. From the beginning of the church, it was clear that a group of mature spiritual leaders was to have responsibility for the church. The book of Acts indicates that elders existed in the church for leadership to the body. Nearly every church in the New Testament is specifically said to have had elders.

## Does the New Testament use other titles to describe elders?

Three terms are used synonymously in the New Testament to describe these leaders of God's people. The title of elder is used most frequently. The title of pastor is used least. Overseers and pastors are not distinct from elders; the terms are simply different ways of identifying the same people. This is best illustrated in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-8 and 1 Peter 5:1-4. Acts 20:17-30 also uses all three terms interchangeably.

## What is the role of an elder?

As the apostolic era came to a close, the office of elder emerged as the highest level of local church leadership. Thus, it carried a great amount of responsibility. First Timothy 3:1 states, "It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do." In verse 5, Paul identifies the work of the elder as "taking care of the church." Therefore, an elder is to be a caretaker of the church. There are four basic functions of the elder: lead, feed, care for practical needs, and protect the church. Functioning in these four major areas, the elders are to enact church policy (Acts 15:22), manage church resources (Acts 20:28), lead, teach, and preach (1 Timothy 5:17), exhort and refute (Titus 1:9), and act as shepherds, setting an example for all (1 Peter 5:1-3). They are to devote themselves first to prayer and to the ministry of the Word, and delegate ministry assignments to gifted and qualified individuals.(Acts 6:3-4).

## What are the biblical qualifications of an elder?

First Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-8 identify the qualifications of an elder. (See *The 21 Qualifications Of Elders* in the church manual for a detailed explanation of these qualifications.)

## **How are elders to be ordained?**

The New Testament clearly indicates that elders were uniquely set apart or appointed to their office. The concept of ordination implies official recognition by the leadership of the church and a public announcement setting men aside for special ministry. Elders are a group of specially called and ordained men with a great desire to shepherd the flock of God. Their calling is initiated by the Holy Spirit, confirmed through prayer, and qualified through the consistent testimony of a pure life in the eyes of all. Scriptural references to ordination are found in 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:22; Acts 14:23; 2 Corinthians 8:19; and Titus 1:5.

## **Are elders to be supported financially by the church?**

First Timothy 5:17-18 and 1 Corinthians 9:1-19 demonstrate two thoughts concerning the support of elders. Paul's admonition was that elders who rule well should be worthy of a financial remuneration. However, he further clarifies his admonition in the Corinthian letter by stating in verse 6, "Do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working?" He and Barnabas were supporting themselves through work outside the scope of the church. Clearly, Paul was stating that financial remuneration is the responsibility of the flock; however, it is the option of the elder to accept or refuse the subsidy. A more important issue to be considered here is not subsidy, but equality. Every elder, paid or unpaid, has the same right of leadership. If the Lord has called him to be an elder, and the church has recognized his calling, whether or not he receives financial support from the church body has no bearing upon his position of leadership. An elder's subsidy is at his option; his spiritual qualifications are not.

## **Is the pastorate a team effort? Why have we always had just one pastor and associate pastors to help him?**

All the biblical data clearly indicates that the pastorate is a team effort. It is significant that every place in the New Testament where the term *presbuterous* is used, is clearly in the plural sense. The norm in the New Testament church was a plurality of elders. Nowhere in the New Testament is there reference to a one-pastor congregation. Much can be said for the benefits of leadership made up of a plurality of godly men. Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual. Why have so many churches ignored this team concept? It is not easy to answer this question. Speculative thought could easily be directed toward the example of the third century rule of Constantine and his organization of the "clergy-laity" structure for church leadership. Constantine erred in his approach because the New Testament does not present the church as just one church with just one infallible leader. It is interesting to note that his model is more akin to our present day approach than the New Testament.

## **Does leadership by elders eliminate the role of a special leader?**

No. The plurality of elders does not eliminate the unique role of a special leader. Within the framework of elders' ministries there is great diversity as each man exercises his unique gifts. Some gifts are highly visible and some are not. All are within the plan of God for the church. With the exception of Judas, the disciples were equal in terms of the office privileges, respect shown, and honor given. And yet within the twelve, there was a tremendous amount of diversity.

Even among the twelve, there were recognized leaders, or, a "leader among leaders." Most often, Peter was the spokesman or representative for the twelve. And while Peter occupied this role, they all retained equal office, equal honor, equal privileges and responsibilities. They were all sent, they all preached the same message, they all healed, and they all possessed equal access to Jesus. Whereas, none of them was less in equality, some of them stood out over the others as leaders among leaders.

Every ministry we see in the New Testament is a team effort. And while that does not eliminate the unique roles of leadership, it does mean that there is no place for dictatorial or self-serving leadership.

## **Does leadership by elders eliminate congregational involvement in church administration and guidance?**

Absolutely not! The church would be informed, on a regular basis, of matters related to church finance and other issues of significance. The church would retain the right to call, rebuke or dismiss the Pastor-Teacher, elders, and deacons. Major decisions relating to church properties, such as buying, selling, or going into significant debt, would be decided by the church. The church would approve the annual ministry budget. Amending the Bylaws would also require a church affirmation. The elders would frequently seek church counsel and affirmation on other important issues, as they arise. Remember, it would be impossible for a council of elders to do all the planning, supervision, and administration of a church our size. They will need to delegate responsibilities in many areas of church life.

## **What is the elders' relationship to the congregation?**

According to Scripture, elders are called and appointed by God, confirmed by the church body, and ordained to the task of shepherding the flock of God. To them are committed the responsibilities of living biblical lifestyles for all to see and emulate. Hebrews 13:7 and 17 emphasize both the elder's responsibility to live as an example, manifesting virtue in his lifestyle, and the church's desire to follow this example. Elders lead through love and in the power of the Holy Spirit, never forcing their will or authority over the flock.

## **If our tradition does not call for elder leadership, can we have elders and remain Southern Baptist?**

The answer is yes, but that should not be our first concern. The primary question is, "Can we become more biblical by appointing and empowering elders?" The Bible clearly teaches that we should use elder leadership.

To get back to Baptists, we can have elders and remain affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. There are many Baptist churches today practicing elder leadership, and Baptist history is full of churches that used elders. (See History Of Baptist Elders Documents.)

## **Many churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention do not use elder leadership. Why?**

The nature of Southern Baptist organization allows every Baptist church to function as an independent and autonomous congregation. This allows for a wide variety of practices among our churches. We should not be surprised that Baptist churches differ regarding eldership. A study of Baptist history reveals that when the government began to require trustees for all business corporations, that requirement was also applied to churches. Gradually, some of the primary functions of biblical eldership were assumed by these new trustees. Unfortunately, the trustees were frequently not selected according to scriptural qualifications. This encouraged confusion within the churches regarding the leadership role. Another reason why many Baptist churches do not use elders is that they have chosen to use their pastor and associate pastors in this leadership role; perhaps believing that only full-time pastors were called and equipped to perform the elder tasks. Still other churches have invested the elder responsibilities in their deacons. Unfortunately, they have lost the vital function of the deacons by that decision. Still another reason for not using elders is tradition. When we rely on tradition to determine our faith and structure, we depart from biblical truth.

## **Do elders replace the need for deacons?**

No, they are two separate groups with very different assignments. Both offices are prescribed for the local church. See Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:1-13. Deacons are charged with the responsibility of offering the ministry of mercy. Elders are responsible for protecting, feeding, leading, and caring for practical needs of the church.

## **Who comprises our Elder Council?**

The Bible offers us specific guidelines for the selection of elders. Elders must be appointed according to the undeniable leadership of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). They must be men who passionately believe they are called to this place of ministry (1 Timothy 3:1). Finally, elders are to be selected according to twenty-one specific characteristics (1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-8). (See *The 21 Qualifications Of Elders*.)

It is probable that some of the pastoral staff would feel called to serve on the elder council and meet the qualifications for selection. It is also probable that men, who are not involved in vocational ministry will meet these guidelines and serve as elders. Together, those called to vocational service and those who are non-vocational, are to minister together as a council of equals. The church will ultimately have the right to confirm the Lord's leadership regarding the appointment of elders.

It is recognized that the Pastor-Teacher serves as an elder. The church has already called him to perform the functions of eldership.

## **How many elders would comprise the Elder Council?**

We must not set limits on this number. That is a question that must be answered by the leadership of God. Man-made quotas and regulations can cause the church to miss the Lord's leadership in the selection process. However, it is recognized that there must be a plurality and never a single elder. As the church grows, the need for elders will increase.