

Elders

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” (1 Peter 5:1–4)

The New Testament presents to us a system of order in the church in which elders lead. The questions that are before us are as follows: who are elders, what are their duties, what is their authority, what qualifies one to be an elder, and what relationship does the rest of the local church have to the elders?

Lessons From The Old Testament

The first thing that needs to be recognized is that elders were nothing new in the New Testament days. Elders have been around since Old Testament times. As with many other things in the New Testament, the office of elder is based upon the pattern that was established in the Old Testament. With this in mind, we shall consider the Old Testament’s teaching regarding elders.

In Genesis 50:1-8, the elders of Egypt were present for the burial of Jacob in the land of Canaan. While there is little specified here, it seems that the elders of Egypt were those who were under Pharaoh in authority. While age probably was a factor, eldership was about the position of leadership and authority under the supreme ruler, who was Pharaoh. The elders represented Pharaoh and the people of Egypt.

When Moses was directed by the LORD to tell Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go, the elders of Israel went with Moses. First Moses spoke to the elders of the people, who obviously were the representative heads of the various tribes and families of Israel. Then the elders, representing the tribes and families, appeared before Pharaoh, demanding their release in the name of the LORD. (Exodus 3:15-19)

When Moses would give the words of God to Israel concerning the Passover, it was physically impossible for him to assemble the large multitude of people, so he called the elders together and gave them the message to take back to the people. Upon reception of God’s Word, the people obeyed the elders and offered the Passover as they were directed. (Exodus 12:21-28)

In the days of God giving Israel water from the rock, it was again the elders who stood with Moses as God demonstrated His glory. (Exodus 17:1-7) It was literally impossible for a couple million people to see the water immediately flow from the rock when it was struck; but it was possible for the elders to tell them of it as they saw the water flowing to them. Again, the elders stood as representatives of the people.

Exodus 18:12-27 shows us Moses choosing men to judge the people. It seems that everyone applied to Moses for judgment in various cases, yet Moses could not bear the load. Because of this, he followed the guidance of his father-in-law and set the elders to represent him as Israel’s leader under God; and the elders were to rule

over the people as the representatives of God under Moses' leadership. (See also Numbers 11:11-17).

In Exodus 19:1-8, Moses spoke the words of the LORD to the elders, who then carried those words to the people. Again we see that the elders were representative leaders of the people, under the authority of Moses and God's Word. (Cf Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Joshua 8:33-35; 2 Kings 23:1-3).

Moses, in Deuteronomy 5:23-25, spoke to Israel of their assembling at Mount Sinai. There he told them that the heads of their tribes and their elders asked him to speak to them rather than their hearing the voice of God directly. When we read Exodus 19:7-8 and Exodus 20:18-20, we can see that the elders both spoke for the people and to the people. We once again see that the elders were representatives of the people.

Notice also that the elders of Israel were those who judged, applied and enforced the laws of God in Israel. (Deuteronomy 19:11-13; 21:1-9; 18-21; 22:13-21; 25:7-10; Joshua 20:1-6; Ruth 4:1-12)

We also see that the elders of Israel were the ones who confirmed God's choice of David as their king. (2 Samuel 3:17-21; 5:3; 19:11-15)

One thing that is of great importance is that elders are to be honored. We are told to honor the old men (Leviticus 19:32). Elders who are leaders are not always old men, yet their position is that of an old man whose character, word, and example are to be expected. Sadly Israel failed in that, and that was part of their downfall, when they went into captivity (Lamentations 4:16; 5:12,14).

Elders In The Church

"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." (Acts 20:28)

As we study the New Testament church and its leadership, we must remember that the church did not arise as something entirely new. Jesus' work was a work of fulfillment. Jesus came to build upon the things He had established in the Old Testament. We know that the things that happened to Israel are examples to us (1 Corinthians 10:6,11; Romans 15:4), and that Jesus did not come to destroy the Old Testament Scriptures, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17-20). We shall see, then, that the New Testament eldership has much in common with Israel's eldership.

As we begin, let us notice that the eldership in the New Testament is referred to in a variety of ways. The elders in the text above are to feed, or to shepherd God's flock. In 1 Peter 5:1-4, we find that the elders are to feed, or shepherd God's flock, and to take oversight by giving attention to them and their state of affairs. Another word for shepherd is pastor. Just as we saw that the elders of Israel heard the words of God from Moses and spoke them to the people, so the elders in the church are under the Lord Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, and must take only His Words, which are the Scriptures, and speak them to the people. We also find the word bishop used in 1 Timothy 3, which is paralleled by the word elder in Titus 1:5-11.

What are bishops? A bishop is an overseer. Just as the shepherd is to take oversight of the flock, that is the very name of the office as well- overseer. Notice

that Paul tells Timothy four very important things concerning pastors (1 Timothy 3:1-7):

1. He has to be of godly character (:1-6).
2. He has to have the reputation of a godly man (:7).
3. He is to be able to teach (:2).
4. He is to take care of the church of God, just as he is to rule (That is, to stand over, preside, rule, and direct.) his own house.

Paul left Titus at Crete to set in order, or correct the things that were lacking there (Titus 1:4-11). Among those things was the fact that they needed leadership. Titus was to ordain bishops to shepherd the flock. As bishops, they needed to be of godly character, but also one who would cling to the Word of God. They needed to cling to the Word of God, because they were going to face opposition from people who would need to have their mouths closed. Titus and these bishops would have to rebuke these vain talkers (:10-14). Not only were they to rebuke, but also they were to rebuke sharply. This speaks of abruptly exposing the falsehoods, ungodly words, and ungodly deeds of those who were disrupting the flock of God. The eldership is more than simply a figurehead who is to preach, visit the sick, and go home. If that is what you desire, perhaps you might have a chaplain, a preacher, or an evangelist of sorts, you may even have a hireling; but you don't have a biblical elder or pastor, that is for sure! Biblical elders are given the difficult task of pointing out sin, exposing the ungodly, who refuse to repent, and rebuking them.

The elders, as seen in the book of Acts, gave directions based upon God's Word. As they did so, the churches were expected to honor this. *"And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved. When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren. And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:1-5)* *"Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren: And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment: It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered*

to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.” (Acts 15:22–29) Because of the truth of the Word of God, these elders had the right to speak the Word to others, with the expectation that those who heard it would accept it in humble submission.

Elders are also spoken of as ruling, or leading, as well as laboring in the Word and in doctrine, or teaching (1 Timothy 5:17-18). We are instructed to give them double honor, which not only denotes respect but, as the context shows, speaks to us of providing for his material needs. Not only so, but as an elder, Timothy had a duty to rebuke, and to rebuke publicly (1 Timothy 5:20).

The work of the pastor/elder is also seen in the command that Paul gave to Timothy: *“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry.” (2 Timothy 4:1–5)* The elder is to preach the Word of God. He is to be instant. That is, he is to be standing near and pressing in his earnestness. He is not only to be ready to do his work, but must do so with great sincerity and godly passion. And this being instant must be whether it is convenient to do so, or inconvenient. He must reprove, show sin to be sin, and to bring the convicting influence of God’s Word to bear upon the people. He is to rebuke, to censure those who refuse to repent: his words must always be charitable, but they will not always be sweet and kind, because rebuke involves stern resistance to those who reject the Word and refuse to repent. Then he is to exhort. Exhortation is coming alongside others to help them. The elder is to truly act as one who is older than those around him, lending them the wisdom that He has gained from the Word of God and from the experiences God has used to give him wisdom. All of these things must be done with much endurance, while continually teaching and applying God’s Word.

We also find these instructions in 1 Thessalonians: *“And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12–13)* Again, the elders labor, are over the flock as managers or leaders, and they have the job of admonishing, or instructing the church. Those who lead have authority, and are expected to be followed. Those whose office is to teach do so with the expectation that those who are taught are to learn, believe, and submit to the Word of God. These things are most certainly implied in the command that the church know, or be fully acquainted with those who labor among them. This implies close relationships, and is followed by the command to esteem them very highly in love, or to abundantly, exceedingly, and vehemently regard, or esteem them in love because of the work God is using them to do.

We also find God’s Word instructing us in Hebrews: *“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day,*

and for ever.” (Hebrews 13:7-8) “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.” (Hebrews 13:17) The instruction to the churches is to remember, to keep in mind those who rule over them. That is, there are those whose job is to speak the Word of God, following the Lord Jesus Christ, and they are rulers, leaders, their position in the church of God is chief, being under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd. Not only so, but verse seventeen tells us that the elder rules and watches over the souls of the flock, because they must give an account to God. This entails much more than simply preaching, but keeping an eye out for the spiritual health of each sheep, and addressing those needs. Sometimes addressing the needs of the sheep means comforting them in their afflictions, but it can also mean stern correction and rebuke in order to call them back to the right way.

John certainly was no passive elder when he said, *“I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.” (3 John 9-10)* It was his duty to actively resist those who thought that they had the right to usurp the authority of the eldership and take charge of the church. John stated that he would most certainly deal with the matter. We must also notice that in the matter of church discipline in 1 Corinthians chapter five, it was Paul who took the lead. The apostle wrote to the church, and commanded them what to do, when to do it, and why. The modern day idea of the passive pastor who simply preaches, visits the sick, and goes home is by no means in harmony with the Biblical doctrine of the eldership.

In closing, the elder is one whose position is that of one who is mature, experienced, educated in the Word of God, and is considered chief among the flock where he is placed. He is not elder by merit of age, but by merit of position. There may be those within the flock who are older than he; but if there is a man who is eighty-six years of age, he should respect his pastor as though he were approximately one hundred-six years of age, having the wisdom and character that would come with a godly life of so many years. His duty is to patiently teach the flock the Word of God, to show them their errors and rebuke them when needed. The pastor is to use the Word of God to instruct the people in righteousness, correct their errors, and to help them in all of the things that they face in life. In all of these things, the elder is to step out in front of the people, as a shepherd does his sheep; and he is to lead the people. For too many years, and in too many places, the sheep have taken charge and led the shepherd. Is it any wonder that we have so many weak, anemic, and unholy churches these days? It is time for us to recover a Biblical understanding of the eldership. It is designed by God for the good of the churches, that we might fill our place here on Earth to spread the gospel and give God glory.

