

The Work of Elders

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Introduction:

- I. In doing research for this presentation, I have browsed through the archives of various “brotherhood” papers, searching for articles relating to my topic.
 - A. *Searching The Scriptures, Truth Magazine, Preceptor Magazine, Gospel Guardian, etc.*
 - B. The search took me back, in some cases, over 50 years.
- II. I was somewhat surprised to find that (according to my own estimate) perhaps three-fourths of all articles dealing with the subject of N.T. elders in those papers concerned qualifications.
 - A. I was able to locate only a few articles dealing specifically with the work of elders.
 - B. Even those articles often turned out to be more about the qualifications than about the actual work.
- III. In my opinion, this is an area that has been much neglected in our study of elders.
 - A. A “cart-before-the-horse” mentality.
 - B. *In my opinion*, the qualifications can only be clearly understood and meaningful when we first understand the nature of work that an elder is to do.
 - C. The qualifications make sense not only because they are given by God, but because of the work they are intended to produce.
- IV. In this study, we want to do several things to help us understand the work of elders in local churches as it is revealed in the New Testament:
 - A. First, we want to make it clear that we are talking about an “office” in the local church when we talk about the work and qualifications of elders.
 - B. Secondly, we propose to examine the various words that are used in the N.T. to describe these men.
 - C. Finally, we want to pull together everything that the N.T. says about how these men function in the working of a local church – the work of elders in practical terms.

The Work of Elders Is Work!

- I. The apostle Paul, in his remarks on the qualifications of elders, makes it clear that being an elder involves *work*!
 - A. ***“It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.”*** (1 Timothy 3:1)
 - B. “It is dangerous to forget that the eldership is a *work*.” (Henry, 9)
 - C. The word translated “*work*” in this passage means “business, employment, that which any one is occupied; that which one undertakes to do, enterprise, undertaking.” (Thayer)
 1. According to this verse, then, there is something that an elder must **do** – **WORK!**
 2. “We need to understand not merely the authority of the eldership, but also the proper usages of that authority.” (Henry, 9)
 - D. Perhaps it will help us to understand the working nature of the eldership by considering the role of “elders” at other times in Bible history.

1. In Old Testament times.
 - a. Jethro counseled his son-in-law, Moses, to spread the burden of leadership among able men who were to serve as “*leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.*” (Exodus 18:21)
 - b. Later, a group of “*seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people*” were chosen to stand with Moses and serve in a special capacity. (Numbers 11:16)
 - c. Later, the elders of Israel were specifically involved in the leadership of cities. (1 Samuel 11:3; 16:4; and 30:26)
 - 1) The Old Testament refers to them as “*elders of Israel*” (1 Samuel 4:3); “*elders of the land*” (1 Kings 20:7); “*elders of Judah*” (2 Kings 23:1); “*elders...of each city*” (Ezra 10:14); and “*elders of the congregation*” (Judges 21:16).
 - 2) They served in the capacity of local magistrates, and as governors over the tribes. (Deuteronomy 16:18; 19:12; 31:28)
2. In New Testament times.
 - a. The council of elders – The Sanhedrin – a sort of Jewish “Supreme Court” (the word “*elder*” appears 28 times in the N.T. in reference to this council).
 - b. At the same time, many communities had their own council of elders, whose duty was to interpret and enforce the law.
 - c. Each synagogue also had a council of elders to oversee the worship.
3. In the local church.
 - a. Elders first appear in the context of the local church in Jerusalem. (Acts 11:30; 15:2-3, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 21:18)
 - b. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders “*in every church.*” (Acts 14:23)
 - c. Paul met with the elders of the church at Ephesus. (Acts 20:17)
 - d. Paul addressed the Philippian letter to, among others, “*the overseers.*” (Philippians 1:1)
 - e. Paul instructed Timothy and Titus concerning the qualifications and appointment of elders in local churches. (1 Timothy 3 & Titus 1)
 - f. Peter included instructions to elders in one of his letters. (1 Peter 5)

II. What is the work that elders are appointed to do?

- A. We can only answer that question by examining the Scriptures.
- B. In the N.T. we find 4 words that are used to describe these men.

Four New Testament Words That Describe The Leaders of Local Churches

- I. “**Elder.**” (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2; 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1)
 - A. Greek: *Presbuteros*.
 1. “Elder, of age; among the Christians, those who presided over the assemblies.” (Thayer)

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2. “One who is older, experienced, and wise – exercise mature judgment and leadership abilities in the local church.” (Halbrook, 611)
 3. This is the most frequently used word pertaining to these leaders in the N.T.
 4. The meaning of this term fits exactly with the qualifications regarding the man not being “*a new convert*” (1 Tim. 3:6), and having established himself both in the faith and in terms of the maturity coming from family leadership responsibilities.
- B. The word implies that the man possesses the needed *wisdom* and *dignity* to do the work.
- II. **“Overseer.”** (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1:7; Philippians 1:1)
- A. Greek: *Poimen*.
1. “An overseer; a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly, any curator, guardian or superintendent.” (Thayer)
 2. “One who looks over, superintends, and inspects – see that the things to be done by a local church are done rightly.” (Halbrook, 611)
 3. Unfortunately translated “*Bishop*” in some early versions, which leads to confusion today because of the “ecclesiastical” meaning often attached to that term.
- B. This signifies the position or function which they have in the congregation – a position of oversight, guardianship, *etc.*
1. They do not make laws where God has not made them – they simply carry out the laws God has commanded.
 2. This term shows that God has given them the *authority* to do just that!
- III. **“Shepherd.”** (cf. Ephesians 4:11; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:4)
- A. Greek: *Poimen*.
1. “To feed, to tend a flock, keep sheep; to rule, govern; of rulers; to furnish pasture for food; to nourish.” (Thayer)
 2. “One who guards, tends, and feeds sheep – provide for all the spiritual needs of the local church.” (Halbrook, 611)
 3. Used as a noun only one time in the New Testament. (cf. Ephesians 4:11)
 4. Again, unfortunately translated “*Pastor*” in some early versions.
- B. Their work, then, involves shepherding the flock, with all the varied implications of this word.
- IV. **“Steward.”** (cf. Titus 1:7, “*For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward*”)
- A. Greek: *Oikonomos*.
1. “The manager of household or of household affairs; especially a steward, manager, superintendent (whether free-born as was usually the case, a freed-man or a slave) to whom the head of the house or proprietor has entrusted the management of his affairs, the care of receipts and expenditures, and the duty of dealing out the proper portion to every servant and even to the children not yet of age.” (Thayer)
 2. Implies confidence, trustworthiness.
- B. The word “*steward*” indicates a man who can be trusted with great treasures that belong to someone else.
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1. The greatest of these treasures are the souls of the local church members over whom he has charge.
 2. “The word *steward* implies that the elder must tend the property and possessions of another as a part of his work. It is properly understood of an elder to be one who takes care of the house of God.” (Phillips, 191)
- V. Of the three terms, in general usage, we most often use the term *elder*, perhaps because it seems to be free of many of the connotations and nuances of meanings that have been imposed on both *bishop* and *pastor* by our culture.
- VI. Now that we have defined the various descriptive terms relating to the men who serve as leaders in local congregation, we can turn our attention to the work that they are to perform.

What Is The Work of The Elders In The Local Church In Practical Terms?

- I. **# 1 – The Work of Elders Involves Overseeing / Ruling The Local Flock. (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Peter 5:2; Hebrews 13:17)**
- A. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” (Hebrews 13:17)
1. Although none of our four descriptive words are used in this passage, almost certainly it is the elders of the local congregation who the author of Hebrews has in mind here.
 2. Greek: *Hegeomai* = “to lead; to go before; to be a leader; to rule, command; to have authority over ... leading as respects influence, controlling in counsel.” (Thayer)
 3. Apart from the apostles, no other member of the local church could rightly be described in this way.
 4. Other N.T. verses state or imply the same work.
 - a. “Appreciate those who ... have charge over you in the Lord.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
 - b. “The elders who rule well ...” (1 Timothy 5:17)
 - c. The same Greek word (*Proistemi*) is translated “charge” and “rule” in these two verses. It means “to be over, to superintend, preside over.” (Thayer)
 - d. “Literally, those who stand in front of you, your leaders in the Lord, the presbyters or bishops ... Get acquainted with them and follow them.” (Robertson’s *Word Pictures*)
 - e. Their rule is by leadership and example, not “as lording it over those allotted to your charge!” (cf. 1 Peter 5:3)
- B. This work will involve the elders in:
1. Planning and implementing the congregation’s work.
 2. Planning and disbursing the financial resources of the congregation.
- C. This work involves helping members of the body of Christ mature into the fullness of Christ. (cf. Ephesians 4:11-15)
1. An immature elder cannot help an immature saint grow.
 2. This is why he must be an “elder,” not a “new convert.”
- II. **# 2 – The Work of Elders Involves Feeding The Local Flock. (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2)**

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- A. Peter instructs elders to “*shepherd the flock of God among you.*” (1 Peter 5:2)
 1. Paul issues similar instructions to the Ephesian elders – “*shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*” (Acts 20:28)
 2. To properly do this, an elder must:
 - a. Know the sheep;
 - b. Be “*among*” them;
 - c. Know their needs;
 - d. Be prepared to render their proper diet of the Word;
 - e. Help them in the struggles of daily life.
 3. This requires total dedication to the work.
 - B. This work involves teaching.
 1. Both N.T. lists of qualifications include this necessary ability.
 - a. “*An overseer, then, must be able to teach.*” (1 Timothy 3:2)
 - b. “*Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*” (Titus 1:9)
 2. As a matter of fact, as you examine the work of an elder in the N.T., it becomes clear that a great amount of time must be given to teaching.
 - C. This work involves exhorting and refuting, both based on “*sound doctrine.*”
 1. “*Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*” (Titus 1:9)
 2. This is another work which stresses the importance of knowledge and teaching ability.
 - D. This work involves edifying the body of Christ under his oversight.
 1. “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*” (Ephesians 4:11-12)
 2. This is a positive work, which demands knowledge and planning.
 - E. This work also involves helping members of the congregation to discover and develop their talents for the work of service within the local church.
 1. “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*” (Ephesians 4:12)
 2. This also involves a commitment of time and effort – personal involvement.
 - F. Being able to do this implies that the elders will:
 1. Know the word of God themselves. (cf. Acts 20:28, “*be on guard for yourselves.*”)
 2. Know how to teach it, and how to help others teach it.
 3. Know what is being taught as part of the work of the local church at all times.
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III. # 3 – The Work of Elders Involves Watching Over The Souls of The Flock.

- A. As we have already shown, the work of an elder involves overseeing the congregation. (*cf.* Acts 20:17-18, 28)
1. The Greek word for “*overseer*” includes the idea of being “a watcher.”
 - a. In ancient Athens, for example, it was the name given to the men sent into subdued states to conduct their affairs.
 - b. Elders, therefore, are charged with the responsibility of conducting the affairs of the local church in a “watchful” manner.
 - c. “*Watch*” in Hebrews 13:17 means “to be sleepless, keep awake, watch; to be circumspect, attentive, ready.” (Thayer)
 - d. This should impress us with the awesome responsibility that elders have.
 2. It is to be with humility, and with the proper attitude – “*exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*” (1 Peter 5:2-3)
- B. This work will involve the elder in practicing hospitality.
1. Paul lists “*hospitality*” as a qualification in his instructions to both Timothy and Titus. (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)
 2. The Greek word means “generous to guests.” (Thayer)
 - a. The word appears only 3 times in the N.T., once in each of the lists of elder’s qualifications, and once in Peter’s writings, where the same quality is enjoined upon all Christians.
 - b. “*Be hospitable to one another without complaint.*” (1 Peter 4:9)
 3. “A scriptural elder must be one who loves strangers and will receive them into his home to entertain them and supply their needs generously. He must be a man who has the spirit of the Good Samaritan who helped the stranger on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho.” (Phillips, 165-166)
 4. Ferrell Jenkins quotes Barclay (*The Letters To Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, 94): “In *The Shepherd of Hermas* ... ‘The *episkopos* must be hospitable, a man who gladly and at all times welcomes into his house the servants of God.’” (Jenkins, 31)
 5. Hospitality would go a long way toward the elder developing a feeling of trustworthiness among the people he oversees.
- C. Being able to do this implies that the elders:
1. Know the members.
 2. Be able to meet the needs of the members.
 3. Be available to the members.
 4. Communicate with the members.

IV. # 4 – The Work of Elders Involves Protecting The Flock.

- A. The foundation for this work will be found in an elder being a pattern (*i.e.*, a blueprint) to the congregation!

1. Peter instructs the elders to be “*examples to the flock.*” (1 Peter 5:3)
 2. This means that elders demonstrate in their lives what they are teaching the members to do.
 3. Being an example is **not**, as some are contending today, the **only** way in which elders “oversee” the flock – this minimizes their role as revealed in many N.T. passages.
 4. Being a good example is an important way that elders help to lead and shape the congregation.
- B. This work involves guarding the flock from evildoers and false teachers – “*Therefore be on the alert For they keep watch over your souls!*” (Acts 20:28-30; Hebrews 13:17)
1. Again, this work points out the wisdom of the elder not being a novice, and having the ability to teach, exhort and admonish as a part of the qualifications.
 2. “Their vigilance will enable them to see the first signs of coming trouble so that they can attack it while it is weak. Trouble in its earlier stages is easier to destroy if wisdom is used.” (Phillips, 204)
 3. “The elder is to watch for *souls*. He is a *steward*, who is entrusted with that which belongs to God (Titus 1:7). He must protect the flock from false teaching, hobbies, hobby-riders, worldliness, etc. He must give account to the great shepherd.” (Jenkins, 28)
- C. In order to do this work, it will be necessary for the elders to:
1. Know the word of God – “*holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.*” (Titus 1:9)
 2. Be informed about outside issues that have the potential to inflict damage on the flock as a whole or on individual members.

Conclusion:

- I. Doing the work of an elder is an awesome task.
 - A. It is not a work for the fainthearted and partially committed.
 - B. This is why God wants only mature, able men involved in this great work – its very nature demands men who are qualified and who desire it.
 - C. A man forced into the work of an elder will not effectively do the work ordained by God.
- II. Elders should be men who can rule:
 - A. By convincing others of the truth of God’s word;
 - B. By winning the confidence of the congregation as to their good judgment in matters of expediency and opinion;
 - C. By successfully managing and expediting the congregational work.
- III. If you labor under the oversight of godly, qualified men who serve as elders, **BE THANKFUL!**
 - A. Don’t make their work any more difficult and challenging than it already is by adding to their worries (Hebrews 13:17).
 - B. Always remember them in your prayers.
- IV. Suggestions for additional discussion regarding the work of elders during the Q&A session:

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- A. How did the work of elders so quickly evolve from the simple N.T. pattern into a “council of elders” under the oversight of one “bishop”?
 - B. The merits of the various “working models” that elderships adopt in exercising the oversight of a local congregation.
 - 1. A “business” model.
 - 2. A “delegated authority” model.
 - 3. “Hands-on” or “hands-off” in regard to the physical details (building upkeep, *etc.*).
 - C. The working relationship between the preacher and the elders of a local congregation.
 - D. The advisability of a preacher serving as an elder of a local congregation.

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Selected Bibliography

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