

Where Elders Come From

Introduction. Elders are all over the pages of the New Testament. Used to describe an office, the word occurs almost twenty times from Acts to Jude. Add to that the words “bishop,” “overseer,” and “pastor,” and you have a solid concept of leadership.

When new churches were established, Paul and Barnabas returned to “appoint elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). Paul gave the elders at Ephesus a lengthy sermon of exhortation in Acts 20. Peter gave elders an outline of their work in 1 Peter 5. Timothy and Titus are given qualifications by which men are to be accepted as elders (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). The Hebrew Christians (Hebrews 13) and the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 5) are told how to relate to their overseers.

It is clear that these men, who have authority over a local congregation, are of crucial importance to the church remaining a light in the world. If God wants them and the church needs them, then where do elders come from?

I. They Are Taught

- A. Paul sent Titus to Crete with the express mission of setting in order “the things that are wanting, and ordain(ing) elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). He outlines what God is looking for in such men, and gives one key qualification in v. 9. “As he hath been taught” means that elders do not grow on trees, but are produced by a long process of education and practice (Hebrews 5:14).
- B. An elder needs more than a surface knowledge of the word — he needs a deep intimacy of the knowledge of God (cp. Hosea 4:6). Why? Because he has to “be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” The “gainsayer” is one who contradicts or opposes the sound doctrine of Christ. The elder has a responsibility to correct and refute them, and stop the mouths of the insubordinate who would question the authority of Christ, the authority of the eldership, and trouble the flock (2 Peter 3:16).
- C. He needs to do more than mouth good words about Jesus or give a book report on the Bible. He needs the kind of knowledge of the Bible that also prepares him to use it as the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17; cp. Hebrews 4:12; Revelation 1:16; 19:21) in combating error and evil. No amount of rapport with people, kind disposition, or worldly wisdom can make up for a lack of biblical knowledge. This originates with solid, sound teaching.

II. They Are Examples

- A. Because they have been taught well, these men begin to follow sound teaching, and develop genuine faith (Hebrews 13:7). Over time, their firmness in following Jesus is noticeable (cp. Acts 6:3), and others see that their conduct is beyond reproach. They are not perfect, but their pattern of life is admirable.
- B. God tells us to look at them and “consider the end of their conversation (or conduct)” — see where their path is headed and follow! Elders shepherd not “as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Elders are not simply men who reach a certain age and want to be in charge (“desire,” 1 Timothy 3:1), but men whose lives produce a natural leadership and spirituality that we all want to follow (Philippians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 1:7).

III. They Are Disciplined

- A. Consider how many of these qualifications involve personal discipline: “vigilant, sober, of good behavior ... Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous” (1 Timothy 3:2-3). Elders are men who vigorously attack their personal flaws and are trained to be in control. While they are not perfect, they also are not merely campaigning for an office and showing others what they want to see.
- B. They are men who have demonstrated the ability to control their tongue, and their desires, and their tempers over a long period of time. This discipline is essential, since they will have opportunity to misuse money, or become quarrelsome, or loosen their tongue. Yet these men have — through a life of hard work in their personal lives — gained the respect and trust of the flock.
- C. Additionally, if a man does not display the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), then he does not “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16). If a man currently serves as an elder — or wishes to someday serve as an elder — these are some of the qualities he ought to cultivate in his life; just as every Christian ought to be cultivating these qualities.

IV. They Are Proven

- A. God has not put His local churches in the hands of men with good ideas and no experience. Elders know what it is to lead — they have done it before at home (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6; cp. Psalm 78:1-8). They know what it is to have others in submission to them — and how to maintain that submission by example rather than by force — because they have done it at home. They know how to put others first and watch out for them (Hebrews 13:17).
- B. God will not have any willful Rehoboams to lead local churches, and immediately divide them in their foolishness (1 Kings 12:6-15). God wants men who have proven themselves to be worthy leaders both through raising their families and demonstrating their character to the church (1 Timothy 3:10).

Conclusion. Where do elders come from? Elders come from men who have put the Lord first over many years (Matthew 6:33). They have been taught the word of the Lord, followed it carefully, disciplined themselves after His image, and proven themselves as godly leaders. They did not simply do this to impress people for a month or two during the selection process; it has become who they are. Over time, they have proven themselves.

But beyond simply submitting to our elders, we have to encourage our younger men to pursue this noble goal early in life. We should stress a focus on personal understanding of scripture. Younger men must learn to demonstrate sincere faith rather than living for selfish pleasures or cozying up to sin. Flaws need to be addressed and discipline established. The home should be the focus of our younger men because it is not only essential to their children’s spiritual life, but is also a proving ground for godly leadership. Elders come from within the church — where else would they come from? Are we working to become and encourage the next generation of God’s elders?

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