

Elders & Deacons in the Church

John Hepp, Jr.

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables....We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:2b-4)

This is an introductory study of the biblical pattern for the two main church officers: elders and deacons. In Baptist churches, and once in the Bible, elders are called “pastors.” Many deacons and elders already render great and unselfish service to God and their churches. They will welcome a biblical review of their offices.

The ultimate source of information for church doctrine and practice is not denominational tradition but the Bible. It is risky to take any one teacher as authority. Most teachers—like most pupils—follow the party line and do not buck the system. Each teacher is limited by his own areas of ignorance and prejudice. Therefore, a student should try to determine if the teaching takes into account all the revealed facts in their proper settings. For example, in regard to church government, does it explain why the Bible says much about elders but very little about deacons?

Elders

In both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, the word *elders* can refer simply to older people. For examples, see Genesis 18:11; 19:11; Luke 15:25-26; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; 1 Timothy 5:1. This paper, however, is concerned with the office of elders in both Testaments.

In the Old Testament

In the Old Testament the normal leaders and representatives of Israel were called *elders*. This title implies age and experience. It is mentioned—sometimes repeatedly—in every book from Genesis through Ezra, also sometimes in poetical and prophetic books. Some of the early examples are in Exodus 3:16,18; 4:29; 19:7-8; 24:1,9,14. To share responsibility, there were several elders in every town (Deut. 9:12; 21:3-6).

In the New Testament

1. A frequent title. The elders of Israel are mentioned often in the Synoptic Gospels and Acts. For examples, see Matthew 16:21; 21:23; Acts 4:5,8,23. Meanwhile, church elders are mentioned by that title first and often in Acts (e.g., 11:30; 15:2,4,6), then in 1 Timothy, Titus, James, 1 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John.
2. The main leaders. By using the same title as the one Israel used, the New Testament church implied that its elders were its main leaders. Specific statements verify this fact.
3. Plurality of elders. The evidence points to several elders in each church, regardless of the church's size or age. Occasional use of the singular for this office—as in Titus 1:6—is clearly generic. As usual, Acts shows the pattern. In their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas were several times forced to leave towns where they had started churches. Braving

great danger, they soon returned to those towns and “appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23). On a later occasion Paul left Titus in Crete to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). James instructed the sick to “call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil” (James 5:14). This plurality of elders is easy to understand when we consider their heavy responsibilities, which no one man could carry alone.

4. Overseers. New Testament elders are also called by other titles that emphasize their responsibilities. One such title is *overseer* (*episkopos*). Titus 1:6-7 shows that *elder* and *overseer* are the same person. First Peter 2:25 applies this title to Christ; He is the great Overseer over all overseers. Similar titles are used for elders in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 (“those who...*are over you* in the Lord”) and Hebrews 13:17 (“Obey your *leaders* and submit to their authority”).

NOTE: In New Testament passages that speak of elders as overseers, we find three terms. The person is an *overseer* (*episkopos*): Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; and Titus 1:7. His office is *episkope* (1 Tim. 3:1 and possibly Acts 1:20). His work is *episkopeo* (1 Peter 5:2). Although the King James Version uses “bishop” when translating some of these passages (Phil., 1 Tim., Titus), it gives the meaning better when it uses “overseer” (Acts) or “oversight” (1 Peter).

5. Pastors. Once the elders are called “*pastors* and *teachers*” (Eph. 4:11; there is a question whether *teachers* here are separate from *pastors*; cf. 1 Tim. 3:2 and 5:17). *Pastor* (*poimen*) means shepherd. The function of shepherding God’s flock is emphasized in several passages. Jesus used this title for Himself several times in John 10.

NOTE: In the Old Testament Israel’s rulers were also called “shepherds.” But we must remember that not everything in God’s kingdom over Israel has a counterpart in the New Testament church. For example, at least some times the “shepherds” in Israel were the anointed kings, such as David (Ps. 78:70-72) and his descendants (Jer. 23:1; see the context). New Testament elders are not anointed in that sense and should not sit on a throne. For the church our anointed one (Christ) is Jesus, not yet sitting on David’s throne as promised, but waiting on His Father’s throne.

6. Key passages. Notice the words of the twelve apostles (from Acts 6) quoted at the beginning of this paper. Since they were the original leaders of the church, their ministry was a model for elders who replaced them. Other important passages for studying biblical eldership are
 - 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 for their qualifications
 - 1 Timothy 5:17-22 about their remuneration and discipline
 - Acts 20:17-38 and 1 Peter 5:1-4 for instructions to them from Paul and Peter, the great founders of the church. These last two passages show clearly that *elders* must oversee and shepherd God’s flock (cf. 1 Tim. 3:5).

Deacons

1. Three terms. *Deacon* is not a translation but a transliteration of the common Greek noun *diakonos*. In other words, it says *diakonos* in English but doesn't give its meaning, which rarely refers to the office of *deacon*. Consider three related words:
 - *Diakonos* (plural *diakonoi*) in the New Testament is used twenty-nine times in eleven books. It means *one who serves* (but not specifically a slave). For example, it is used of the servants at the wedding feast of John 2:5,9; of Christ Himself in Romans 15:8a; of Phoebe in Romans 16:1; of Apollos and Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:5a.
 - *Diakoneo* is the verb for what a *diakonos* does. Used thirty-four times in the New Testament, it is often translated *serve* (Rom. 15:26-26) or a synonym like *take care* (Matt. 25:44).
 - *Diakonia*, the related word for *service*, is used thirty-two times in the New Testament. For example, in Ephesians 4:12 it refers to the service each believer can perform according to his gifts and training. Often it refers to practical care to the poor and needy; for example, in Acts 11:29 it refers to relief of the poor brethren. (See also Acts 12:25; Rom. 15:31b; 2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1.)
2. This office. There was no such office in the Old Testament; even in the New Testament it is mentioned by name only three times: Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8,12. Though it existed, it is hard to be sure how many churches had it, for how long, or for what purposes.
3. Its origin. The pattern for this office may be given in Acts 6:1-6. When the Hellenistic Jews' widows were being overlooked in the daily "distribution of food" (*diakonia*, v. 1), the twelve apostles said it was not right for them to forsake the word of God "to wait on [*diakoneo*] tables" (v. 2). They asked for seven godly men to whom they would entrust this responsibility of distributing food, so that the Twelve could continue in prayer and the "ministry" (*diakonia*, v. 4) of God's Word. Therefore, the Seven were set apart to take care of the daily food distribution to widows. We do not know how long they continued with this special responsibility. We do know, as the next sections of Acts tell us, that two of them developed outstanding preaching ministries.

It is interesting that both the Twelve and the Seven did *diakonia* and could therefore be called *diakonoi*, but neither group was so-called in Acts. If the story in Acts 6 gives a pattern for deacons, they can be ordained to perform a material service in order to unburden ministers of the Word. (See Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon* [Littleton, CO, Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1992], pp. 77-79: "The Relationship Between Deacons and Shepherds.")
4. An observation. Often a church (a) has a single elder (pastor) brought in from outside the church and (b) vests much of the leadership authority in the deacons. Both parts of this arrangement disagree with New Testament polity, producing confusion about Scriptural instructions. It also tends to cause unnecessary power struggles. Their severity depends on factors such as (1) that elder's wisdom and ability to work with the deacons, (2) the deacons' ability to work with the elder, (3) the church's love and unity.

Paul's Farewell to the Ephesian Elders **Acts 20:17-38**

Background and Occasion for this Farewell

On his third missionary journey, Paul ministered nearly three years at Ephesus, a highly important commercial port and cultural center on the west coast of the province of Asia. Through his ministry many churches started in that province. Apparently Paul departed from Ephesus abruptly—right after a dangerous riot. From there he went north to Troas.

At Troas Paul expected Titus to meet him with news from the church in Corinth. Paul was worried about that church, which had not responded as he had hoped to some letters and a visit. Not finding Titus, Paul could not take his opportunities for ministry in Troas. He continued to Macedonia, where Titus met him with good news. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, reflecting his joy, attacking those opposed to him, and anticipating his visit to them. He spent more months ministering in Macedonia, “all the way around to Illyricum [modern Albania]” (Rom. 15:19). Then he went south to Corinth, where he spent the winter and wrote to the Roman church.

When sailing resumed in March, Paul left Corinth headed for Jerusalem. He took a large offering he had been raising from Gentile churches “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom. 15:26). With him traveled representatives from churches in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia Minor. To evade a Jewish plot, they took a longer route, through Macedonia. Hoping to arrive at Jerusalem by Pentecost, they did not stop at Ephesus. During a layover at the ancient port of Miletus, however, Paul sent word to Ephesus for certain people to come see him.

Questions on Acts 20:17-38 (These are based on NASB. After you answer, see ANSWERS.)

1. Whom did Paul send for while waiting at Miletus? (v. 17)

In Acts this speech to church leaders is the only speech to believers. Paul considered these words to be his last ones to these elders (vv. 25,38). First, he spoke of the PAST (vv. 18-21), reminding them of his own ministry at Ephesus.

2. What three words in verse 19 can summarize Paul's personal experiences in Ephesus?
3. Paul had taught them publicly and in homes all that was profitable (vv. 20-21). How did he summarize his evangelistic message to Jews and Greeks?

The second part of Paul's speech (vv. 22-27) had to do with his PRESENT. In view of what awaited him at Jerusalem, Paul declared that his conscience was clear.

4. What did the Holy Spirit tell him was going to happen at Jerusalem? (vv. 22-23)
5. In view of this danger, what was his goal? (v. 24)
6. When saying that they would see him no more (v. 25), Paul again summarized his message. With what words?
7. Why was he innocent of the blood of all men? (vv. 26-27)
8. Why do you suppose he reminded them about his own ministry?

The next part of his speech (vv. 28-32) had to do with the FUTURE. Paul warned the elders and commended them to God.

9. Give two verbs and one title that show the elders' responsibilities. (v. 28)
10. Why is the church worth so much effort? (v. 28)
11. What danger to the flock did Paul predict—and from what sources? (vv. 29-31)
12. To whom and to what did Paul leave them for safe deposit? (v. 32)

The last verses (33-38) give Paul's final reminder and their goodbye.

13. In verses 33-35a Paul again reminded the elders of his own ministry in Ephesus. Specifically, of what aspect of his ministry did he remind them, and for what purpose?
14. In 35b Paul closed with words of Jesus not found in the Gospels. What words?
15. What were three final actions by the elders in saying goodbye? (vv. 36-38)

ANSWERS

1. the elders of the church in Ephesus
NOTE: At first the only church leaders were apostles, the foundation (Eph. 2:20). But soon elders began replacing apostles as leaders. No other officers are named in Acts.
2. humility, tears, trials (NIV, tested)
3. repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 21)
4. bonds and afflictions (NIV, prison and hardship) (v. 23)
5. to finish his course (NIV, race), to testify solemnly of the gospel of God's grace
6. preaching the kingdom
7. because he had told them the whole purpose of God
8. probably to remind them that they had an example to follow
9. Be on guard, overseers, shepherds
10. because it is God's church, purchased with His own blood (or, blood of His own)
11. savage wolves that won't spare the flock (v. 29)
men who speak perverse things (NIV, distort the truth) to draw away the disciples (v. 30)
These will come from without and within.
12. to God and to the word of His grace
13. of his hard work to meet his own needs and those of his companions
to show that by hard work we must help the weak
NOTE: In 1 Timothy 5:17-18 Paul ordained that elders should receive pay ("double honor...wages"), especially "those who work hard at preaching and teaching."
14. It is more blessed to give than to receive.
15. They knelt down with Paul and prayed, wept as they embraced and kissed him, accompanied him to the ship.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Every church needs elders to lead it, men with deep concern to shepherd God's sheep.
2. Elders must know the whole purpose of God and must communicate it.
3. Elders should stay alert to—and fight off—dangers to the flock ("wolves").
4. Though some elders should be paid for their work, they should not work for pay.