

# WHAT IS BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP?

***SUMMARY:** The elders are God-ordained and qualified men who are called to serve as the spiritual leaders of the body of Disciples Church. Biblical elders (pastoral elders) have the responsibility of managing and shepherding the flock of God entrusted to their care. As a group, the elders are to protect, feed, lead/govern, and care for the members of the church. Elders are men who are called and appointed by God because of their spiritual qualifications. They are servants who consistently seek direction for the body from the Lord through diligent study of the Bible, while maintaining the highest standards of integrity and maturity before God and man. When biblical elders are established and recognized by the church as a centralized authority, the body functions in victory and freedom, resulting in unified vision, accountable leadership, shared responsibility for the equipping of each member of the body, and restorative church discipline.*

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The Bible spends a great deal of time dealing with the issue of spiritual leadership, or biblical eldership, within the Church. The following are some primary texts that help clarify what biblical eldership is:

- Acts 15:1-29
- Acts 20:17-35
- Acts 14:23
- 1 Timothy 3:1-13
- 1 Timothy 5:17-22
- Titus 1:5-16
- James 5:14
- 1 Peter 5:1-11
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13
- Hebrews 13:17
- Ephesians 4:11-13

Based on passages like these, several questions come up: Who is supposed to lead the local church according to the Bible? What do these leaders do? What qualifies someone to be a biblical elder? Why does it matter in the first place? Those are the questions this article will answer.

## **Who is supposed to lead the local church according to the Bible?**

The Bible is clear that the ultimate authority and leader of the church is Jesus Christ (cf. 1Pet. 5:4; Eph. 5:23; 1Tim. 2:5), and each member of the church plays a submissive yet crucial role in the body under Him (1Cor. 12:14-27; Eph. 4:12; 1Pet. 2:9). The Bible is also clear that God chooses to give the church a clear leadership structure under Christ that is designed to help each member grow deeper in his/her relationship with Him.

In short, we believe the Bible teaches that God intended each local church to be led and shepherded by a unified group of God-ordained and qualified men. Throughout the New Testament, the men who are called to fulfill this role within each local church are given the title *elders*. (The New Testament uses three different words to describe the office of elder: Elder, Overseer, and Pastor. Each title can be used interchangeably.)

## **What do biblical elders do?**

Biblical elders are called *to manage and shepherd* the local church. They don't manage the church like a CEO but like a loving father would manage his household by tenderly caring for his family (cf. 1 Thes. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:4-5; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). They don't shepherd the church by treating the people haphazardly but like a shepherd would tenderly care for his sheep, protecting them, feeding them, leading them, and caring for them (cf. Acts 20:28; 1Pet. 5:2).

If we want to further understand biblical elders and their work, we must understand the biblical imagery of shepherding. As keepers of sheep, biblical elders are to protect, feed, lead, and care for the flock's many practical needs.

### **Protecting the Flock**

A major role of a biblical elder's work is to protect the church from false teachers. The New Testament is clear that false teachers are a real threat to the church and should be taken very seriously (Acts 20:30-31). Therefore, biblical elders are responsible for having enough biblical knowledge to refute any false doctrine, and they are responsible for giving the church's official stance on any issue that might come up (Acts 15:6; Titus 1:5, 9).

### **Feeding the Flock**

Unlike modern day church-board elders, biblical elders are required to feed the flock by teaching them the word of God (1Tim. 3:2). Further, biblical elders are responsible for using the Bible to encourage and exhort others in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9; Eph. 4:11-12). Though not every elder will have full-time preaching responsibilities, every elder must be able to teach the full counsel of God in the Bible.

### **Leading the Flock**

Biblical elders are responsible for leading the church by providing the direction and vision of the church as well as managing the church's people, property, finances, and other resources (1Tim.5:17; Titus 1:7; 1Pet. 5:1-2).

### **Caring for the Flock**

Biblical elders are responsible for meeting the practical needs of the flock by providing pastoral care to the church (James 5:14; Acts 20:35). These responsibilities include things like visiting the sick, comforting the bereaved, praying for the flock, visiting with new members, providing counseling for a wide variety of issues, and anything else that relates to the inner life of the flock.

## **What qualifies a man to be a biblical elder?**

In light of the magnitude of what elders are called to do, the Bible clearly lays out a high standard for the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The following is a list of those qualifications:

### **Motivation Qualification:**

An elder must be led by the Holy Spirit, and not out of obligation, to rightly prioritize his schedule and life to faithfully serve the full calling of a pastoral elder (1 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28).

### **Character Qualifications:**

- Above reproach  
*blameless*
- Husband of one wife  
*one woman man, sexually pure*
- Temperate  
*self-controlled*
- Prudent  
*sober, sensible, wise*
- Respectable  
*worth following*
- Hospitable  
*unselfish, generous, welcoming*
- Without addictions  
*free from excesses*
- Not contentious  
*peaceable, non-divisive*
- Gentle  
*kind, gracious, even-tempered*
- Not covetous  
*not greedy*
- Not a new convert  
*spiritually mature*
- Good reputation  
*respected in society*
- Not self-willed  
*not stubborn or insensitive*
- Just  
*fair, impartial*

### **Ability Qualifications:**

- Worth following and imitating  
*provide a model to follow*
- Able to teach  
*communicates sound biblical doctrine*
- Manages his household well  
*healthy family life*

## **Why does biblical eldership matter?**

There are many reasons biblical eldership is important for the church.

1. **Shared leadership balances weaknesses.**  
In a team leadership structure, different members complement one another and balance one another's weaknesses.
2. **Shared leadership lightens the workload.**  
The weight of the functions of eldership should indicate that one person cannot carry that weight alone. Shared leadership allows every responsibility of leading the church to be taken seriously and given the right amount of time and resources to be handled adequately.
3. **Shared leadership provides accountability.**  
Shared leadership provides close accountability, genuine partnership, and peer relationships that provide a level of accountability that is not possible in a one-pastor model (due to time constraints if nothing else).
4. **Shared leadership models sacrificial love and community.**  
By sharing the leadership responsibilities through close, accountable relationships with one another, biblical elders provide a real-time picture of community and mutual love for the church to model itself after.
5. **Shared leadership most closely follow the biblical model of how to lead the church.**  
As shown throughout this article, the Bible spends a great deal of time describing and modeling a shared leadership structure in the earliest churches.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, we believe Disciples Church's leadership is a crucial part of God's design for our church. While we do not believe elders have any more value than any other member of the church, we do believe the leadership of the church should be taken very seriously. Because of that, it is our desire to model our leadership after the pattern of biblical eldership as found in the Bible and outlined in this article.