

*ECCLESIOLOGY*  
**THE LOCAL CHURCH**  
 Lesson 12

**General Observations About Elders**

**I. THE OFFICE OF ELDER**

- A. The meaning of terms. The two names given for an ordained leader in a church are elder (*presbuteros*) and bishop (*episkopos*).
1. Elder looks at the dignity of the office. It indicates a man of spiritual maturity. A man not necessarily old in years, but mature in judgment. However, age can also help an elder to be more wise. NOTE: In the Jewish tradition, a man could be part of the Sanhedrin at age 30.
  2. Bishop (overseer) looks at the duty of the office which is to oversee, administrate, manage the flock in spiritual matters.
- B. The equation of elder to bishop
1. Biblical proof
    - a. **Acts 20:17, 28.** The elders at Ephesus are called “elders” (20:17) and the same elders are called “overseers” (20:28). The word “overseers” is of the same root as “bishops” in the Greek.
    - b. **Titus 1:5, 7.** Titus was to ordain elders in every city (1:5) and then gives the qualifications for an overseer (bishop) (1:7). This is one office with two titles.
    - c. **Philippians 1:1.** Paul acknowledges deacons and bishops (overseer). He does not mention any elders but this is the highest office in the church. It is not likely Paul would forget the elders. Therefore, the bishop and elder must be the same office.
    - d. **1 Timothy 3:1-8** cf. **1 Timothy 5:17.**
    - e. **1 Peter 5:1-2**
  2. Historical Proof
    - a. The Didache (115 AD) does not make a distinction between the two offices.
    - b. Clement of Rome equated the terms.
    - c. Ignastius (martyred in 117 AD) was the first to speak of a bishop being different than an elder.
    - d. The Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent (1545-1564 AD) recognized officially the difference between elder and bishop. However, Jerome, Chrysostom and other great Catholics never acknowledged this distinction in the two offices to be scriptural.
- C. Elder rule is representative government. Elders represent the people whether the elders are appointed or elected. An elder listens to the people but votes his conscience before God.

## II. THE METHOD OF SELECTING ELDERS

- A. Elders were appointed by God (Acts 20:17, 28).
- B. Elders were appointed by Apostles
  - 1. **Acts 14:23.** The Greek word for “appointed” (ordained) is *keirotoneo*. In its earliest meaning, it was a word used for voting in the Athenian legislative assembly and meant “to elect” or “designate with the hand.” The development of the word in the New Testament came to mean “to appoint.”
  - 2. **Titus 1:5.** The word *kathistami* means “to appoint” (ordain), to put in charge of someone over something (Arndt and Gingrich). NOTE: There can be little doubt that originally elders were appointed either by Apostles or representatives of the Apostles.
- C. Elders were publically recognized by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22).
- D. Question: Who appoints elders today since there are no Apostles?
  - 1. Some think appointment should be by the pastor-teacher (teaching elder).
  - 2. Some think appointment should be by elders.
  - 3. Some think the congregation should nominate potential elders, elders should screen and approve the candidates and then the people vote.  
NOTE: Presbyterians and Baptists have traditionally held the right of the congregation to elect their own officers based on Acts 6:1-7. Since we have no Apostles and no apostolic representatives, then it remains for the people to recognize in their midst the men that God is raising up to be elders. NOTE: Self-perpetuating elders by appointment can become cliquish and self-serving, especially if there is no way to remove inefficient elders.

## III. THE NUMBER OF ELDERS

- A. There was a plurality of elders in every church (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; Phil. 1:1).
- B. The number of elders for any given congregation is not governed by expediency or by the size of the congregation but only on the qualifications and capabilities of a person to be an elder.

## IV. THE TENURE OF OFFICE OF THE ELDER

- A. The Bible is silent on this matter, but we may assume that the tenure of office is for life.
- B. However an elder’s conduct (moral or doctrinal deficiency) or circumstances (sickness, transfer, senility, etc.) may make it impossible for a person to serve as an active elder.
- C. An elder should be allowed to take a sabbatical when needed.
- D. A rotating elder board, while not anti-scriptural, is not found in scripture. The rotating system was probably instituted to give faithful elders a break and to give a gracious way to remove cantankerous elders without formal discipline.

## V. TYPES OF ELDERS (1 Tim. 5:17-18)

- A. 1 Tim. 5:17-18 definitely teaches a plurality of elders. However, the problem is whether those “who direct the affairs of the church” and those whose “work is preaching and teaching” are the same person with two spiritual gifts, or whether they are different types of elders, ruling and teaching.
- B. If this refers to ruling-teaching elders, then every elder must rule and have the special gift of teaching. By ruling well and laboring at speaking and teaching they are worthy of double honor (respect and financial help). If this view is correct, then every elder should be paid to perform his office of elder (5:18). This would certainly make one feel more responsible to do his job well.
- C. If 1 Tim. 5:17 makes a distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders, then those who rule well are to receive double honor (respect) and those who labor in understanding and teaching the Word as a full-time ministry are to be paid. This interpretation might hint that even ruling elders may receive financial remuneration of some kind. NOTE: All teaching elders study and preach the Bible (Acts 6:4). All teaching elders help rule and all ruling elders are to teach, but only the teaching elder has the spiritual gift of pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11).
- D. Ruling and teaching elders have equal authority. The teaching elder has more influence:
  1. Handles the Word
  2. Moderates the Elder board
  3. Sets the agenda
  4. Motivates the elders
  5. Most likely will be the visionary for the elders

## VI. DUTIES OF ELDERS

- A. Admonish the flock (1 Thess. 5:12 – *neutheteo*).
- B. Word hard among the flock (1 Thess. 5:12 – *kopiao*).
- C. Rule over the flock by taking the lead (1 Thess. 5:12 – *proistami*)
- D. Teach the flock (1 Tim. 3:2 – *didasko*)
- E. Direct the affairs of the flock (1 Tim. 5:17 – *prostistami*).
- F. Protect the flock (Tit. 1:5-6).
- G. Lead the flock (Heb. 13:7 – *ayeomi*).
- H. Shepherds the flock (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:27 – *poimaino*).
- I. Examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:3 – *tupos*).
- J. Oversees the flock (Acts 20:28 – *apiskopos*).
- K. Responsible for the finances of the flock (Acts 11:29-30).

## VII. POINTS TO PONDER

- A. The spiritual qualifications between an elder and a deacon are very similar. The difference is not in moral, social or family qualifications, but elders must teach, rule and shepherd. If so, then elders must be people-persons.
- B. Elders must never abuse their authority over the flock (1 Pet. 5:3).
- C. Elders have been entrusted by Christ with His flock (1 Pet. 5:3).
- D. Elders must give an account to Christ for how well they governed the flock (Heb. 13:17).

