



Church on Mill

The Ministry of Elders
A Theological Position Paper

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Introduction

God's plan has always been to form a people for his glory.¹ He gathers Christians into local churches in order that they would display his wisdom,² so that they would grow into maturity,³ and so the unity exhibited by the Trinity would be displayed in forgiven sinners learning to live as brothers and sisters in Christ.⁴ Who bears the responsibility for these churches? Ultimately, the members do.⁵ But in wise providence God appoints leaders called elders to lead every local church to fulfill her God-given mission. As one author put it, "Elders are Jesus's assistants for shepherding his churches."⁶

On the pages that follow, readers will discover the importance of elders, the biblical picture of elders, the ministry given to them, who shall serve in this crucial biblical office of the church, the importance of elder-led (not elder-ruled) congregations, and some concluding thoughts.

Importance of Elders

Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the gospel exploded from Jerusalem with incredible speed and remarkable force. As it was preached in new areas and people trusted

Jesus as their Lord and Savior, new churches were formed. Qualified men were selected to lead the churches. Paul and Barnabas provide one example, *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23)*. When one considers the astonishing growth of Christianity and the severity of hardship these early churches faced, the fact that time was taken to develop and appoint a specific group of leaders should not go unnoticed.

To use biblical imagery, God's sheep need shepherds. Whether in times of relative ease or stark hardship, the people of God need qualified shepherds to provide God's care and instruction. The church is infinitely important to God: Jesus died for her! And he cares for each member of the congregation by providing godly leaders who nurture a gospel-culture throughout the congregation. This was the normative pattern in the New Testament and it is being recovered in many churches today.⁷

Elders in Scripture

The words elder (πρεσβύτερος), overseer (ἐπίσκοπος), and pastor (ποιμήν) are all synonyms for the same leadership office

¹ Exodus 6:7, Titus 2:14, Revelation 21:3.

² Ephesians 3:7-10.

³ Ephesians 4:11-16.

⁴ This shocking fact is seen perhaps most clearly in Jesus's high priestly prayer found in John 17:20-23.

⁵ This fact is often referred to as congregationalism. Congregationalism means that God entrusts the final authority of and responsibility for the church in the membership. It does not mean, however, that the church is a simple democracy. Local church policy should reflect the model outlined in the Bible, not in secular governments, which is: Christ-centered, congregationally-governed, elder-lead, and deacon-served.

⁶ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2014; 14.

⁷ We are confident churches in the New Testament had elders because specific churches with elders are mentioned, including: the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30, 15:2, 15:4, 15:6, 15:22-23, 16:4, and 21:18), churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:21, 14:25), the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1), and on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). They are also mentioned in more general ways in 1 Timothy 4:4, 1 Timothy 5:17-19, James 5:14, and 1 Peter 5:1-5.

occurring throughout the New Testament.⁸ It is common today to refer to a Senior Pastor as ‘the pastor’ of a church, yet God directs every church to have a team of ‘pastors’ (paid and volunteer) who lead the church as a council of equals.⁹ These pastors are most commonly called elders in the Scripture.

The principle word-picture for the responsibility of the elders that is depicted in the Scriptures is of shepherding the sheep of God. The Apostle Peter provides a masterful picture of elders:

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:² shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Peter 5:1-4).

Most of us have never spent time with literal sheep or shepherds so the tender picture Peter painted in 1 Peter 5 is somewhat lost to us. Alexander Strauch serves us city-dwellers well by drawing out the care of a shepherd:

“The biblical image of a shepherd caring for his flock – standing long hours ensuring its safety, leading it to fresh pasture and clear water, carrying the weak, seeking the lost, healing the wounded and sick – is precious. The whole image of the Palestinian shepherd is characterized by intimacy,

tenderness, concern, skill, hard work, suffering, and love.”¹⁰

Imagine a church led by a team of called, qualified, and equipped servant-leaders, whose driving passion is to care for the church in ways that reflect the character of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. That is the type of church God desires all his children to enjoy.

The Responsibilities of Elders

God leads, cares for, teaches, and protects the church through a plurality of qualified and called men who share these important responsibilities. Elders approach the mutual work of shepherding the church under the direction of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Elders are not the board of a corporation; rather, elders are the servant-leaders of the family of God. Picture them not as the board at the pinnacle of a business organizational chart, but as humble initiators on the front lines of every Christian’s pursuit of Christlikeness, disciple-making, and the obligations of the church family towards one another. They are called to live among the flock not over the flock. They are to look like and smell like the sheep because in addition to being shepherds they are also sheep.

Since some members of Church on Mill may not be familiar with a congregational form of church government that is elder-led and deacon-served, the five biblical responsibilities of elders are outlined below:

- 1) Elders *protect* the church from false teaching and teachers.¹¹ False teaching abounds today. The so-called ‘prosperity-gospel’ is ravaging the church. Elders are to guard the church family from false teaching, which harms the testimony of

⁸ Study carefully how these words appear interchangeably in Acts 20, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5, noting especially how all three words occur within a span of 12 verses in Acts 20.

⁹ Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5, and James 5:14 show there is to be a

plurality of elders in a local congregation (i.e. elders in each church).

¹⁰ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*. Littleton: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1995; 16.

¹¹ Acts 20:28-32, 1 Timothy 6:3-10, Titus 3:8-11.

the church and confuses God's precious children.

- 2) Elders *feed* the church by passionately preaching and teaching God's Word. They are to patiently and faithfully teach the whole counsel of Scripture. Chester and Timmis state helpfully, "God rules through his word, and the Spirit applies that word to our lives."¹² To whom is the task of the authoritative preaching and teaching of God's Word given that we might often have the wonderful experience of hearing God together? This task is given to the elders, including some vocational elders.¹³
- 3) Elders *lead* the church through sacrificial, courageous, and humble oversight.¹⁴ This leadership is delegated leadership: elders function under the authority of God and directives of Scripture. Elder leadership is best envisioned as pastoral servant leadership.
- 4) Elders *care* for the spiritual needs of the church. One example of this care is praying for members who are ill.¹⁵ In his passionate appeal to the elders of the church of Ephesus, Paul said, "*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God...*" (Acts 20:28).
- 5) Elders *serve* as examples of Christlikeness.¹⁶

Who Should Serve as Elders?

All Christians are called to serve: some godly men are to be set apart for the

¹² Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008; 31-32.

¹³ Both vocational and non-vocational elders should serve as equals, although those who often labor especially in the public preaching and teaching of Scripture are specifically named as men who should be financially compensated by the church they serve (1 Timothy 5:17-18). On elders teaching see also Ephesians 4:11-16, 1 Timothy 3:2; cf. Acts 6:2-4 and 2

responsibility of being elders. Elders are the kinds of men you want your sons to become and your daughters to marry. They are not power-hungry: they are servant-leaders with proven spiritual maturity. The Scriptures give nineteen qualifications of elders, the vast majority of which address the character of the leaders not their leadership abilities.¹⁷ As under-shepherds, they must be increasingly like the Chief Shepherd.¹⁸

Elder-led not Elder-ruled

This paper has urged readers to affirm the Bible's pattern of local church leadership, namely elder leadership. It is not our intention, however, to encourage Church on Mill to become elder-ruled. The distinction may not be readily apparent but it is nevertheless significant. Mark Dever, author and pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, has written extensively on this issue. His summary is worth quoting in full:

"Under God, the final judicatory authority resides not with a pope or a convention, not with a national assembly or a pastor, not with a regional association or a state convention, and not with some committee or board, whether paid or unpaid. Final responsibility for the discipline and doctrine of the congregation, under God, lies not with the deacons or the elders. It lies with the congregation as a whole...only the congregation is finally accountable to

Timothy 4:1-4. Also, a related but not identical task of elders is to admonish church members (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

¹⁴ Acts 20:17-35, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Peter 4:1-4.

¹⁵ James 5:14.

¹⁶ 1 Peter 5:3.

¹⁷ See 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and the Church on Mill Position Paper titled, "The 21 Qualifications of Elders."

¹⁸ 1 Peter 5:1-4.

God for the church's actions in discipline and doctrine."¹⁹

The Bible teaches that the whole congregation is accountable to God for certain issues in the life of the church. These fall into three different, though interconnected, responsibilities:

- 1) Members *preserve unity and promote holiness in matters of significant dispute* between Christians.²⁰
- 2) Members *guard the gospel message by removing elders* who teach a false gospel.²¹
- 3) Members *protect the purity and reputation of the church by overseeing her membership*. While the elders will no-doubt lead the related processes, it is ultimately the members who are accountable before God for receiving people into membership²² and removing the unrepentant from membership in hopes of restoration.²³

While never specifically addressed in the Bible, it would seem wise and prudent for local churches to also be asked by the elders to affirm major decisions related to church finances and the installation of new church officers. Therefore, the fourth responsibility of the church membership is to make decisions on the *church's budget and office holders*.²⁴ A church's elder council may choose to seek the input of the church family in other decision making, yet the general posture of

the members towards the elders should be one of godly submission.²⁵

A church that is congregationally-governed and elder-led promotes honesty, humility, and trust as both the members and the elders mutually support, encourage, and serve one another under King Jesus. While God calls the members and the elders to different responsibilities in the body of Christ, neither is more important than the other nor more necessary for a healthy church. All are equal in Christ. When the elders understand the leadership of Jesus Christ and embrace their neediness before him, they will be leaders who are a joy to follow because they will have your best in mind. John Stott said it well, "The Christian minister should be preoccupied with the people's spiritual progress and care nothing for his own prestige."

Conclusion

To summarize this brief study on the ministry of elders please consider the first distinctive of our Church Constitution:

"Bible-believing: The Bible is the Word of God given to teach us about God and how we should live in His world. It is our final authority for all things. It is the 'roadmap' for all that we are, say, and do. God's voice, speaking through it, must make sense of our past and guide our present and

¹⁹ Mark Dever, *By Whose Authority?: Elders in Baptist Life*. Washington D.C., 9Marks, 2006; 32.

²⁰ Matthew 18:15-17 and 1 Corinthians 6:1-8.

²¹ Galatians 1:6-9.

²² It should be admitted that the biblical warrant for this is sparse and many churches disagree on this issue; however, it is not unprecedented in Scripture for the whole church to be told to accept someone into membership (see 2 Corinthians 2:5-8).

²³ 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; cf Matthew 18:15-17.

²⁴ In what may have been the affirmation of proto-deacons, Acts 6:1-6 records the whole church selecting leaders. While the Bible does not give details as to precisely how that decision was made, it is safe to assume there was some procedure used to find broad

agreement on the selection of these important leaders. Elders, on the other hand, were originally appointed by the Apostles or their delegates (see Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5). In the absence of apostles today we believe it most wise to ask members to affirm new elders. This is always to be done as an expression of God's provision and selection of certain leaders (Acts 20:28, 1 Timothy 3:1). Finally, because the church exists on the free sacrificial gifts of her members, members should vote on the approval of the annual church budget.

²⁵ Hebrews 13:17. The posture of submission, of course, is to be rejected if the elders disqualify themselves, reject the clear teaching of the Scriptures, or are attempting to lead the church into sin.

future. Personal and corporate traditions, history, and experience are all important, yet it is God alone through Scripture who is definitive.”²⁶

Adopting an elder-led model to our church leadership structure will enable us to better fulfill this key distinctive, which in turn will better care for and equip the members of Church on Mill in our purpose of glorifying God through lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While the structure of the church is important, we must be careful never to make it primary. Seasoned pastor and prolific author John Piper states wisely:

“The ministry of the church is primarily the work of the members in the activity and worship towards God, nurture towards one another and witness towards the world. Internal structures for church governance are not the main ministry of the church, but are the necessary equipping and mobilizing of the saints for the work of ministry.”²⁷

In conclusion, the unified voice of the New Testament indicates that each local congregation is to be led by a plurality of godly elders.²⁸ These elders are responsible to protect, feed, lead, care, and serve as humble examples of Christlikeness, so that the members of the church are built up in the faith and the testimony of the church is clear to a world desperately in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.



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²⁶ “Church on Mill Constitution”, Distinctive One.

²⁷ John Piper, “Biblical Eldership”, section 4, principle 2.

²⁸ We can give no greater recommendation to you than the encouragement to study the relevant biblical

passages for yourself. The role of elders is given significant treatment in Acts 20:17-38, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-16, and 1 Peter 5:1-4.