

022 Equip the Saints Part 8 Elders

Although our Eph 4:11 verse deals with apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers, it is equally important to understand the role of the Elder in church life. We shall also in this study look at the deacon.

One of the earliest mentioned of elders is:

Gen 50:7

7 And Joseph went up to bury his father: and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, the elders of his house, and all the elders of the land of Egypt.

The Hebrew word means “old” “senior” “aged” as mentioned below.

zaqen (zaw-kane'); old: aged, ancient (man), elder (-est), old (man, men and ... women), senator.

(Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright © 1994, 2003 Biblesoft, Inc. and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

In our verse here, it is the Egyptians who also had ‘elders of the land’. So the elder is not just a Hebrew role, but also an early civilization role.

Throughout the Hebrew history, it was the senior or older people who by way of their age, maturity and wisdom were honored and set in places of leadership and government.

To this day, there are many countries whether Jew, Arab or Asian in particular still give the honored place for the wisdom of the elders.

It is also interesting to note that in the New Testament, there is no introduction or setting in ministry of the role of an elder, unlike our Eph 4 ministry team. It is the only role that is carried over from the Old Testament.

That means that the foundations of an elder have not changed i.e. senior, maturity and wisdom.

The point that is emphasised in the New Testament is Character.

Titus 1:6-9

6 An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient.

7 Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless — not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain.

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8 Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.

9 He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

1 Tim 3:1-7

3:1 Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.

2 Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

3 not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

4 He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.

5(If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)

6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.

7 He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.

Now a lot of people get very confused over certain terms and if you read the King James Version you have even more names to contend with, like Elders, Bishops Overseers, Shepherds etc, but it is quite simple if you read just what the Bible says.

In the verse in Titus above we see clearly we are talking about a person – an elder.

“An Elder must be...”

In the verses in 1 Timothy above we are talking about a function. Oversee.
“... on being an overseer...a noble task”.

So very simply according to scripture an Elder – Oversees. It’s quite simple really if you just read what it says and don’t add to it or complicate it.

The trouble with traditional ecclesiastical thinking is that we get so bogged down with sorting out the Elder, Overseer, and Bishop thing, that we lose sight of the main scriptural emphasis, which is Character.

(Just to point out that the word Bishop and Overseer are the same Greek word and totally interchangeable).

The King James Version says this of Jesus.

1 Peter 2:25

25 For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.

KJV

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The New International version and many other versions say;

1 Peter 2:25

25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (Some translations say “Guardian of your souls”).

Now we can see more clearly the meaning of:

Acts 20:28

28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.

So an Elder is to be mature, full of wisdom, of high and good character within the church and outside the church, is to have a good testimony, be a good manager of his own house so he can “Watch” “Oversee” “Shepherd” the flock of God.

Now there is something very important to look at here.

Both Peter and John the apostles in ministry refer to themselves as elders.

Peter refers to himself as a fellow elder.

1 Peter 5:1

5:1 to the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed:

John refers to himself as an elder.

2 John 1

1 The elder, to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in the truth — and not I only, but also all who know the truth—

3 John 1

1:1 the elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

What these apostles of the New Testament did by identifying themselves, as ‘elders’, was to place themselves under the same character requirements and scrutiny as all other elders.

I would to God that all leaders and ministers today would have the same humble attitude and realization as the apostles demonstrating Godly Holy living at home and in church. In stead we constantly hear of ministries falling, being exposed and bringing the name of the Lord into such disrepute.

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The next important thing to note apart from the personal reference we have seen above, the word is always Elders – plural. That in its self does away with the one-man syndrome we so often have today.

So now we have a plural number of elders who watch over and shepherd the flock. That is their number one function – to shepherd or if you want and must still use the word, ‘pastor’ the flock.

So the elders are not so much governors, or members of the elder board, the Bible clearly teaches us here that they are shepherds and their role is to care for and shepherd the flock of God. Thus elders are the pastors of the church and they are a plurality.

Now if we remember back to studies ‘Equip the Saints 1 and 3’ on ‘pastor – shepherd’ we saw very plainly that there are those who shepherded the groups 10 people. So if people are truly to be cared for as the Lord intends, then there has to be shepherds taking responsibility and giving oversight to a group of 10 or 12 people, thus we are releasing ministry in the church and real care for the flock. All totally Biblical.

For the Elder the only ministry requirement apart from caring is being able to communicate what they are taught by the ministry team – able to teach and thus work the Kingdom of God out in people’s lives on a very personal basis. In areas like Marriage, Children, healthy living, faith under pressure, prayer, reading the Word of God, wholesome talk and conduct and so on.

This is very different than being preached at every Sunday, this is getting it real where it matters. This brings Godly accountability as well as true support and encouragement.

What a powerful community this would be, i.e. New Testament church.

One last and important point on elders.

Absolutely NO-WHERE in scripture is there any reference to elders being elected by the people – it does not exist and any church that elects their elders by congregational vote is operating totally contrary to scripture.

Acts 14:23

23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Titus 1:5

5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

Elders are appointed by the Eph 4:11 ministry team or those like Titus on behalf of or as instructed by that team or the apostolic ministry of that team.

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The only elected or group chosen by the fellowship are the deacons.

Acts 6:1-6

6:1 In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

2 So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.

3 Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them

4 and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

5 This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism.

6 They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Here was a problem of administration so seven men were chosen to fulfill this servant role. Note. They were not placed in authority or ministry, but as servants to the practical needs of the church.

However, it is very important to note that spirituality and wisdom were the first and foremost criteria.

This is further born out strongly in 1 Timothy.

1 Tim 3:8-13

8 Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain.

9 They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience.

10 They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

11 In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything.

12 A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.

13 Those who have served well gain an excellent standing and great assurance in their faith in Christ Jesus.

Again, if we honored God's word and followed its instruction, we would have a very different church structure, a different type and caliber of eldership and Godly deacons humbly serving the community.

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With church life like that set up by the Lord Himself;
Is it little wonder that those out side the church stood in wonder of those in the church?
Is it little wonder that the gospel spread like a fire across the whole Roman Empire?
Is it little wonder that the power and presence of the Lord wrought miracles wherever the church went?
Is it little wonder that the Scripture tells us that we will provoke even the Jewish people to Jealousy or make them envious?

Rom 11:11

11 Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

Just how far removed from the New Testament Church life has the 21st Century church strayed?

To be honest with you, my heart aches for the church because we are missing out on so much that the Lord has for us and wants to shower upon us. He has chosen that through the church His manifest Wisdom is to be displayed and the world to see His Kingdom here on earth. We on the other hand, are more concerned with keeping our conventions and denominational establishments, than receiving power from on high.