



Church Elders ***Acts 20:17-38***

The crucial component of any organization or business is leadership. Good leaders can take the organization to heights of success, while bad leaders can take it to depths of ruin.

Jesus cares greatly about the organization and structure of His body, the Church. The Holy Spirit has given us the blue print in the New Testament for proper and appropriate church leadership (*Acts 6; Acts 20; Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5*).

The New Testament uses the word **elder** interchangeably with the words **bishop, overseer, and pastor**. These terms point to the same office, and the term **elder** is used most frequently in the New Testament. The term **elder** means “**mature.**” The term **overseer** means “**guardian.**” The term **pastor** means “**shepherd.**”

So, the basic understanding of the role of an elder is **a mature man who watches over the spiritual wellbeing of the church.**

The New Testament teaches there is one among the group of elders who has a spiritual gift attached to the office. That term is **pastor-teacher** (*Ephesians 4:11*). In some of our English translations, the word **and** is added between the word **pastor** and the word **teacher**. However, the Greek language does not separate the two, indicating an office with a gift. The role of the **pastor-teacher** is to be the primary teacher of God’s Word. He is the lead shepherd. The other elders have a responsibility to teach the Scripture, but the **pastor-teacher** is the primary teacher of God’s Word to the church.

Paul charged the church elders to maintain five priorities: be right with God, shepherd the flock, guard the flock, study and pray, and be free from self-interest.

1) Be right with God. (Acts 20:28a)

The first priority for anyone involved in spiritual leadership is his or her own relationship with God. Effective ministry is not mere outward activity; it is the overflow of a rich, deep relationship with God.

2) Shepherd the flock. (Acts 20:28b)

The elder’s second responsibility is the spiritual care of the flock. That care involves feeding and leading. The metaphor of a flock and a shepherd is often used to describe God’s relationship to His people.

Jesus Christ, the Chief Shepherd, has taken His big flock and divided into smaller flocks, known as the local church. The Holy Spirit sovereignly raises up **overseers**, or under shepherds. These

individuals are responsible to shepherd the flock. Shepherding involves feeding, protecting, and caring for the sheep. God has committed the leadership of the church to the **overseers** (pastors; elders).

3) Guard the flock. (Acts 20:29-31)

A faithful shepherd must not only feed and care for the flock, he must protect it from predators. Paul knew after his departure false teachers would threaten the church from outside and inside. False teaching invades the church from outside its fold, but it invades from within it as well. The elder is responsible to be on guard for both.

4) Study and pray. (Acts 20:32)

Study of the Word and prayer are the foundational pillars for leadership within the church. The Word of God is the source of spiritual growth. If an under shepherd is to feed and protect the flock, he must be a student of the Word of God. He must also be devoted to prayer. Only then will he have true knowledge and the wisdom to apply that knowledge. There is no substitute for prayer because prayer acknowledges dependence on God and lines us up with His purposes.

The church cannot be adequately fed or equipped if the spiritual leadership are not daily engaged in the Word and prayer. The Lord has placed on elders the direct responsibility of leading His people to the Word, not to themselves.

5) Be free from self-interest. (Acts 20:33-38)

A truly God-honoring ministry must focus on giving, not getting. God does not bless a ministry or elder who is preoccupied with money. Those who care for the flock of God must not do so for material gain.

Love of money has always characterized false teachers. Both the Old and New Testaments denounce false teachers because they seek money and abuse God's people through guilt or Scripture twisting to obtain it.

Paul's own ministry was not characterized by self-seeking materialism. Paul's ministry was successful because his life was right with God, he made it his priority to feed the flock, he devoted himself to prayer and the ministry of the Word, and he was totally free of any self-interest or self-glorification. The result was the devoted love of those whom the Lord entrusted to him and, more importantly, the approval of God.

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