

# Shepherding the Flock

*"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, which he obtained with his own blood."  
(Acts 20:28)*



Overview and Introduction

We approach this study on *eldership* within the church with the following suppositions:

1. The Bible is truth.
2. The Bible is authoritative.
3. The Bible teaches us through *direct command* and *precedent*.
  - a. Direct Command -- We have a direct command where the Bible specifically addresses a subject and provides instruction about that subject. For instance in Galatians 6:2 we read, *"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."*<sup>1</sup> This means that caring for others is not optional, but is required of Christians because it is a direct command.
  - b. Precedent -- We can also learn much about how to organise and operate the church by reading the Bible to discover the practices of the church in the early years. If these churches, which were planted and taught by the apostles, adopted certain practices (and they are not condemned or corrected by the apostles) we should assume that these practices that are accepted and desired by God. Sometimes we describe the precedents found in the church in the New Testament as *normative*. This is to say that they constitute the normal practice for the church for all time.

In New Testament we are taught by command and example. In this study on eldership, we will look at what the Bible directly teaches about eldership in the church and we will look at examples of elders in the churches.

## The Politics of the Kingdom of God

The church is a part of the Kingdom of God and as such is subject to God's rule. In the Bible, God has revealed a pattern for the organisation of the church clearly showing Christ to be the head of the church. When Jesus refers to the church in Matthew 16:18 he calls it *"my church"* and Colossians 1:18 adds that Jesus is *"the head of the body, the church."*

The church is not a man-made institution and is not designed as a democracy. The church is a part of God's Kingdom and was designed by God and purchased through the blood of Jesus.

1. The church is a part of God's Kingdom
2. God is King of the Kingdom
3. The church belongs to Christ because he purchased it with his blood
4. Christians are a part of the kingdom and subject to the will of the King

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise indicated.

As Christians, we place ourselves within God's Kingdom and God's rule. We have decided to do what God wants, how he wants as best we can in our lives. In Philippians 3:20 Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi and said, *"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ."* As Christians, we are not citizens of this world, but of heaven. The decisions we make for God are not grounded in the ways of this world, but on God's will as revealed to us in Scripture.



While Jesus is head of the church, the Bible reveals a pattern for local church government that includes a group of servant leaders called elders (or overseers, bishops, and pastors) who serve to shepherd the flock.

Since it is our desire to be faithful to God and His Word, we want to follow the pattern that He gives. If we are to be true to both direct command and precedent we need elders within the church today. While a church can exist when qualified men are not available to serve as elders, it is not fully formed until elders are in place. The apostle Paul instructs Titus *"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you"* (Titus 1:5).

1. Why don't we have the "right" to choose for ourselves how the church will be governed?
2. What do the following Scriptures teach us about the authority of Scripture? (Psalm 119:89; Matthew 24:35; Hebrews 4:12; 2 Timothy 3:16)
3. What does it mean to say that Christians are citizens of heaven?
4. What do we learn about the presence of elders in local churches by reading Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1; James 5:14?
5. What is meant by putting the church in order? (Titus 1:5)

## What Are Elders and Why Do We Need Them?

Congregational leadership is the form of church government seen in the New Testament with local autonomy for every congregation. Likewise there is a divine pattern of leadership within the local congregation. This leadership is first and foremost based on the headship of Christ (Ephesians 2:20), but included in church leadership are elders and evangelists.

Ephesians 4:11 says, “*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.*” This verse teaches that it was Christ who established these positions of leadership within the church. Apostles and prophets were foundational roles that were needed in the first century of the church. This verse also lists two enduring positions: 1) Evangelists and 2) Shepherds/Teachers or Pastor/Teachers. Shepherds (or pastors) and teachers are joined and refer to a single position.

Ephesians 4:12-14 tells us why these roles exist within the church. They have been given “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.*”

1. Elders equip saints for works of service
2. Elders build up the body of Christ
3. Elders promote unity in the faith
4. Elders provide teaching so that the saints may have a knowledge of the Son of God
5. Elders assist the church to become mature
6. Elders are concerned to provide spiritual instruction so that the church is not tossed

Jack Cottrell points out that the word “elder” as it is used in the New Testament does not have the generic meaning of “old person,” but rather refers to a position within a family. The people of God have always been a family. In the Old Testament, Israel was a patriarchy, which means “rule by the fathers.” “The elders of Israel” are mentioned often in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:16, 18; Numbers 11:16; Deuteronomy 21:18-19; 27:1; 1 Kings 20:7-8). In a similar way, in the New Testament era the church is a spiritual family, and the elders are the father figures, the ones in the family who have the experience and maturity to exercise spiritual leadership (1 Timothy 3:4-5).<sup>2</sup>



Elders are men who love those within the church, are mature in their own faith, and serve as godly examples. They are appointed to lead, protect, and feed the church as they teach, preach, exhort, encourage, visit and pray for the sick, and guard the church against false teachings.

We need these men because the world in which we live is a spiritually dangerous place. In Acts 20, Paul addresses the elders at Ephesus and says in Acts 20:29, “*fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.*”

6. What does 1 Peter 5:1-4 teach us about the attitude, motive, and leadership style of the elders within the church?
7. Why is being an example an important role of the eldership?
8. What does Ephesians 4:12-14 and 1 Peter 5:1-4 teach us about the spiritual maturity and biblical knowledge of those who serve as elders?

<sup>2</sup> Cottrell, Jack. *The Faith Once For All: Bible Doctrine for Today*. Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002. p. 427.