

# 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)*



Appointment of Elders

## The Appointment of Elders

The New Testament does not go into great detail about how elders are to be appointed. Much space is given to qualifications and responsibilities, but less about how elders come to serve within the church. There are a number of ways in which churches have chosen to appoint elders such as:

1. Any member of the congregation nominates an elder and the congregation votes.
2. Existing elders choose new elders or existing elders propose new elders to the congregation who votes.
3. Evangelists appoint elders within any input from anyone.
4. Committees are formed in the church to interview potential elders who then present their choices for the congregation to consider.



Within this list there are countless variations of ways in which churches choose to appoint elders. Are all acceptable or is there a singular teaching about how elders are to be appointed? What does the Bible say? Ultimately it is the Holy Spirit that makes one an overseer (Acts 20:28). It is the Holy Spirit who inspired the New Testament where we are given the qualifications and He is the one who gifts these men.

Ian Fair writes, *"Leadership in the body of Christ is not a matter of position or authority, but of ministry. Whatever ministry we are called to is the result of God's grace working in our lives, and not one's own ability or position (1 Pet 4:7-11; Rom 12:3-8; Eph 4:7, 11; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 2 Cor 5:18-19; 1 Cor 12:27-31)."*<sup>1</sup>

### 1. How have elders been selected in churches where you have been?

We first encounter elders in the church in Acts in 11:30 with no mention of how they were selected. On his first missionary journey the Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:21-23.) This they did accompanied by a period of prayer and fasting.

### 2. Why did Paul and Barnabas surround their decision about elders with prayer and fasting?

<sup>1</sup> Fair, Ian A. *Leadership in the Kingdom: Sensitive Strategies for the Church in a Changing World*. Revised ed. Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2008. p. 209.

Later the evangelist, Titus is instructed to appoint elders in Titus 1:5. There is no instruction beyond this simple statement and we are not given a list of steps that he was to follow though qualifications or qualities of men who could be elders are given in the verses immediately following.

Some point to the appointment of the seven in Acts 6:1-6 as a template for choosing and appointing elders. While the men who are chosen in Acts 6 are often referred to as the first deacons, they are not called deacons. All we really know about them is that they were seven servants chosen for a specific responsibility. In the choosing of these seven men the following steps were taken:

1. The congregation selected the men from the church.
2. The men to be chosen had to meet the qualifications of being of good repute and being full of the Spirit and wisdom.
3. The church presented the men to the apostles who prayed and laid their hands on them.

### 3. Why did the apostles involve the congregation in the choosing of the seven instead of simply making the choices themselves?

When we consider the passage of the appointment of the seven in Acts 6, the appointment of elders by Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14, and the instructions to Timothy and Titus certain guidelines emerge as to the appointment of elders for the church today.

1. A man must aspire to be an elder (1 Timothy 3:1).
2. A man must be qualified to be an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; and 1 Peter 5:2-3).
  - a. The congregation must be taught about eldership, so that they understand the qualifications of an elder.
  - b. The potential elder must be “tested.” In 1 Timothy 3:10, Paul writes about deacons and says “*let them also be tested.*” The word “also” refers to the elders in the context of 1 Timothy 3.
    - i. This period of testing takes place over a period of time as the congregation comes to learn the faith and character of a potential elder. If a church is particularly large, special care must be given so that the church can get to know the spiritual character of any potential elder.
3. The qualified man who has been tested should be selected to be an elder.

#### **The Eldership is Not a Popularity Contest**

*We love and respect men who serve in the church as elders, but we do not choose them to be elders through any kind of popularity contest. We choose men to be elders because they desire to serve as elders and have demonstrated that they are qualified to serve by their age, wisdom, experience, Christ-like lifestyle and attitude, ability to teach God's Word, and their shepherd heart.*

*For this reason it is inappropriate to propose a pool of candidates from which a selection may be made. The church should select a man on his qualifications and suitability alone, not his ability or popularity compared to another man. This type of elder selection process can sow the seeds of division and jealousy.*

- a. The selection process should involve the whole church after they have examined the qualifications of the one(s) who would become an elder. — For elders to be selected there must be a plurality of men to serve in this position, so that a church with no existing

elders must appoint two or more. In churches that have elders, one or more men could be chosen to join an existing eldership.

- i. The Bible does not speak to the selection process, so there is latitude for each congregation to determine how the church will make the selections.
  - ii. As a practical matter, anyone who has biblical evidence as to why a man who has been selected may not meet the qualifications of being an elder should personally inform the evangelist and/or elders. The evangelist and any existing elders can examine whether or not there is merit to the objection and if necessary inform the congregation as to why a man has been withdrawn from the selection process.
- b. The potential elder should prayerfully examine his own life as he knows himself better than anyone in the church knows him. If he does not desire to serve in this capacity or believes himself to not be qualified he should decline appointment as an elder.
  - c. The evangelist and any existing elders should appoint (set apart) the man or men to the eldership by the laying on of hands. (Acts 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:22). No evangelist or elder should participate in appointing a man that they know is not qualified to serve as an elder.
  - d. Prayer and fasting should surround the entire process (Acts 6:6; Acts 14:23).

#### Example of a Selection Process

1. Allow every member to propose one or two persons. Those who have the most nominations would be considered the elder candidates.
2. The evangelist and elders discuss and prayerfully consider these men. Unless there is a substantial spiritual reason to disagree with the nomination of the congregation, it should move forward.
3. Those who have been nominated should be informed allowing them to accept or decline.
4. The church should be informed of the elder candidates and after a period of prayer they should vote to appoint the man or men. If anyone has a biblical objection against one of these men they should inform the evangelist and/or existing elders who examine any evidence prior to their appointment as elders.
5. After the congregation has made their decision, they should be appointed by the evangelist and/or elders.

#### 4. List any questions or suggestions you have about the appointment of elders.



#### How Long Should a Man Serve as an Elder

Just as all churches do not appoint men to serve as elders by the same methods, the duration that a man serves as an elder varies from congregation to congregation. Some churches have elders serve a set period of time that they often refer to as a “term.” These terms may be anywhere from one to three years. Some churches allow the man to be appointed again immediately to the eldership while others require that a man takes a period of time away.

There is no scriptural support for “term limits” and this seems to undermine the true nature of the elder as shepherd. If a man cares for the flock, loves the flock, and is respected by the flock, how can he sit idly by for a period of time unable to serve as an elder in the church in which the Holy Spirit has made him an overseer.

There is a great danger in making the eldership into a popularity contest when we give these men “term limits.” Occasionally unpopular decisions must be made within the church. We do not vote these men out like we might a politician who has not pleased us.

It is possible to remove a man as an elder if there is grounds to do so (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Not only must a man meet the qualifications to be an elder initially, but he must continue to meet these qualifications if he is remain in this position. An elder may elect to remove himself from the eldership if he is unable to fulfill his obligations to the church because of health, work or family commitments, spiritual issues, or other concerns.

5. How long have men typically served as elders in the churches in which you have been a part?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
6. Is there benefit in men serving for as long as they believe they can do so, or should men be required to spend time off the eldership? Can you support your position with scripture?