



ORDINATION OF NEW ELDERS

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1 Pet 5:1-4; 1 Tim 3:1-7

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On this special morning when we introduce two new elders of our church, I want to make a few introductory comments. In our text, from 1 Peter 5, we will seek answers to the following four questions:

1. What is an elder?
2. How are elders chosen?
3. How are they to be motivated?
4. How do they function and lead others?

1 Peter 5:1-4:

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (1 Peter 5:1-4, NASB)

I. What is an elder?

In these verses Peter makes use of all three Biblical terms (elder, pastor, overseer) to describe the office and work of an elder.

A. Elder

First, the apostle uses the word *elders* (from which we get the term *presbyter*) to refer to the men whom he is commissioning. The word speaks of their experience and godly character (Titus 1:5-9). These men were proven, godly servants in their homes and communities. Notice the greater emphasis on character rather than gift.

B. Shepherd

Next, Peter describes the elders' work of teaching, using the verb "*to shepherd*." As pastors, the elders' primary job is to feed the flock with God's word. The apostle no doubt remembered his own ordination ceremony, following his threefold denial of the Lord on the evening before the crucifixion. When Jesus appeared to him after the resurrection, he asked him, "Do you love me?" Peter assured Jesus that he did indeed love him, and Jesus told him, "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Tend my lambs" (John 21:15-16). That is the primary work of elders—feeding the flock of God.

When the apostle Paul had finished his ministry in Acts, he addressed the elders concerning what he felt he had faithfully discharged before them. To do this God had given them divine gifts so that they were "apt to teach" (Eph 4:11). Thus their primary task was not directing ministries and taking charge of everything, but teaching God's word. Here is part of what the apostle said on that occasion:

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ...Therefore I testify to you this day, that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. (Acts 20: 20-21, 26-27)

Paul further instructed Timothy, "Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Tim 4:2). He states the priority once more in these words from his first letter to his son in the faith: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim 5:17).

Simply stated, then, the work of an elder is to feed the flock.

C. Overseer

The final term used by Peter, found in most Greek manuscripts, is the verb "*overseeing*" (from which we get the nouns *episcopal* and *bishop*). This word is descriptive of a shepherd's call to watch over and guard the flock of God. It is used in the LXX to describe God himself who watches Israel, his flock, with tender care, and then intercedes from heaven to earth to "*visit*" his people with salvation or judgment.

This concept is especially prominent in the pastoral epistles. Paul exhorts Timothy to protect the sheep from false teachers who would seek to exploit and manipulate the sheep, teaching false doctrines that are damaging to the soul. The apostle worked especially hard to preserve the doctrine of grace among his churches. How many blows did he suffer in his striving to keep the gospel of grace free from legalism!

Thus each of these terms, elder, shepherd, and overseer, is descriptive of the same individual, only from different points of view: the first describes his character and experience; the second and third, his dual tasks of

feeding and guarding the flock.

In the third and fourth centuries the church misapplied these terms to different offices within the church, creating a hierarchical form of church government, with one bishop, who would become the pope, presiding at the top of the pyramid. The New Testament churches, however, always operated with a plurality of servant leaders, ministering together in the manner in which Peter and Paul instructed.

II. How are elders chosen?

Certainly, elders are not to be chosen by a popularity contest. Paul tells Timothy to appoint elders who fulfill the qualifications of godly character, experience, and divine gift. Notice again, there is more emphasis on character than gift. Gift is mentioned (an elder is to be “apt to teach”), but there are many spiritual gifts that make a leader “apt to teach.” The emphasis is on not on gift but on character.

The stories of the births of Samson and Samuel are found back to back in the Old Testament, but what different accounts they are. The Samson story has descriptions of angelic visitations to his parents before the birth of the child. Samson had spirit and strength, yes, but he was a man of weak character. No angelic visitation preceded Samuel’s birth, however. His mother, Hannah, was barren, but she prayed for a child. When her son, Samuel, was born, Israel had its first prophet. Which man would you rather have as an elder in the church, Samuel or Samson?

In 1 Timothy 3, Paul sets out the character qualities an elder must possess.

It is a trustworthy statement; if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?); and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil. (1 Tim 3:1-7)

When Timothy identified these qualities in individuals, he was recognizing what the Holy Spirit had already done, for, as Paul said on another occasion, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28).

That is how leaders are chosen. Our board of elders here at PBCC asks who is already functioning as an eld-

er among us, and then we merely recognize what the Holy Spirit has already done.

III. How are elders to be motivated?

Peter writes, “exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.”

A. Not externally by inwardly: “not under compulsion, but voluntarily.”

Elders are not to be driven by duty. Rather, they are to allow the Lord to move them internally, from the heart. No ministry should be undertaken because one has been coerced to act. If coercion is applied, ministry becomes routine and void of love and care. In the Old Testament, David looked ahead to the Ascension of the Messiah when he would inaugurate the New Covenant: “Your people will *volunteer freely* in the day of Your power” (Psa 110:3). With the coming of Christ, ministry is always to be done voluntarily, without compulsion. This is to be especially true of elders.

B. Not conditionally but unconditionally: “not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.”

Elders should always be ready to serve with a willing heart, not holding back for some earthly reward like money or prestige for their service. If elders remember that their reward comes from the Lord on that day, they will be able to cultivate hearts that are free to serve in all situations.

IV. How do elders lead others?

A. By example

Peter says that elders are to exercise leadership by example, not by domineering or coercion—“nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.” The apostle remembered the occasions when the Lord rebuked him over his debates with others of the disciples about who would be the greatest in the kingdom of God. Many of the miracles of Jesus in the gospel of Mark, signs such as the healing of the blind man, were designed to teach the disciples how blind they were about leadership. It was not until Peter denied Jesus and personally witnessed his sufferings that this lesson came home to him fully.

Elders must not lead with a heavy hand. They must not lead under compulsion or lord it over the flock. The only authority they have to lead is by example. That is the way it is to be in the church. Elders are under-rowers whose authority is granted them on the basis of their service to the body of Christ.

One more principle about the nature of leadership enters when leaders must address important issues in the body.

B. By Unanimity

“it seemed good to us, having become of one mind;

...For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden upon you than these essentials:" (Acts 15:25, 28)

According to this text, it was through prayer and the process of open discussion that elders found the mind of the Lord for his local church by "becoming of one mind." Once they achieved that unity of spirit they felt they had Christ's mind on the issue that was before them. F.F. Bruce comments: "So conscious were they of being possessed and controlled by Him that He was given prior mention as chief Author of their decision" They didn't need permission from one of the pillars of the church in Jerusalem to find the mind of Christ for the local body. They all worked together equally as brothers.

This is the principle that we have operated under throughout our history. After each elder has had opportunity to ponder and speak his mind on an issue, and if

we come to one mind on the matter, then we feel we have the mind of Christ for that particular situation. The apostles didn't circulate among the New Testament churches instructing the elders on what to do. They knew that they too could find the mind of the Lord when they had come to "one accord." The same thing holds true for ministries within the church. Elders are not micro-managers who oversee every ministry. They trust that the Holy Spirit can work in the lives of the flock, just as he does within the leadership.

That is how elders are to lead: by example, by service, and by sharing with the congregation when they feel they have the mind of Christ on issues within the local church.

With that New Testament backdrop, it is my great privilege to introduce to you our two new elders, Mickey Cook and Patrick Cunningham.

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