

Church — Saints, Elders & Deacons

Church leadership is a major issue for believers, church leaders, and pastors. As a result, many church leadership conferences are offered every year. Many denominations offer a leadership conference. In addition, various ministries and some individual churches conduct Christian leadership conferences. These conferences draw pastors, church leaders, and church members from countries all around the world. One very popular conference has an attendance of over five thousand people. I searched the Internet for the top leadership conferences. One website listed what they believed were the best ten church leadership conferences in 2021. Their top three conferences were LeaderCast Live, Church Leaders Conference, and the Christian Leadership Alliance Outcomes Conference. The costs ranged from free to over \$1,000 for a three-day conference. The conferences are held in churches, and the \$1,000

conference was held at a Hyatt Regency Hotel. Another website listed the top twenty church leadership conferences. Another website had a different list of church leadership conferences. When I compared the three lists, I discovered that the

lists did not agree. I also discovered the conferences focused on a variety of techniques, creative approaches, conferences geared for women, for different age groups, and on how to grow the size of your church. What was amazing is that each one claimed to develop leaders, but each one had their own unique approach as to how to do that. It was obvious that each one believed they offered the best approach to develop leader-

ship.

WHAT SCRIPTURE DOES NOT ADDRESS. But if we examine the New Testament, we discover that it does not say anything about music programs, the order of the worship service, worship bands, song leaders, assistant pastors, secretaries, or what type of ministries the church should have. However, the New Testament does provide some guidelines as to how the church should care for widows, love and care for one another, share the gospel, and it provides qualifications for who should teach the Word of God.

But the primary emphasis of the New Testament is about the spiritual qualifications of the church leaders, their responsibilities, and the congregation's response.

THE SAINTS, ELDERS, AND DEACONS. Therefore, the questions we should ask are, "Who are the Elders or Overseers?"

and "What has God revealed in Scripture about how He wants His church to be organized?" If we did that, we could combine all of the leadership conferences together into one and study the Bible together. The place to start would be Philip-
pians 1:1 because

it is one of the most important verses in the New Testament about church leadership. It says,

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons . . . Philipians 1:1 (NASB)



In this verse we find three groups of people. First, Paul indicates that he is writing to the saints. That is, Paul was writing to all of the true believers in the church. Then Paul refers to the other two groups. He says, “including the overseers and deacons.” Now this includes individuals who are saints and members of the church and are also leaders in the church. The overseers are also called elders in the New Testament. The third group of people are the deacons. These support the overseers. Deacons can be men or women. This verse is important because it gives us a snapshot of God’s view of how His church should be organized or structured. We see both the congregation and the leaders of the church.

PLURALITY OF CHURCH LEADERS. The New Testament reveals several important facts about the overseers or elders. First, it reveals that God designed the church to be governed by a plurality of godly men, and not by one man. Philippians 1:1 gives us one example. It refers to a plurality of elders and deacons. There are a number of verses in the New Testament that reveal God wants His church to be led by a plurality of leaders. Acts 11:30 is another passage that refers to a plurality of church leaders. It says,

And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders. Acts 11:30 (NASB)

Here we are told that the church in Antioch had sent Barnabas and Saul to deliver some money to the elders in Jerusalem. Notice the passage does not say to the elder, but to the elders.

Acts 14:23 is more specific. In this verse, the “they” are Paul and Barnabas. It says,

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14:23 (NASB)

Now, what does it say about the leaders of every church? We are told that Paul and Barnabas appointed not one elder for each church, but a plurality of elders in every church. The churches mentioned in the book of Acts were usually small. The church in Ephesus seems to be the only exception. The early church usually met in homes (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthi-

ans 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 1:2). The message is that Paul and Barnabas did not appoint one elder, but a plurality of elders.

There are six other passages that refer to a plurality of elders in the church. One of those passages is Acts 15:22-23. We read,

Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them, the apostles and the brethren who are elders . . . Acts 15:22-23 (NASB)

In Acts 20:17 we read,

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. Acts 20:17 (NASB)

Here we are told that Paul called the elders from Ephesus to himself. Notice once again that elders is in the plural.

In 1 Timothy 5:17 we find another verse that refers to a plurality of elders.

The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17 (NASB)

In 1 Peter 5:1, the apostle Peter calls himself an elder and speaks to the elders.

Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder . . . 1 Peter 5:1 (NASB)

The last two New Testament passages that refer to a plurality of elders are about the elders in the city of Jerusalem. The passages are Acts 16:4 and Acts 21:18.

In strong contrast to this pattern of a plurality of church leaders, the apostle John rebuked a man named Diotrephes because he was a dictator in a church, according to 3 John 9-10. The apostle refers to this tyrant by name. The apostle John implies that when he visits the church, he planned to deal with

the man. I suspect the apostle removed him as an elder. The message for us is that no church should be controlled by only one person, but by a plurality of godly elders.

THE OVERSEERS, ELDERS, AND PASTORS. So, what is the significance of the titles of overseer and elder? We have already read about overseers in Philippians 1:1 and elders in many passages. In summary, the term elder refers to the spiritual character of the man, and overseer refers to his function. The Greek word for elder is *presbuteros*. It usually referred to an older person. Today, we call older people seniors or our elders. That is, the person is physically mature. But in the context of the church, the word has the idea of spiritual maturity. The Greek word for overseer is *episkope*. It has the sense of a religious role involving service and leadership.

Thus, the term elder refers to the spiritual character of the man, and overseer refers to his function. When discussing church leaders, both terms refer to the same person. An elder is also an overseer. Proof of this fact is found in Acts 20:17 and verse 28. In Acts 20:17, we read that Paul called the elders or *presbuteros* to himself. Then in verse 28 Paul said this about these elders,

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 (NASB)

Notice that Paul now refers to the elders as overseers. In verse 17, Paul called these men elders and now in verse 28 he called them overseers. He referred to the same men by two different titles. Also, notice that he said they had the responsibility of shepherding. The Greek word for “to shepherd” here is the verb form of shepherd, which comes from the Greek word *poimen*. This Greek word is also translated as “pastor” in the New Testament. Therefore, what does all of this mean? It means that an elder is an overseer, who is also a shepherd or a pastor. The elders of the church are overseers and shepherds or pastors. The apostle Peter also makes this point very clear in 1 Peter 5:1-2 when he says,

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, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness . . . 1 Peter 5:1-2 (NASB)

Notice that Peter, who is an apostle, calls himself an elder. Then he speaks to the elders of a church, urging them to shepherd the flock of God in verse 2. That is, he urges them to shepherd or pastor the flock in the local church. Then he urges them to exercise oversight. This helps us crystalize the responsibilities of an elder as oversight and shepherding. Therefore, the term elder refers to the spiritual character of a man. The terms oversight and shepherding refer to what he does in the church. He exercises oversight and also shepherds the flock, which includes teaching the Word of God.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF AN ELDER. Now there are three important passages that help us understand the responsibilities of an elder. We have already discovered two of those passages. They are Acts 20:17, 28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2. Those passages taught us that elders have the responsibility to exercise oversight and shepherd the flock, which includes caring and teaching Scripture. 1 Timothy 5:17 is another important passage. It says,

The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. 1 Timothy 5:17 (NASB)

This verse is very important because it helps us discover which responsibility is the most important one for elders. First, we are told that some elders will rule well, and some will not. That is, some elders will exercise oversight very well. If he does, then he is worthy of double honor. Next, we are told that those elders who work hard at preaching and teaching are to receive very special honor. It says, “especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” This helps us understand that the most important responsibility of an elder is not organizing and managing the affairs of the church. His most important responsibility is to teach and preach. Oversight is a secondary function. His teaching responsibility is the major part of shep-

herding.

James 5:14 mentions another responsibility of elders. It says,

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. James 5:14-15 (NASB)

This passage describes another responsibility of an elder. They are to pray for the sick when a believer asks them to pray over them. If a believer is sick due to sin, they should call the elders and ask them to pray for him or her, and the prayer of faith will result in healing. This is part of shepherding. Shepherding includes caring, protecting, and teaching.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-14 describes another responsibility of elders.

But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another. We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-14 (NASB)

Verses 12-13 help us understand that the passage is about elders since it refers to leaders who have oversight and teach the Word. This means verse 14 describes another responsibility of elders, and that responsibility is counseling.

So, an elder has the responsibilities of praying for the sick, counseling, caring for the flock of God, teaching the Scriptures, and exercising oversight.

IF ANY MAN ASPIRES. This brings us to our study which is just one verse. It is 1 Timothy 3:1. It is about elders. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is about overseers or elders and we will discover later that 1 Timothy 3:7-13 is about deacons. Verse 1 says,

It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. 1 Timothy 3:1 (NASB)

Verse 1 begins with the statement “It is a trustworthy statement.” Paul uses the phrase “trustworthy statement” three times in the book of 1 Timothy. We have already studied the first one in chapter one and verse fifteen. This is the second one. We will find the third one later in 1 Timothy 4:9. Each time Paul uses this phrase “trustworthy statement,” he is drawing our attention to a very significant statement. The Holy Spirit and Paul want believers to know that the statement is true. It can be seriously trusted. So, what did He say?

He said, “if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do.” This statement is often misunderstood. I did not understand it for many years. I once thought it was saying that if a man aspires to the office of overseer or elder, his desire was a good thing. That is, his desire was good. But that is not what this verse is saying. Instead, it says that the office of overseer or the office of an elder is a fine thing.

There are two words in this verse that describe the passion of a man who wants to be an elder. They are “aspires” and “desires.” The first word “aspires” is translated from the Greek word *orego*. This word literally means “to reach out for,” “to stretch forth,” or “to reach for.” It has the idea of a man stretching his hand out after something, maybe something just beyond his reach. It can be illustrated as a child desperately reaching for a cookie just beyond his or her reach. The child stretches and stretches. That is a picture of the man described in this verse. The second important word in this verse is “desires.” It comes from the Greek word *epithumeo*. It refers to a strong passion. It is often translated as “lust” in the New Testament. It is used of sexual desire in Matthew 5:28. Taken together, these two words refer to a man who has a very strong passion to become an overseer of the church. He is reaching out for the office of an elder.

Now, these words do not reveal if his strong passion is good or evil. His passion may be good or evil. It depends upon two factors: his motivation and his qualifications. We will discover the qualifications of an elder in the next study. They are described in verses 2-7. But for this study, we want to answer this question, “Is there a good reason for a man to want to be an elder?” The answer is there are good and bad reasons.

Let me give a few illustrations. Many years ago, I knew a man who seriously wanted to be an elder because he wanted to

gain some control of the direction of the church in which he was a member. He did not like the direction of the church, and so, he wanted to change it. The man did not realize that he had the spirit of Diotrephes as in 3 John 9-10. He did not realize that he was not qualified to be an elder. This man had an evil desire. His character revealed that most likely he would cause problems among the elders. I knew another man who was like him, and he was a problem among the elders. Eventually, he was removed from the board of elders because he had a critical spirit.

I knew another man who wanted the status of a being an elder of the church. He revealed his desire in a public meeting when he complained that he had not yet been asked to be an elder. As he spoke, he also revealed that he was not qualified to be an elder. He was never asked to serve as an elder.

These were three examples that reveal these men had a wrong passion for being an elder. But there are many examples of good pastors and elders.

1 Peter 5:2-3 gives us an example of elders who have good passions. Here is the passage,

Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight 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. 1 Peter 5:2-3 (NASB)

Verse 2 says that a man who serves as an elder of the church must desire three things. First, verse 2 says an elder must “exercise oversight not under compulsion.” That is, he must want to faithfully serve in an oversight role. He must not serve reluctantly. Second, an elder must serve voluntarily. That is, he must willingly serve Christ, according to the will of God. I remember the first time that I was asked to become an elder, I asked the Lord to give me guidance. I wanted to know God’s will. I finally said, “Yes!” I did that because I believed that God called me to be an elder. That was His will for my life.

Third, an elder must serve Christ with “eagerness.” So, an elder is one who voluntarily, with eagerness serves the Lord, because he believes it is God’s will for him to do this. He does not serve as an elder because he wants control, because

he wants status or significance, or for any other reason, except that he has a great passion to do the will of God. He believes he is called by God to serve as an elder of the church. If God wants him to serve as an elder, the Holy Spirit will have prepared him. Others will recognize that. The truth is “a man is an elder because he is an elder” and not because the church has asked him to serve as an elder. An elder is an elder because he is an elder. In our next study, we will discover the full meaning of that statement.

IT IS A FINE WORK. So, we have learned that there are good and evil reasons for a man to aspire to the office of an elder. Now what is the meaning of the phrase “it is a fine work” he desires to do? The Greek word for “fine” is *kalos*. This word has the sense of beauty, excellence, and grace mixed with a high moral quality. The work of elders is one of grace, and high moral beauty.

The office of an elder is not primarily about making decisions. It is about being shepherds and teaching the Word of God. It is about laying hands on and praying for the sick. It is about counseling those in need. As we have already discovered, that is God’s job description for every elder and not just the man or men who are paid a salary. The office of an elder is a high spiritual calling. It is beautiful work to do for the Lord.

The Greek word for “work” is *ergon*. It has the sense of labor. That is, the office of overseer or the office of an elder is a beautiful, but hard work. So, it is a trustworthy statement that if a man aspires to be an overseer, or an elder, he desires a beautiful, spiritual ministry, which is hard work.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-14 and 1 Timothy 5:17 also teach us that the ministry of elders is hard work. Those elders who labor hard for the Master are to be highly honored because their service is “fine work.”

CONCLUSION. So, what have we learned? We have discovered that if a man aspires to the office of an elder, if he seriously believes that God has called him to be an elder, and if he has the opportunity to serve as an elder, then he must eagerly serve. When a man aspires, stretches himself out, to be an elder, he seeks a work that is one of grace, and high moral beauty. It is a high calling for a man to pray for the sick, counsel the needy, care for the flock of God, exercise oversight, teach the Scriptures, and serve the Lord with all his heart.