

Elders and Deacons

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There is a funny story going around about a young woman who told her pastor she didn't want to go to heaven. The puzzled pastor asked her, "Why?" She told him that she heard there were going to be 24 elders there! While this may be an amusing story, all too often it really does reflect many Christians' lack of understanding of true eldership in the church.

It is our desire to examine both the offices of elder and deacon in this teaching to help all of us better appreciate the value of these people and their roles in the church.

Who Are Elders? - As one reads the Epistles it quickly becomes clear that elders were important people in the New Testament church. For example, John refers to himself as an elder. (2 Jn 1:1, 3 Jn 1:1 NIV) And, as the story about the woman referenced, we see in the Book of Revelation that there really are 24 elders in heaven surrounding the throne of God. (Rev 4:4)

We see in Acts 14:23 that, "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust." (NIV) Again in Titus Paul makes references to appointing elders, "The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." (Titus 1:5 NIV)

It seems that appointing elders was the biblical pattern wherever the first century apostles established churches. And so it continues today. Unfortunately, in some churches today the office of the elder has degenerated to a position of honorary title, or a position one attains by virtue of seniority. That was not the case in the New Testament times. Quite the contrary, the elder of the early church held an extremely important, crucial position. He or she had great authority with man and with God. True elders in the church of Jesus Christ continue to have that authority and power with God today.

Biblical Qualifications for Elders - Scripture sets forth general guidelines for the appointment of elders. Here are Paul's instructions to Titus:

An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless--not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Tit 1:6-9 NIV)

Clearly this passage is describing a very mature, sanctified Christian. Because of the attributes Paul describes, and because of the spiritual maturity of one with this kind of character, I believe we can add the fruit of the Spirit to this list. Thus I also include within the context of godly elders the fruit of the Spirit which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (See Gal 5:22-23 NIV.)

To restate the attributes of the man or woman that God sees as an elder in His church, that person is not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain, is hospitable, loves what is good, is self-

controlled, upright, holy and disciplined, holds firmly to God's message, encourages other by sound doctrine, is willing to refute those who oppose that sound doctrine, and has love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and is self controlled! Wow! Just imagine the power and authority such a person has in the spirit realm. And, of course that kind of person should also have a strong voice in church affairs as well.

I have encountered many such elders in my Christian walk. I have literally met such men and women all over the world. They are of all races, colors, different denominations, and of both sexes. I believe these men and women fall into the category that Daniel found himself in when the angel assured him that his prayers had been heard and were already answered in heaven because he was a man highly esteemed in heaven. (Dan 9:22,23)

Elders shake the heavenlies when they pray. I have met elders in some places in the world who have never traveled farther than a few miles from where they were born, yet they can hear of a situation, or read something in the newspaper which is taking place in a far away land and, as they begin to pray about that situation, they move the very heart of God concerning it. They can defeat powerful demons and demolish strongholds with their powerful, effective prayers.

I was in a nation of Africa a few years ago and met a pastor who had a real vision for his nation and for Africa. He told me that his church had just sent seven of their elders to the capital cities of the seven surrounding nations to pray and fast for a week. These men did not hold meetings, they simply rented hotel rooms and undertook fasting and praying for that nation. The sending church joined in the fight and everyone involved knew that they had made a mighty spiritual break through. Imagine the power of these seven elders, sent under the authority of their pastor and their church. And imagine what a mighty team these men made with their pastor. That church had a real understanding of how elders can be used.

I believe that elders are ordained ultimately not by a church, but by God. They are those in His church who grow to spiritual maturity, who have deep Bible knowledge, and who are Christ centered in their walk with Him. God is faithful to raise up people like this within the local church context. Thus, because it is God who actually ordains His elders, the local church simply recognizes what God has already established when the local church selects or appoints elders. One doesn't become a true elder by human appointment or selection. God does the raising up, others merely recognizes.

To refer back again to the list of attributes of the elder found in Titus 1:6-9, and the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23, these attributes certainly apply to both men and women. Based on this conclusion, I believe that both men and women can be elders in God's church. Yes, I am aware that most local elder boards are composed of men "and their wives." And that's OK. But, when you begin to really understand the role and anointing of eldership in the worldwide church, the distinction based on sex simply doesn't hold up. To tell the truth, I have known some local male elders in a church whose wives were far

more godly and spiritually mature than their husbands! I believe that, from God's perspective, in these cases the wives were the true elders in His church!

What Are the Responsibilities of the Elders?

Paul told the elders at Ephesus to, "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood." (Acts 20:28 NIV) Gerhard Kittel tells us what the word **shepherding** meant in the first century Middle East, the setting in which the Bible was framed.

"The shepherd goes before his flock, guides it, leads it to pastures and places where it may rest by the waters, who protects it with his staff, who whistles [calls] to the dispersed and gathers them, who carries the lambs in his bosom and leads the mother-sheep."

"To lead, to guide, to go before."

"Gathering the dispersed, righteous government and care for the weak."⁽¹⁾

Although we usually think of the pastor as the shepherd, we see from Paul's directions that the spiritual responsibility for the church is borne by all elders, not just the pastor.

Now let's look at Scripture for some of the specific responsibilities of an elder.

a. To Govern - Because of the spiritual maturity of elders, I believe the spiritual government, or oversight, of a church is the responsibility of the elders of the church. Remember what Paul wrote to Timothy? "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching." (1 Ti 5:17 NIV) Here Paul tells us that the elders are to direct the affairs of the church, that at least some of the elders will preach and teach, and that all elders are worthy of double honor.

How does this work or what form does it take? The form isn't important as long as the spiritual oversight is in place and functioning well. Most churches have a council, or board of elders consisting of the pastor and the designated elders. This body bears the burden of the spiritual oversight of the flock.

b. Pray For the Sick - James wrote,

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray....Is any one of you sick [suffering]? He should call the elders of the church and pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well . . ." (Jas 5:13-15 NIV)

I believe that this Scripture is often misapplied. In many instances James' instructions have been reduced to a ritual in which the official elders of a church ceremonially anoint a sick person with oil and saying a short prayer over the person. Unfortunately they often give little or no thought to their prayer. I don't believe that's what James intended. The reason for naming elders as those who should pray is that presumably those elders are the spiritually mature members of the body. They know God's voice. They have a life style of prayer and can hear when the Holy Spirit speaks God's truth regarding a sufferer. They also have the responsibility to spend time in prayer for the sick and for any other burden the Holy Spirit puts on their hearts.

c. Spiritual Discernment - Let us continue our examination of this passage from James from the standpoint of spiritual discernment.

". . . He should call the elders of the church and pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. *If he has sinned*, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective." (Jas 5:13-16 NIV, emphasis added.)

In b. above, we used this Scripture to point out that the elders should earnestly pray for the sick. Here we use it to emphasize the ability of elders to discern *causes* of sickness which sometimes includes sin.

The statement "if he has sinned" implies that after a season of concentrated prayer over a sick person the Holy Spirit will often reveal to the elders if there is sin involved in this sickness. If that is what the Holy Spirit tells those praying, the sick person should be confronted about the sin with the goal of repentance, which will then open the way for healing.

If the cause of the illness is Satan, the elders will confront Satan and stand with the sufferer against the enemy's attack. If the cause is a disease or ailment of the body, the elders can pray for God's healing touch, encourage medical help, and can simply give comfort and encouragement.

This discernment of the elders extends far beyond prayer for the sick. Elders should also be aware of any unhealthy spiritual activity involving the church, such as demonic attacks. In that case an appropriate counter attack should be made with the elders leading the way with power and effectiveness.

d. Judge Prophecy - There are three sources of prophecy, the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, and an evil spirit. Because of these different sources, all prophecy that comes forth in a church must be judged by the more spiritually mature. Why? Because young or immature believers in the church simply have not learned yet to discern good from evil. (See Heb 5:12-14.)

There are three categories of people who are responsible for judging prophecy: prophets, pastors/elders, and individual Christians, although the primary responsibility falls on the first two categories. Along with the pastor, every elder should be able and prepared to judge prophecy.

Note: For detailed information on judging prophecy, see our book: [Prophecy and Prophets in Today's Church](#), by Jim and Carolyn Murphy, distributed by Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l.

e. Discipline - There is a sound reason why discipline is vital to the church. It preserves the spiritual health of the church. As Paul told the church at Corinth, "Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough? Get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast . . ." (1 Co 5:6-7 NIV)

All of us sin daily. But the kind of sin that merits church discipline is that sin which has become so dominant in a person's life that the enemy has a strong foothold in his or her life, or even an entire church. By this I mean sin like ongoing malicious gossip, marital infidelity, theft, lying, witchcraft and so forth. Sins in this category must be dealt with.

As harsh as it may be, if a foot has gangrene, it must be cut off or the whole body will perish. Some people will not repent of their sin. Simply stated, when *appropriate biblical means of correction have failed*, and there is still no repentance, it is then proper for the elders to consider church discipline. Matthew 18:

15-17, 1 Corinthians 5, and Galatians 6:1 should be the guide. Most of the time properly administered discipline will involve not only the pastor but the elders of the church as well. But remember, Galatians 6 tells us that the object of all church discipline is restoration if at all possible.

f. Counsel To the Pastor - The pastor is primarily responsible for the spiritual direction of the church. But elders also bear some responsibility for the church's spiritual direction and oversight. They are to spend much of their time and energy in prayer concerning the spiritual affairs of the church. Since their responsibility is spiritual, rather than the functional day to day operation of the church, elders are to be a conveyor of God's counsel and wisdom.

It is important that the elders of the church communicate with the pastor what they are hearing the Holy Spirit say. Often their counsel is confirmation to the pastor of what he or she is hearing. But if the pastor is slow to act, their word can provide the leading that is needed for spiritual direction.

The Office of the Deacon

Now we turn our attention to the role of deacons in the church. In Acts 6 we read of the early church choosing seven men as deacons. The Greek word for deacon is **δῆκονος**, or *diakonos*, and its basic meaning is one who renders a service to another, or one who ministers. The verb form of the word is **διακονᾶ**, or *diakonia*, and it means the act, or process of serving or ministering. Theologian W. Ewing⁽²⁾ gives us insight into the role of deacons in ministry. He wrote,

The earliest fact we have about the organization of the Christian church is given in Acts 6, where we are told "seven" men were appointed to what is called a "ministry of tables" . . . which is distinguished from the "ministry of the word" . . . This distinction between two different kinds of "ministry" which appears at the very beginning is seen to exist all through the apostolic church and beyond it into the sub-apostolic.

Those who are called to one of the five-fold ministries (apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher or evangelist) are, in Ewing's words, "ministers of the word." All who are called to support ministries, such as deacons, are "ministers of tables," or, in today's terminology, "ministers of service." The five-fold ministries' responsibility is that of ministry of the word, while the deacons' responsibility is service to the church.

1. How Are Deacons Chosen? Scripture sets forth both how deacons are chosen and what the qualifications are for deacons. As to how they are chosen, we look to the book of Acts.

Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (6:3-6 NIV)

Although we are not told how they chose these men, it is reasonable to presume that an election was held. The qualifications for deacons are also found in Scripture.

Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. In the same way, their wives are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well. (1 Tim 3:8-12 NIV)

2. What Are the Responsibilities of the Deacon? Now we ask the question, "What does a deacon do?"

Again we turn to Kittel's dictionary. "That the primary task of deacons was one of administration and practical service may be deduced a. from the use of the term for table waiters and more generally for servants; b. from the qualities demanded of them; c. from their relationship to the bishop; and d. from what we read elsewhere in the NT concerning the gift and task of *diakonia*. . . the deacons undertake practical service as distinct from the ministry of the Word."⁽³⁾

I do not see any precedent in Scripture for deacons involving themselves in the spiritual oversight of the church. The spiritual oversight of the church is more properly left to its elders.

We do see deacons preaching in the New Testament. Philip preached, but that was an evangelistic outreach from the church. This brings up another point. Anyone in the church is to use whatever gifts and talents he or she has to benefit the church. No one is to interpret what I'm saying here to mean that he or she only does one thing in the church. We all must do what we can, whenever we can, to build up the church, just as Philip did. Let me also point out that many who enter one of the five-fold ministries begin their ministry call by serving as a deacon.

Now let's look more closely at some of the specific responsibilities of deacons. Some of these responsibilities come directly from Scripture, others flow from a practical application of a scriptural principle.

a. Benevolence - Scripture delegates the responsibility of caring for widows in the church to deacons. Why? Because the problem of the neglect of the widows in the first century church prompted the decision to chose deacons in the first church. Today many churches have a benevolence fund set aside to care for those among the flock in need. Deacons should oversee both the collection and disbursement of this fund.

b. Financial Management - All proper financial accounting in a church should involve the deacons. The reason for this is to protect the pastor from being accused of having all the control over the church's money. I believe that it is a good idea for a church to have a treasurer. That person may be selected from among the deacons. If, for some reason, the person actually handling the money or keeping the books is not a deacon, then that person should report to the deacons.

The offerings are God's money and He requires a proper accounting of them. There should be a permanent record kept of all offerings as well as a permanent record of all expenses. The presence of such records greatly hinders Satan in the use of one of his favorite tools to disrupt and tear down a church, that of accusations of misuse of church funds.

Whenever deacons do handle money, it is *always* wise to insure that two or more are present when the offerings are counted and reported. This also robs the enemy of the opportunity to tempt and accuse.

If a church is large enough to have a budget, here again, deacons should be heavily involved in the budget process.

c. Administration - Every church should be administered by the pastor or someone acting under the authority of the pastor. This is often done by a deacon who has administrative training or skills. Administration involves the ordering and control of supplies and equipment, Bible training materials, some correspondence, and office administration in general.

d. Functional Operations - All churches, regardless of size, need people to oversee practical, functional needs. For example, this meeting needs a sound system. . . this class needs a chalkboard. . . the chairs need to be moved to this building, and so forth. All this work requires constant oversight and the physical presence of someone responsible. Deacons usually oversee this kind of work, often with young volunteers.

e. Maintenance Oversight - Buildings, grounds and equipment constantly need repair and maintenance. Most of this kind of work is either done or supervised by deacons. Again, I am emphasizing deacon oversight of this work, although deacons may, if qualified, certainly do the actual work.

3. Are Deacons All Men? - The Bible says, "A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and household well." (1 Tim 3:12 NIV) This statement of Paul's has led many to believe that his purpose was to assert that the deacons in the Bible were all men. I don't believe Paul's intent here was to make this a gender issue. I believe he was addressing the issue of polygamy which was common among the Gentile, non-Jewish converts.

The original *Greek text* of the New Testament is our final authority, not its translation into any particular language. Remember, the Bible does not contradict itself, and on rare occasions translators may miss important but subtle nuances of the original language.

In Paul's final greetings to the church at Rome *in the Greek text* he wrote these words: "But I commend to you Phoebe, our sister, being a *diakonon* of the assembly in Cenchrea. . ." (Rom 16:1 NIV) Most English translations translate the word *diakonon* as *ser-*

vant, thereby denying the fact that Phoebe was a deaconess! Phoebe's title of deacon is further proven by verse two when Paul, still speaking of her said, ". . . for she has been a *great help* to many people. . ." The words "great help" in the Greek text is **προστάτις**, or *prostatis*, and it means "one who stands in front or before, a leader." The fact that Paul used *diakonon* and called her a *leader* is clear evidence that this woman was a deacon. Note that in 1 Timothy 3:11, the New International Version states that the word "wives" may also be translated as "deaconesses." (footnote c11)

To further prove the common use of women as deacons Kittel, writing about the early church, also said, "It is indisputable, however, that an order of deaconesses did quickly arise in the Church."⁽⁴⁾

Conclusion

God has established His church and has given us both Scripture and the Holy Spirit to guide us in how it should function. The governing structure of the local church, in general terms, is the pastor, a group of mature, Godly elders who are responsible, along with the pastor, for the spiritual oversight of the church, and the designated deacons whose oversight of the function, more practical aspects is invaluable. What a wonderful system! Every church which has understood this structure, and every pastor who has been blessed with mature elders, and who will allow his or her elders to do the job God has ordained for them to do, will have a very well balanced church. Add to this oversight body a group of strong deacons and you have a church that can reach the lost, feed its own sheep, and demolish every demonic force that stands in its way!

1. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, By Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Volume 6, pages 486-487.
2. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Volume 3, Page 2057.
3. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, By Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. Volume 2, Page 90.
4. *Ibid.*, Page 93.

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