

to reach a lost world



A position paper examining...

WHAT IS AN ELDER? & WHAT DO THEY DO?...

HOW DO THEY OPERATE?...

HOW ARE THEY APPOINTED?...

AND HOW SHOULD WE RELATE TO THEM?

What is an Elder?

There are three Greek words used virtually interchangeably in the New Testament that define the office and role of "Elder".

1. ***Presbuteros*** – This is the word directly translated as "Elder". It carries the Old Testament connotations of the Elders of Israel, of wisdom, of respect for their credibility of character, and leadership.
2. ***Episkopos*** – This is a combination of "over" (*epi*) + "watch" (*skopos*), and is translated as Bishop, or Overseer. It carries the idea of responsibility, of authority and protection.
3. ***Poimen*** – This is the word "Shepherd", from the Greek word for "flock". It is translated "Pastor" (as in the office). E.g. "He gave some pastors..." In most instances occurs as a verb, describing what elders do. It conveys the idea of pastoral care.

The Elders therefore are the ruling body that shepherds, teaches, and governs a local church.

Eldership

**Craigmore
Christian
Church**

a brethren assembly

Raising up disciples...



What do Elders do?

They shepherd and watch over the flock.

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers (Lit taking oversight, i.e. watching over), not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

(1 Peter 5:1-4)

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to 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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.”

(Paul’s last sermon to the Ephesian Elders in Acts 20:28-31)

The reference in 1 Peter 5 uses all three terms listed above, in a comprehensive definition of the office of Elder, which combines all three aspects of the role. The first responsibility can be seen as shepherding, which is the primary imperative to all elders. Added emphasis of the Shepherding aspect of oversight is seen in the term “Chief Shepherd” referring to Christ, as the supervisor of the overseers, who will come to hold them to account for their oversight. In the Acts passage the focus for “oversight” is protection of the flock, and the teaching of truth is in prominent view.

In recognition of the priority of their shepherding role, Elders should build into their program of meetings, some formal visible expression of pastoral visitation, to which all elders are to be committed. At Craigmere Christian Church, the Elders meet for an hour, fortnightly on Monday nights where they share a meal together over which they catch up on any urgent business before going visiting among the congregation.

How do they operate?

They are serve as “slaves” not masters.

But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. “Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. (diakonos) “And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave (doulos) of all. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

(Mark 10:35-45)

The scriptures emphasis on shepherding tempers the way we interpret the “oversight” aspect of the elder’s role. Some see themselves as what they call “ruling” elders as opposed to “pastoral” elders. This distinction denies the universal principle already noted in 1 Peter 5, and is often used as an excuse by those who are not biblically gifted or qualified as genuine elders. Elderships are not to be aloof, and isolated from the congregation, as an administrative leadership function. Sadly, in many churches today, elders often operate as a faceless, board of management, relatively isolated from the congregation, to set policy and to chart the direction of the church. “Oversight” in these churches is interpreted as superintending and ruling. The emphasis is on decision-making and the exercise of management authority.

In Mark 10, the Lord identified these very characteristics as belonging to a secular concept of leadership. He disparages “those who are considered rulers”, whose leadership is characterized by “lording it over” their subordinates, in the “exercise authority over them.” Jesus strongly repudiates this kind of leadership and starkly contrasts it with His definition of oversight, which is to watch over, to care for, to shepherd, and to serve, to sacrifice, as humble slaves.

At Craigmore, we do not appoint elders who seek to take up only the “oversight” aspect of eldership, as “administrative” leaders only, without being shepherds among the people.

They always maintain mutual respect.

Submitting to one another in the fear of God

(Ephesians 5:21)

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time,

(1 Peter 5:5,6)

The exercise of Christian Grace is the responsibility of all believers, and is pertinent to all circumstances, but the need to submit to one another in humility is especially relevant in the exercise of authority, as is evident in this verse in Ephesians which introduces the substantial section which deals with various kinds of leadership relationships, such as husbands and wives, parents and children, and masters and slaves.

In the operation of eldership this principle of mutual submission is even more important. The understanding within eldership is to be willing to submit to and respect each others convictions. Any elder in good standing, should be listened too and his perspective must not be dismissed or overruled.

This does not mean there are not sharp differences of opinion, which are shared strongly. Issues sometimes need to be argued quite vehemently, before the Lord's mind can be discerned. Most differences are resolved when the brother with a minority view yields to the perspectives of his brothers. However, this submission is not expected or demanded by the majority. There are often situations, where a lone voice may prevail, or at least hold back the decision of the majority. In these cases where an elder appeals to his brothers, that he cannot yield in good conscience before God, then that conviction is accepted as from God by his peers. The only basis for resolution of contentious issues therefore is unanimity.

Honouring the principle of unanimity takes time and can appear to frustrate decision making, but it underpins a very powerful unity in the leadership.

At Craigmore, this principle of submission is also expressed systematically. Each year, each of the elders in turn each month submit themselves to each other for an assesment. Each elders tenure is also reviewed every three years, and re-affirmed in consultation with the congregation.

They take time to reach unanimous consensus.

⁶Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. ⁷And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them ... ¹²Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul... ¹³And after they had become silent, James answered, saying, "Men and brethren, listen to me: ¹⁴"Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. ¹⁵"And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written...

¹⁹"Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰"but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. ²¹"For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

²²Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. ²³They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, ... ²⁵it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord... ²⁸For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us... (Acts 15:6-29)

The early church leaders themselves had to resolve some highly contentious issues, and fortunately, the Scriptures document for us some very helpful examples of how some of the most difficult issues were resolved. For example, in Acts 15 the early church had to resolve with how Gentile Christian converts were to relate to the laws of Judaism. It highlights a few key principles of the dynamics of how the leadership structures worked.

The issue was considered and dealt with openly and corporately by the leaders. There was "much dispute". The arguments ran quite hot, and the implication is it was time consuming. Everyone kept silent and let each one speak without interruption, showing genuine respect for their perspective. Everyone had ample opportunity to have their say, Peter gave his input, Paul and Barnabas also.

We also note that James exercised a kind of leadership role, bringing to bear relevant teaching from the Word of God. The Scriptures do make clear that there are leaders (or a leader) within leadership or eldership and the basis for that leadership is also made clear, which is gift is teaching the Word of God.

James' apparent leadership though helpful, is not the basis for the resolution of the issue. The key phrases that highlight the dynamics of their decision-making are in verse 22 where it says, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church...", and verse 25 where it says, "it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord..." and finally in verse 28, where it says "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us..."

These phrases demonstrate how the principle of unanimity worked, and that they worked things through patiently, for as long it took to reach full consensus, with one accord in the whole church. Each one's perspective is respected as the Lord's provision. At CCC we don't shy away from heated dispute. Neither do we let the pressure of time force us to limit our discussion. We are committed to wait on God to lead us through each other to discerning His will in unanimous agreement.

They don't all share the same roles & responsibilities equally.

*Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages."
(1 Tim 5:17,18)*

It is clear that the "honour" referred to involves financial support. The early church was instructed to support certain elders to lead the church in a full-time capacity. This was especially true of those who laboured in the ministry of the word and doctrine. Clearly this "honour" also reflected a special respect for their authority as spiritual leaders as well.

In the early church it appears that some leaders were afforded greater honour than others. In Acts 12:17; 15:13; & 21:18 James' leadership among the elders is subtly apparent in the way he is specifically singled out by name among the rest of the elders as a group. It is significant to note that while those who had the responsibility for teaching were usually paid for their ministry, and esteemed with a special respect, they never-the-less were not regarded as a different class. They were all essentially still elders. There was not a distinct clergy, with a separate office.

At Craigmore, we financially support various shepherds. We call them as "Pastors", as is the custom in the wider Christian community, though the term could equally well be applied all our elders. In accordance with 1 Timothy 5, our "Senior Pastor" is a leading elder, who oversees the preaching and teaching of the Word, and gives leadership to the pastoral team.

How are they appointed?

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

(Acts 14:23)

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you— if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

(Titus 1:5-9)

This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

(1 Timothy 3:1-7)

Elders in the early church were appointed directly by existing elders. This appointment was not by a democratic process, but it was an executive appointment, made in the local context and was not subject to endorsement from the apostles, or any other remote central authorizing structure.

Paul gave detailed instruction as to how these elders should be selected. There are specific criteria that should be applied when assessing candidates for eldership which include their character, their temperament, spiritual giftedness, maturity, and the consistency and credibility of their reputation. The responsibility for this assessment lay wholly with the existing elder on the spot, as it were, but it would seem necessary for that assessment to be made in consultation with the congregation, to confirm the credibility and respect the new elder would be able to command.

The appointment of the elders in Galatia so soon after the churches were founded in Acts 14 raises questions about how Paul's warning to Timothy against appointing novices should be applied.

What is a novice? How soon is too soon? This example seems to suggest that the Apostle Paul was bolder in appointing leaders than many older leaders are today, at least when establishing new churches.

At Craigmore we apply these listed biblical qualifications carefully. We identify those men who are already effective shepherds. In both 1 Cor 4:15 and in 1 Thess 2:7-12, Paul appeals to those he himself has lead to Christ to recall the impact of his own ministry in bringing them to Lord and nurturing them to maturity. We therefore seek as elders men who have a proven track record as spiritual parents, who have led people to Christ and established them in the church. We invite them to walk with us unofficially for a time, while we pray about their role. As we sense a confirmation of their calling their names are brought to the people for prayer and comment. After some weeks, if the response is supportive they are appointed publicly.

How should we relate to them?

They should be loved, respected and obeyed...

And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves. (1 Thess 5:12,13)

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct...¹⁷Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. (Heb 13:7,17)

Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. (1 Tim 5:19)

Elders should be esteemed very highly, (that is respected,) and shown love. Their spiritual authority should be obeyed with genuine submission. Care should be exercised so that they are not grieved and burdened by their responsibility, but the church is commanded to make their work a joy. Conflict regarding their leadership is especially condemned. Sadly, many churches violate this principle by making support for their pastors a special focus for division. Steadfast loyalty is also demanded of the church toward its elders, to the point where any criticism or accusations can only be received where they can be proven rigorously by a number of witnesses.

At Craigmore we are grateful to God for His provision and protection of our leaders, and pledge ourselves to their support and encouragement.