



Elders Position Paper - Emmaus

Introduction

As the early church began to take shape and the apostolic age came to a close, the need for qualified leaders became increasingly evident. As cultures collided and the gospel spread through various ethnic groups, a division of responsibility and the appointing of qualified leadership within the life of the church was essential. Soon the roles of deacons, elders and pastors begin to appear in the text, providing much needed oversight and care for the movement of the gospel as it made its way through Asia and Macedonia. One could argue that the church today experiences an even greater degree of complexity. With that in mind, the need for biblical qualified leaders has grown exponentially as well. This purpose of this document is to provide clarity regarding the qualifications, purposes and functions of elders within the life of Emmaus Church.

Importance of Elders

- **Elders in the Old Testament**

We see the term elder very early in the Hebrew text. This term was used when referring to a person of authority and prestige within the community. These elders carried delegated powers and were authorized to act on behalf of those they represented (Deuteronomy 1:13, 15).

- **Elders in the New Testament**

Due to the rapid spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the remotest parts of the earth, as recorded in Acts, the need arose for a delegation of spiritual authority within the local church context. These appointed elders served as theological gatekeepers and provided overall shepherding for the local community of faith.

Church Structure

- **Jesus is the Chief Authority**

- He is the Head of the church (Colossians 1:18; Colossians 2:19; Ephesians 1:22; Ephesians 5:23).
- He is the Chief Shepherd (1Peter 5:4).
- He is the Builder (Hebrews 3:3).

- **The Holy Spirit directs the church** (Acts 13:2; Acts 15:28; Acts 16:6-7; Acts 20:28)

- **Elders have been entrusted with the overall stewardship of the church** (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-7; Hebrews 13:17; Acts 20:17-38)

Biblical Terminology

There are two primary Greek words that are used almost interchangeably when referring to the role of an elder. These words help bring further clarity to the biblical function of an elder.

- **Elder - πρεσβύτερος^b, ου m:** a person of responsibility and authority in matters of socio-religious concerns, both in Jewish and Christian societies (Acts 14:23; Acts 15:2, 4, 6; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1).¹
- **Overseer/Bishop - ἐπίσκοπή^b, ἡς f:** a religious role involving both service and leadership—‘office, position, ministry as church leader’ (Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7).²
- **Are these terms referring to a different office?**
Regarding the terms elders, overseers and bishops, most scholars now acknowledge, as J.B. Lightfoot pointed out already in the 19th century: “It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the Church is called indifferently ‘bishop [overseer]’ (ἐπίσκοπή) and ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ (πρεσβύτερος).”³

What are Elders?

Elders are biblically qualified men who are appointed to this sacred duty of providing leadership, oversight and shepherding for the church.

What are these Biblical Qualifications?

The qualifications of elders can be divided into two primary categories: Character Qualifications and Functional Qualifications. The Character Qualifications refer to the nature of the man himself while the Functional Qualifications refer to his ability to execute the responsibilities of an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Character Qualifications

- **Above reproach** - Requires that an elder be a model of integrity. He has a blameless reputation and no accusation made against him can stand (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6-7).
- **Husband of one wife** - Requires that an elder be fully committed and faithful to his wife. He is without adulterous relationships or attitudes (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6). This does not prohibit a single man from serving.
- **Temperate** - Requires that an elder be even-tempered, clear-headed and calm under pressure (1 Timothy 3:2).
- **Prudent** - Requires that an elder be self-controlled, reasonable and clear-minded (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).

- **Respectable** - Requires that an elder be of good behavior, leading an orderly and well-balanced life (1 Timothy 3:2).
- **Hospitable** - Requires that an elder open his heart and his home to others (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8).
- **Not addicted to wine** - Requires that an elder not be given to drunkenness or be controlled by a habit of drinking (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7).
- **Not pugnacious** - Requires that an elder not be combative or quarrelsome (1 Timothy 3:3).
- **Gentle** - Requires that an elder be fair, kind, yielding, forbearing and patient. He is sensitive to the needs of others (1 Timothy 3:3).
- **Uncontentious** - Requires that an elder not be inclined to fight. He does not use abusive words and is not violent (1 Timothy 3:3).
- **Free from the love of money** - Requires that an elder not be controlled by the pursuit of money or amassing material possessions (1 Timothy 3:3).
- **Not a new convert** - Requires that an elder have a spiritual track record leading toward a mature faith (1 Timothy 3:6).
- **A good reputation with those outside the church** - Requires that an elder have a good testimony in the community; he is respected by unbelievers (1 Timothy 3:7).
- **Not self-willed** - Requires that an elder not be stubborn, overbearing or self-pleasing (Titus 1:7).
- **Not quick-tempered** - Requires that an elder not be prone to outbursts of anger. He does not allow himself to be controlled by anger (Titus 1:7).
- **Not fond of sordid gain** - Requires that an elder not be a crook or a cheat. He uses no improper means of acquiring things for himself or others. There are no questions about the way he handles his money (Titus 1:7).
- **Loving what is good** - Requires that an elder value good things, good ways, good actions and good attitudes, as defined by the Scriptures (Titus 1:8).
- **Just** - Requires that an elder lead a righteous lifestyle. In every situation, he desires to do what is pleasing in God's eyes (Titus 1:8).
- **Devout** - Requires that an elder lead a holy life that makes his relationship with Jesus Christ obvious to others (Titus 1:8).

Functional Qualifications

- **Manages his own household well** - Requires that an elder be skillful in leading and providing for his family (1 Timothy 3:4-5).
- **Keeping his children under control** - Requires that an elder who is a father command the respect and obedience of his children. His children do not have a reputation for leading an ungodly lifestyle (1 Timothy 3:4; Titus 1:6).
- **Able to teach** - Requires that an elder have a knowledge of sound doctrine and a desire to share what he knows with others (1 Timothy 3:2).
- **Holding fast to the faithful Word** - Requires that an elder pursue and embrace the Scriptures as God's guiding truths for his life. He uses God's Word to encourage and exhort others, as well as to reprove and correct those who oppose and disobey sound doctrine (Titus 1:9).

What are the responsibilities of an Elder within the life of the church?

According to the New Testament, elders are responsible for the primary leadership, care and oversight of a church. In summary, elders provide leadership (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1–2), care for and shepherd the church (Acts 20:28), teach and preach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17, 28–31), exhort and admonish the church in sound doctrine (1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 3:13–17; Titus 1:9), visit the sick and pray (James 5:14; Acts 6:4), judge over doctrinal issues (Acts 15:6), provide oversight for the financial operations of the church (Acts 11:30), and will ultimately give an account to God for their leadership (Hebrews 13:17).

Elders are Men

- Jesus called male disciples (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:13; Acts 1:13).
- The early church appointed men (Acts 6:1-6).
- Husbands are called to lead their families (1 Peter 3:1-7; Ephesians 5:23).
- Paul teaches male headship within the church (1 Timothy 2:8-3:7; 1 Timothy 2:12; 1 Timothy 3:14-15).
- The role of elder is a male role (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

How does a man become an elder?

1. He has a sense of personal calling (1 Timothy 3:1).
2. He is appointed by the established Elder Board (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).
3. He is affirmed based on the Biblical Qualifications above (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Elders Function in Plurality

It should be stated that the mention of elders within the Scriptures is always plural.* Elders were always appointed in plurality, they were called in plurality, and they were to rule in plurality. Therefore one can infer that the design of a functioning team of elders is indeed a plurality (Acts 16:4; 20:17, 21:18, Titus 1:5). The leadership of the local church is not an isolated elder, but rather a group of elders who function as a team in the execution of their biblical duties (Proverbs 11:14; Hebrews 13:17).

**Exceptions are found in 1 Peter 5:1 and 2-3 John, where Peter and John respectively refer to themselves as “elder.”*

How is this Biblical authority expressed?

Servant leadership: The heart of an elder is to lovingly serve the community as one entrusted with their care, and they are responsible to give an account for their leadership. The expression of their leadership is exemplary and exhorting (Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-7; Acts 20:19, 28-31).

what is a Deacon?

Simply put, the deacon is a servant who serves to accomplish the will of the elders. They are concerned with the details of the ministry as they are played out in the lives of the people.

- **διάκονος^b, ου** *m* and *f*: one who serves as a deacon, with responsibility to care for the needs of believers—‘deacon, one who helps the believers (Acts 6:1-2; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8).⁴

Church structure within Emmaus Church

- **Clear deferment to Jesus as the Head of the Church**
The senior pastor of Emmaus Church is Jesus Christ. He is the “Chief Shepherd” and the “Head” of the church.
- **The Ultimate Authority within Emmaus Church is the Elder Team**
Recognizing the biblical function of elders, Emmaus Church has chosen to entrust the sacred responsibility of oversight, shepherding and care of the body to a biblically qualified team of elders.

Delegation Not Abdication

Recognizing the complexity and high demand of the church today, the elders of Emmaus Church have chosen a twofold approach to living out their biblical calling as elders:

1. Each individual elder has committed to entering into the life of the church as an elder whenever possible. Though each elder has a different personality and gift mix, each man is obligated by the Word of God to function as a biblical elder.
2. The Elder Team recognizes the vast responsibility of eldership within the life of the church and have chosen to delegate some of the practical, hands-on ministry to a qualified team of pastors to help them fulfill their biblical calling. Much like deacons were appointed to help accomplish the will of the elders, staff has been appointed to serve as an extension of the Elder Team at Emmaus. This delegation to the staff does not remove direct responsibility from the Elder Team; rather, it extends their ability to elder the entire body.

Elders and Staff

The pastoral staff are charged by the elders to assist in the shepherding, care and doctrinal oversight of the body, and are thereby aiding in the accomplishment of the biblical function of an elder.

- Elders are encouraged in the “pastoral” duties of overseeing and shepherding, and are thus responsible personally and provisionally (Acts 20:28).
- Elders are exhorted to “shepherd” the flock of God that is in their charge, which is also the description of a pastor (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1-2).
- Thus, their authority is entrusted to the staff team to ensure the proper care and oversight for the congregation.

Board / Lead Pastor Relationship

The Lead Pastor is accountable to the entire Elder Team. No single elder has authority over him, but rather oversight is shared with the team as a whole. The Lead Pastor carries two distinct roles from the other elders.

1. He is responsible for the preaching and teaching of the Word of God (1 Timothy 5:17-18).
2. He is responsible for the staff and the ultimate implementation of the vision of the Elder Team (Hebrews 13:17).

Elder Team Dynamic

An elder within Emmaus Church serves on the basis of his: Commitment, Character, Contribution and Covenant.

- **Character** - An elder is required to live according to the Character and Functional Qualifications.
- **Commitment** - An elder is required to be present at meetings and be an active participant in the life of the church.
- **Contribution** - An elder is required to actively invest in the life of the church.
- **Covenant** - An elder is required to sign a covenant annually, renewing their willingness to be a part of the Elder Team and the fulfillment of the mission of the church.

Consensus

The Elder Team of Emmaus Church operates on the basis of agreement. When an issue is brought before the team, a discussion will ensue seeking to find clarity together as brothers and to discern the “mind of Christ” for His church. There are no votes taken within the Elder Team; rather, each team member prayerfully shares his thoughts and opinions, and a common decision is found in unity together. This deferment to one another ensures that, through wisdom, a truth is found out. This fully engaged plurality of team members allows for the best decision to be uncovered together.

How do Deacons function within Emmaus?

The role of a deacon is to serve the needs of the congregation to aid in the mission of the church under the authority of the Elder Team. As the elders provide oversight, the deacons provide execution. They serve on behalf of the elders to accomplish the will of the Elder Team. With that in mind, the staff team of Emmaus Church functions in a similar manner as that of deacons.

What is an Advisor?

An advisor is a role that has been created to provide a testing ground for potential elders and provide opportunities for the body of Christ to express greater leadership within the life of Emmaus. Advisors are invited to join the Elder Team based on the same Biblical Qualifications as an elder (Character Qualifications and Functional Qualifications). These advisors serve as elders in training and are invited to fully participate in discussions, yet they defer to the actual Elder Team when a decision needs to be made.

- The advisor term is 1 year.
- The advisor role entails being a full-discussion participant who willingly defers to the Elder Team when a decision needs to be made.

Elder Terms

Currently the elders of Emmaus Church are appointed without term limits or specified time periods. Each elder serves as long as they feel they are effectively living out the Elder Covenant. As long as an elder is fulfilling these requirements, they will continue to function as an active member of the Elder Team. An elder is able to step off of the team and become a non-functioning elder at any time. If their life circumstances change, they may request to be reinstated as an active elder upon the approval of the entire Elder Team. If an elder is disqualified morally, they will be asked to step off of the team and work through a process of restoration with the church community as a whole. Restoration to the Elder Team would be discussed if appropriate and if necessary.

Footnotes

^[1] Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 541). New York: United Bible Societies.

^[2] Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, pp. 540–541). New York: United Bible Societies.

^[3] Quoted in Strauch, Alexander (2003). *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (p. 180). Lewis and Roth Publishers; Rev Exp edition.

^[4] Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 540). New York: United Bible Societies.