

Elders: An Introduction for Someone Not in the Churches of Christ

Posted on September 28, 2009 by Jay Guin



I get emails —

Jay,

I serve as a minister of an independent congregation outside the Churches of Christ that has no elders. I may soon become the senior pastor. Thus, I have been doing some research on church polity, elders, etc. Hence, I found your site.

As I have read your postings, I have been impressed with your fidelity to the Word of God. I have appreciated your balance between grace and law in your discussions regarding elder qualifications.

I am trying to learn the language and style of elder-led congregations. I do find that this type of organization certainly has a stronger biblical base, and that sits very well with me. If you have any suggestions on how this plays out in the practical world of buildings, programs, interaction with the legal world and general administrative tasks, I would welcome them.

That's a tough one, not because the answer is unknown, but because there are so many answers! Each eldership and each congregation has a different style. So let me start in broad terms and work from there.

Elders in broad brush

There's a handful of good books on elders. The most important, I think, is Lynn Anderson's [*They Smell Like Sheep: Spiritual Leadership for the 21st Century*](#). The book is mainly about the heart of the shepherd, and so it's the right place to start. I'd insist that any candidate for the position read the book.

Also important is Alexander Strauch's [*Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*](#), written by, I believe, a Baptist theologian.

Charles Siburt and David Fleer have compiled some excellent material on shepherding in [*Like A Shepherd Lead Us*](#) and [*Good Shepherds: More Guidance for the Gentle Art of Pastoring*](#).

Elders more specifically

I believe the Bible refers to elders using three terms, generally translated “shepherd,” “overseer,” and “elder.” Each term carries its own significance, and yet considerable discretion is left to the congregation as to how these roles are fulfilled.

“Elder” refers to rulers of the synagogues and, before them, the leaders of each Israelite city. The elders sat at the city gate, deciding cases and even deciding who might be allowed into the city. The elders were often seen as the successors to the judges appointed by Moses in Exo 18. Elders are charged with doctrinal matters.

(Titus 1:9) [An elder] 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.

The pulpit minister (in Church of Christ terminology) will usually have much more theological education than his elders, and this often leads to the elders relying heavily on him on doctrinal matters. But you really need elders who are well-instructed in scripture. It's always bad when the elders and staff have doctrinal disagreements or when the elders rely solely on staff. After all, if the elders have to hire a professional to read the Bible for them, they aren't very well versed in the scriptures and so won't be very good elders.

“Shepherd” or “pastor” is a reference to the “good shepherd” of John 10:11 *ff* and Eze 34. These are great passages to begin a study of the role of the shepherd.

(Ezek 34:12) As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness.

(Ezek 34:16) I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

The shepherd, therefore, stands in role of God and Jesus as protector of the flock and healer of the hurt.

“Overseer” could be well translated “superintendent” or even “middle management.”

(1 Pet 5:2-3) Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

But, the scriptures are clear, the overseer should not “lord it over” the congregation. They have genuine authority, but it’s an authority exercised for the benefit of others as servants.

(Mat 20:25-28) Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Elders even more specifically

You asked how the eldership plays out in “the practical world of buildings, programs, interaction with the legal world and general administrative tasks.”

* Elders can and should delegate to the staff, to committees, and to individual members as much as possible. In my church, we have a committee that makes most budgeting decisions and a part-time accountant on staff. We have a trusted member who serves as treasurer. And they all do great work for the Lord. We elders reserve the right to overrule their decisions — and never have to do it.

* There is no distinction between “secular” and “spiritual.” It’s all God’s, and therefore there is no matter involving the church outside the jurisdiction of the elders. But the wise eldership understands that they serve under God’s Spirit, and they watch for the Spirit’s work within the church. This means they train and empower those gifted to work in various areas as the Spirit leads. And they steer the church as God leads — watching to see where he is already at work.

* Some elderships focus almost entirely on pastoral concerns — often dividing the families among the elders for pastoral care and counseling. Others train small group leaders to take on much of the pastoral care. Others delegate that to staff. But the wise eldership realizes that they are not a board

of directors or cabinet but, rather, are under-shepherds, serving under the gentle guidance of the Father to minister to the congregation.

* No one elder has all the gifts required to be the perfect elder/shepherd/overseer. The ideal is not an eldership made up of perfect elders. Rather, aim for an eldership that has all the talents somewhere amongst the elders. There are very few 5-talent men. There are many 15-talent elderships.

* And the elders need to understand that they can't each do it all — and the staff shouldn't push the elders to each fit within a single, limited role.

So how does this play out in terms of, say, a building program? Well, the elders look for a man (or a committee) that is gifted to run a building program. He may be on staff. He may be a member without office. He may be an elder. They then surround him with the talents he needs — people with knowledge of building, the law, interior design — and who understand the heart of the church. And then they get out of the way.

The elders should be certain they are kept informed, and they may need to make the occasional big decision, but they shouldn't be deciding color schemes or picking out shingle patterns.

What about the legal world? The elders should see to that the church is well-represented by legal counsel, and they may need to be directly involved to assure that major policy changes are implemented. In a Church of Christ, the elders need to approve the employee handbook or the new child abuse prevention policy for it to carry the necessary weight, but they should delegate the writing and implementation of the policies if they possibly can. You see, the Churches teach a strong eldership, and so the real authority is in the elders, not the ministerial staff.

On the other hand, we are learning that as churches grow larger, much of what was traditionally handled directly by the elders must be delegated to the staff and members. And this frees the elders to take on a more pastoral role.

As I said at the beginning, this is a big subject. Lots of elderships get this wrong — being too removed from the membership, too unskilled in the scriptures, or too unwilling to delegate. Worse yet, few elderships do a proper job of equipping themselves. You see, becoming an elder doesn't mean you know the answers. It just means the church thinks you're capable of learning some of the answers. You and your elders should participate on a regular basis in programs designed for the training of elders. It's a big job, and the need for training never ends.