

Elders and Apostles

NT church leadership consists of Jesus the head, elders/leaders and the saints, who are the foot-soldiers of the church.

Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders over the churches in his care. It is the New Testament norm for local churches to have one or more elders to care for it. But Paul warns not to appoint novice believers who lack maturity in their faith. The reason is that young believers are often eager to become elders because of the esteem it gives them. But Jesus shows us the true heart of an elder:

1. “But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.” (Matt 9:36)
2. “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. (Acts 20:28)

An elder should be a believer with a heart broken for the lost; moved with compassion for the captives and passionate about Jesus. Such a person is likely to lead a healthy church.

In addition to elders, God gives ‘gifts’ of apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists and pastors to help equip the church for ministry (Eph 4). Although the NT does not make clear how these ministries related to the local church and mission, it seems that the 5-fold gifts spear-head and motivate church planting and lay the foundations of truth and practice for churches. Meanwhile, the elders/leaders and saints get on with the task of discipling and multiplying. No doubt some churches had resident ministry gifts whilst others received input from visiting ministries.

ⁱAn elder is a man who is called and gifted by God, who with other elders has the responsibility for leading a local church. Scripture portrays him as a man who is:

- Shaped by apostolic ministry
- Able to lead himself
- Able to lead his family
- Able to lead his local church

The elder is responsible for the day-to-day discipleship of the church and is rightly concerned with the details of individual’s lives and the particular challenges and delights of living out the Kingdom in the community.

Self-control is the preeminent qualification for eldership and is the only thing Paul tells Timothy to teach young men! Learning to lead yourself is the key preparation necessary to lead others. If young people can win this battle early, then they will develop into fine leaders.ⁱⁱ

The devil lays snares for elders! Every potential elder must honestly ask himself where his weak spots are. Where will the devil lay his snare? Pride is a common snare, but there may be others. Do not appoint elders hastily; examine their character and the fruit of their faith.

3. An elder should not be 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. (1Tim 3:6-7)

Elders should be transparent. What you see is what you get. Their ‘yes’ means ‘yes’ and their ‘no’ means ‘no’. Elders and deacons need to be people of pure hearts and open spirits whom you know you can trust. If they have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, do not entrust them with true riches.ⁱⁱⁱ

4. “He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, how will you commit to your trust the true riches?” (Lk 16:10-11)

Elders must honour the priesthood of all believers and should therefore always seek the counsel and mind of those they lead and involve them in the process of decision-making.

The ministry gifts, especially the apostles and prophets, are called to have a bigger vision and wider perspective on what is happening. There tends to be a healthy tension between elders who want to strengthen their local work with more leaders, and the apostles who want to push those leaders out into new works. In addition, apostles and prophets are more likely to see the foundational significance of certain events and how they are responded to. This produces another healthy tension between the pragmatism of an elder and the relative idealism of an apostle or prophet. It is not that one is right and the other wrong, but that both voices and influences are needed. The elder has the God given responsibility to lead and care. The ministry gifts have the responsibility to provoke. For this reason elders need to be continually envisioned and equipped by apostles and their teams.

Teachers will have particular gifting in understanding the breadth of truth in the scriptures, providing doctrinal perspective and balance. They help to reveal simple truths that so easily get obscured by tradition or worldly thinking. They help the saints to gain the confidence to search the scriptures for themselves and take both the meat and the milk of the word. They will not promote their own wisdom with new interpretations, but appeal to the simplicity of the gospel and the witness of the Spirit to bring clarity to the scriptures.

ⁱ PJ Smyth, "The world needs more elders" P11

ⁱⁱ PJ Smyth, "The world needs more elders" P15

ⁱⁱⁱ PJ Smyth, "The world needs more elders" P20