

Role and Function of Elders

Elder Explanation Articles for OCC



The highest goal of church leadership is not planning and maintaining programs, budgets, or activities, it is leading people to God and to his plan for his glory and their good. The purpose of this article is to explain what elders are and what they do as they lead the local church. It will seek to explain why shepherd leadership is so important for the local church, give a quick overview of the biblical support for an elder-led structure of church leadership, and explain how elders lead the local church.

Elders Are Shepherd Leaders

The most often used image of leadership in Scripture is that of a shepherd. In Ezekiel 34 God strongly rebukes the leaders (he calls them shepherds) of the nation of Israel. The problem was not that the nation wasn't being run smoothly or efficiently, it was that the people were not being shepherded spiritually. This is the most important role of leadership in the bible. Shepherds lead the sheep and have authority over the sheep, but this is not so that the shepherds can use the sheep to accomplish a task. The whole point of the shepherd is to lovingly lead and serve the sheep for the good of the sheep.

Jesus said, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45). Shepherd leaders lead by serving. They don't just issue orders and expect results. A good shepherd cares for the sheep, guides them to places they can be fed, and knows the condition of the sheep so that any wound can be bound and healed. Sheep follow shepherds because they know the shepherds care for them.

Shepherds also serve by leading. Sheep need shepherds. They need the protection, care, and even discipline shepherds provide. Spiritual leaders serve people by discerning the will of God from God's Word, prayerfully applying God's will to present situations, and then lovingly leading others into alignment with God's will. It is easy for church leaders to spend their time meeting people's perceived needs, but the greatest need of every person is a deeper relationship with God and the greatest act of service for any leader is to seek to lead people into a deeper relationship with God.

The most important aspect of leadership in the local church is the spiritual care and direction of the people. A church can look very good if the building is maintained, the ministries run smoothly, and the budget is sound, but unless the people are cared for and led spiritually, it is all for nothing. The most important role of spiritual leaders is to help people draw near to God. The highest level of leadership in the local church must have this as their highest priority so that all the other ministries and areas of leadership in the church become aligned with this.

The Bible Teaches Elder Leadership

Some people say that Scripture does not specify any one form of leadership in the local church. This is simply untrue. The Bible gives many examples of elder leadership in local churches. We know that churches in Judea and the surrounding areas were led by elders (Acts 11:30 and James 5:14-15). We know that elders functioned alongside the apostles in the church at Jerusalem (Acts 15, 21:18). We

know that the churches started by Paul were typically led by elders (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch [Acts 14:23]; Ephesus [Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-25]; Philippi [called overseers, Philippians 1:1]; and the churches on the island of Crete [Titus 1:5]). We also know that the churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor (Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia) were led by elders (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1-3) (Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 104). The evidence of the New Testament strongly points to churches being led by a group of elders.

Not only does Scripture give ample support for the existence of elders, it also teaches us why an elder leadership structure is so important. Elders are necessary because they keep the church in alignment with the Word of God. 1 Timothy 3:16 teaches us that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness.” When Jesus ascended to heaven and gave his disciples their marching orders in the Great Commission, he told them to “make disciples” which included “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded” (Matthew 28:19-20). The greatest task for leadership in churches is not administration, coordination or management. It is the teaching and shepherding of the local church according to the Word of God. This is the role of elders.

Elders are also necessary because the church is better led by a group of spiritually mature leaders rather than just one person. The New Testament emphasizes a plurality of leaders in the church (Strauch, 36-37). This plurality of leaders in the local church is important because no one person has all of the gifts necessary for leading the church. We also know from Scripture that all people (even church leaders) are sinners (Romans 3:23). Having a plurality of leaders in the church keeps the leaders accountable to each other, protects the church from being limited by one person’s weaknesses, and keeps the church from being dominated by one person’s opinions, gifts, or passions.

How Elders Lead

Elders shepherd the local church according to the Word of God. The imagery of shepherds is used often to describe both the heart and the function of elders. It is an important idea that must be recovered in churches today because it will keep church leadership from falling into the error of merely managing ministries or the opposite error of developing a CEO/Entrepreneur mentality where the leaders are driving an organization rather than shepherding people. The role of a shepherd is to lead, feed, protect and care for the sheep. The role of elders is to lead, feed, protect and care for the people of the church.

In fact the role of elders is to lead the church *by* feeding, protecting, and caring for the people. We see this by when we examine key passages about elders. In Acts 6:1-7, the early church has an essential need to be met. Some widows of the church are not being cared for as they should. The church leaders make an important statement about church leadership, saying, “It would not be right for us to neglect *the ministry of the word of God* in order to wait on tables” (Acts 6:2). They consider the meeting of the needs of these widows to be important (as they show by delegating qualified people to meet this need), but they knew that the greatest priority of the highest level of leadership in the church had to be the study, teaching, and application of the Word of God so that the church would be fed, protected, and cared for.

Acts 15 gives us a great example of elders in action in the local church. A potentially damaging disagreement has developed in the church regarding whether or not the non-Jewish people had to first submit to Jewish Law by being circumcised before they could come to Christ for salvation. Acts 15 is the account of how the early church handled this situation. The church leaders handled this delicate

situation by first gathering the whole church (15:4, 12, 22) to listen to the people involved in the situation. Paul and Barnabas “reported everything God had done through them” (Acts 15:4) and then the opposition who “belonged to the party of the Pharisees” gave their opinion (Acts 15:5). Next the leaders examined what God has said on the issue. They did this by listening to Peter give his account of God’s revelation to him concerning the clean and unclean foods and the acceptance of the Gentiles to salvation (which is recorded in Acts 10). They then examined what had been happening in light of God’s clear revelation. They did this by listening to Paul and Barnabas’ testimony of God’s work through them among the Gentiles. Then, James, one of the leaders, quotes Old Testament Scripture that pertains to the situation and offers a proposal. Finally, in Acts 15:22, the whole church is involved in carrying out this plan.

This gives us a great picture of how elders function. First, they carefully weigh the situation (by listening to the people or carefully examining the situation). Next they study God’s Word for clear guidance and direction and discuss a proper course of action. Then they publicly teach the church what God’s Word says about the issue and state their decision for what should be done. Finally, they involve and work with the people of the church to carry out this plan.

From Acts 15 and elsewhere in the New Testament we see how elders are to lead the church. First, elders lead by “feeding” the people of the church. They do this by studying, teaching, and applying the Word of God. It is not the job of elders to offer their personal opinion or previous experiences. Their authority and their leadership depend solely on their ability to know and teach the Word of God. This is why 1 Tim. 3:2 lists “able to teach” as a key qualification for elders. The best way to lead the people of God is to nurture them by teaching the Word of God so that the people are led by God to carry out His will.

Elders also lead by protecting the people of the church. In Acts 20:17-38 we see a meeting between Paul and the elders of the church at Ephesus as Paul is on his way to Jerusalem where he believes he will either be killed or arrested. Paul tells the elders that this is the last time they will see him (25). So what does Paul tell these elders in his final meeting with them? He says, “Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” because he knows that “savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock” (Acts 20:28-29). Paul had seen firsthand the damage that could be done by false teaching in a church and he tells the elders that it is their job to protect the people from this ever present danger. The elders protect the church from false teaching by knowing and teaching the Word of God. They are tasked with evaluating all the teaching of the church to make sure it is in line with the Word of God.

Finally, elders lead by caring for the people of the church. As mentioned before, in Ezekiel 34 God has some stern words for the “shepherds” (leaders) of the nation of Israel and in these stern words we see God’s heart for how leaders are to care for the people they lead. God says, “Should not the shepherds take care of the flock?” (Ez. 34:2). He says he will “rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them” (Ex. 34:10). This forever sets a precedent that church leaders are not to use the people of the church to accomplish their own goals. Elders are to shepherd (including caring for) the people because their spiritual health is the goal. God says he will become his people’s shepherd and will “search for the lost and bring back the strays,” he will “bind up the injured and strengthen the weak”, and he will protect the flock from those who would seek to destroy them (Ez. 34:16). In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter writes, “To the elders among you...: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care....” God’s desire for his people to be cared for by godly shepherds has never changed. Elders lead the people of

the church by caring for them either directly (through prayer, visitation, etc.) or indirectly (by overseeing ministries that care for the people as in Acts 6).

Conclusion

Elders lead the church by feeding, protecting, and caring for the people of the church. In his book, Biblical Eldership, Alexander Strauch writes, “A true biblical eldership is not a businesslike committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church” (31). Orchard Community Church should be led by godly elders who are shepherd-leaders overseeing the overall ministry of the church. The primary role of elders is to lead the church in making and becoming fully devoted followers of Christ through the renewing and transforming power of the gospel for the glory of God. All other ministries in the church function under the guidance and authority of the elders since the primary role of the elders to lead the church according to the Word of God. This puts the shepherding of people through the study, teaching, and application of the Word of God as the main priority of the highest level of leadership in the church which leads to greater spiritual maturity among the people of the church. This requires highly qualified elders who meet the biblical requirements for eldership.