

Spiritual Leadership in the Church

A Study of Elders



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In Christianity as a whole, there is a huge disparity when it comes to church organization and government. Many churches are locally autonomous, others have "para-church" organizations which rule over a "parish" or "diocese," others have membership in associations or conventions, some have preachers as pastors, some a ruling board of trustees in addition to elders, some elders *are* the board of trustees, some have no elders, some have self-appointed bodies of leaders for church government... and on and on and on the types of church organizations go.

One would think that the Bible has little or nothing to say about church leadership. However, the Bible does have some significant principles regarding leadership of the church that Jesus purchased with his own blood. This study will deal with the elders of the church.

Contents/Outline:

I. Old Testament Backgrounds (2)

- A. Definition of Elder
- B. Characteristics of Age
- C. Elder origins
- D. Function of Elders
- E. Qualification of Elders
- F. Authority of Elders



II. The Nature of Shepherding (6)

- A. Word Study
- B. Elders as Shepherds
- C. Discussion Questions
- D. The Nature of the "Office"
- E. The "Eldership"

III. Elders' Ministry and Authority (15)

- A. 1 Pet 5:1-4
- B. Eph 4:7-16
- C. Acts 20:28-38
- D. Titus 1:9-11
- E. James 5:14-16
- F. Discussion Questions



IV. Qualities of Elders in the New Testament (23)

- A. 1 Tim 3:1-7
- B. Criteria for the "honorable" man
- C. Titus 1:5-9

V. Responsibilities in the Shepherded Church (35)

- A. Responsibility to Elders
- B. Discussion Questions

VI. Appointment or Ordination (40)

- A. Ways it has been done in the past
- B. Biblical Examples
- C. Other Considerations
- D. Review and Summary of Qualities and Qualifications



VII. Leadership Without Elders (46)

- A. Leadership is God's Plan
- B. Leadership in the Absence of elders - Review of Models
- C. The Open Monthly Business Meeting
- D. A Suggested Process

VIII. Test / Feedback (52)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND:

Note: There is a clear rationale for beginning in the Old Testament. New Testament concepts, word definitions, etc. often begin in the Old Testament. So, rather than skipping straight to Greek word studies and the way pagan Greeks used a word or understood a concept, it is best to begin in the Old Testament as the foundation from where many concepts originated.

I. Definition of Elder in the Old Testament

- A. Hebrew: “*zaqen*” (175 times in the Hebrew Old Testament as a noun)
- B. Is used in two ways
 - 1. The basic meaning is someone old
 - a. Example: Genesis 18:11
 - b. Used as an antonym of “young”: Joshua 6:21
 - 2. Definition evolved. Used in a special sense to mean “elder” (used more than 100 times)
 - a. The “elder” was recognized by the people for his gifts of Leadership, Wisdom and Justice
 - b. He was set apart to administer justice, settle disputes, and guide the people in his charge
 - c. “Elders” were also known as “officers” (Hebrew: *soterim*), heads of tribes, etc. Joshua 23:2 - Notice the parallel usage
 - d. All elders were old, but not all old were elders
- C. Note a similar word: “*Zaqan*” means “beard”, see Psalm 133:2, the association of old age with a beard can be made.
- D. Parallel words in other languages:
 - 1. Spartan Greek - “*presbys*”
 - 2. Homer Greek - “*gerontes*”
 - 3. Roman - “*senatus*”
 - 4. Arab - “*sheikh*”
- E. Translated in the Septuagint by:
 - 1. *presbutera* - “man of old; elder, presbyter”
 - 2. *presbutes* - “old man, aged man”
 - 3. *gerousia* - “council of elders”

II. Characteristics of Age that were highly regarded by the Jews

- A. Job 12:12 - “Wisdom is with aged men, *With* long life is understanding”
- B. Leviticus 19:32 -

1. Because of this, Elder began to have a more restricted meaning
2. This instruction was usually applied to men who played a leadership role
3. The older men became leaders due to their wisdom and knowledge

C. II Kings 2:23-25 - Contempt for Old Age was not sanctioned in the Old Testament

III. Elders origins in the Old Testament

A. First Elders mentioned: Genesis 50:7 - Elders of Egypt. The concept of elders was around before Israel became a nation

B. First time mention of Israel having elders in an official sense: Exodus 3:16

IV. Function of Elders in the Old Testament (note: it was not limited to any one particular thing, but generally, the following can be said of elders)

A. Representatives of the People:

During the formation of the nation of Israel, the elders were always present and took part in major decision, teaching, etc.

1. Exodus 17:6 - Witnessed the smiting of the rock at Horeb
2. Exodus 24:1, 9 - The 70 elders became representative of other elders
3. Numbers 16:25 - representative of the people when punishing Dathan and Abiram
4. I Samuel 8:5 - Represented the people in the desire for a king

B. Counselors

1. I Kings 12:6-8 - Counseled Rehoboam on leading the people as king
2. Ezra 10:6-8 - Counseled on dealing with those who married foreign wives
3. Ezra 10:14 - Mentioned in context with the princes and judges

C. Teachers and Leaders

1. On numerous occasions, Moses provided elders with the experience necessary to make them teachers of the people. He gathered them together often at critical times during the wilderness experience
 - a. Exodus 3:16; 4:29 - Moses gathered the elders and spoke to them first
 - b. Exodus 3:18 - Moses and the Elders went to Pharaoh together

- c. Exodus 24:1ff - Moses took the Elders to Sinai
- d. Other references: Exodus 12:21; 17:5; 18:12; 19:7; 24; Numbers 11:16; Deuteronomy 31:28
- 2. Deuteronomy 27:1 - They charged the people to keep the Lord's commands
- 3. Deuteronomy 31:9-13 - The elders were commissioned along with the priests to teach the law of the people...that learn and fear the Lord and be careful to observe all the words of the law (see also Exodus 19:7)
- 4. Joshua 23:1-11 - when figures like Moses and Joshua passed, the burden of leadership and teaching fell more on the elders (24:1-14)
note: this has some similar elements to Paul's farewell speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20.
- 5. Joshua 24:31 - The Elders were instrumental in maintaining the faithfulness of the Nation
- 6. Ancient Jewish tradition says: "Moses received the law from Sinai and committed it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders"

D. Conferred Authority

- 1. 2 Samuel 5:1-3 - Anointed David King of Israel
- 2. 2 Chronicles 11:3 - Anointing David King
- 3. 1 Samuel 15:30 - Was important to have honor of the elders

E. Elders had various meetings

- 1. Joshua 24:1 - Joshua's final speech
- 2. Judges 11:5-10 - Were the ones who approached Jephthah
- 3. Judges 21:16-21 - Planned for the continuation of Benjamin
- 4. 1 Kings 8:1-5 - Assembled at the Temple Dedication & Ark Procession

F. Elders arbitrated & were to oversee various municipal affairs

- 1. Deuteronomy 19:12 - Delivered criminals to Blood Avengers in city of refuge
- 2. Joshua 20:4 - Made judgment on whether to accept criminal in city of refuge
- 3. Deuteronomy 21:18-21; 22:13-21; 25:5-10 - In Family Affairs

V. The Qualifications of Elders in the Old Testament

(Note: Plural "elders" is used over 100 times in a technical sense to refer to an authoritative body of men. These men did not hold some vague and unorganized position of leadership. Each elder was part of a recognized body of men. However, there could be many groups of elders and some bodies of elders served different purposes. Several passages in the Old Testament indicate that elders were members of an official body)

- A. Qualifications: A list of qualifications comparable to the New Testament is not given in the Old Testament
- B. There were qualifications for those to judge the people, (Exodus 18:21) which elders did (Deuteronomy 19:12; 25:5-10; Joshua 20:4)
 - 1. Able men
 - 2. Fear God
 - 3. Men of Truth
 - 4. Hate dishonest gain
- C. Other qualifications: Deuteronomy 1:12-17
 - 1. Wise men
 - 2. Discerning men (understanding)
 - 3. Experienced
 - 4. Gives Righteous Judgments
 - 5. Shows no partiality

VI. Authority of Elders in the Old Testament:

Elders did not have the same authority as the prophets, but the following can generally be said of their authority in the Old Testament:

- A. Authority to represent the people (see above)
- B. Authority to teach (see above)
- C. Authority to judge (see above)
- D. Ability to confer authority (see above)