

Today's opening quote comes from someone who was a pastor for 47 years and also served with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association:

*There is thoroughly entrenched in our church life an unbiblical two-caste system. In this two-caste system there is a clergy-caste which is trained, called, paid, and expected to do the ministering. And there is the laity-caste which normally functions as the audience which appreciatively pays for the performance of the clergy— or bitterly criticizes the gaping holes in that performance (and there are always gaping holes). No one expects much of the lower or laity caste (except attendance, tithe, and testimony). And everyone expects too much of the upper or clergy caste (including the clergy themselves!). The greatest problem in the whole business is the fact that the Bible's view of ministry totally contradicts this system. —Robert C. Girard*

Girard's closing sentence begs the question: what is the Bible's view of ministry? More specifically, what is the Bible's attitude toward the people it identifies as leaders or authority figures in the church?

The New Testament identifies two kinds of leadership: that of oversight, and that of decision-making. Today, and next week, we will look at oversight. Let's consider a few passages of scripture today. The first is:

Acts 20:17, 28-29

*Act 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*

*Act 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*

*Act 20:29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;*

*Act 20:30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

*Act 20:31b Therefore be alert*

Based on this passage, we can infer that there was one church in Ephesus and that church included several elders. Paul's exhortation to these elders is quite clear and self-explanatory, but to summarize it we could say that they were to oversee, or look out for and care for, the church, with special attention given to warding off false teachers.

Another passage is:

Titus 1:5-9

*Tit 1:5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—*

*Tit 1:6 if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.*

*Tit 1:7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,*

*Tit 1:8 but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.*

*Tit 1:9 He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

The first thing we notice here is that Titus was to appoint not one elder but plural elders in every town. Each town had one church. And then Paul states the character traits that elders are to have.

In the Greek language, elder (presbuteros) merely means an old man. Nowadays some church denominations have officers or professionals that are called presbyters. But those did not exist in Paul's day and Paul never set up any sort of professional leadership office of presbyter. We can't take church leadership structures today and read them back into the Bible. We have to let Paul say what he says. When Paul uses the word presbuteros, which was simply an elder, that's just a person who is a seasoned Christian. A senior. One who had experience and wisdom. Elders were also called "overseers."

This is a term that described their function of supervising the affairs of the church. The task of the elders is also depicted by the metaphor of a “shepherd.” This is because they were caretakers. Just as literal shepherds care for literal sheep, elders care for their fellow Christians. It is important to understand that all elders were supposed to be “apt to teach” and all had the gift of shepherding, but not everyone who shepherded or taught were elders. We will look at the teaching role more next week. Right now we will move on to our next passage:

1 Peter 5:1-4

*1Pe 5:1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:*

*1Pe 5:2 shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;*

*1Pe 5:3 not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

*1Pe 5:4 And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

Based on these passages, we see that those who provided oversight in the church were called elders, overseers, and shepherds. This is simply because they elder-ed— they acted as seasoned models to the less mature. They oversaw— they watched out for the spiritual well-being of the church (v. 2). And they shepherd-ed— they cared for the needs of God’s people (v. 2). A “shepherd” is one who cares for God’s people, “elder” is an old man, “overseer” is one who watches out for others.

Elders, then, were overseers and shepherds. The term elder refers to their character. The term overseer refers to their function. And the term shepherd refers to their gifting. Their chief responsibility was to instruct and oversee the church, primarily during times of crisis— whether that was a crisis of one person in the church or a crisis of the whole church. No terminology in the NT indicates that they held an

office. No example in the NT indicates that the rest of the church had to get permission from them to do any ministry. And at no time in the NT were these elders ever called pastors. And at no time in the NT do we see any one elder elevated to a level of authority above the other elders. There was no such thing as one person being first among equals. They were all just equals. And they were not elevated to a level of authority above the rest of the church either. Timothy and Titus did not appoint them to be commanders. They were simply recognized for the respect they already had among the church. They were respected because they were respectable, not because they held an office.

First-century elders all stood on equal footing. Perhaps some were more spiritually mature than the others. And they undoubtedly had different giftings. But there was no hierarchical structure among them. A careful reading of the book of Acts will show that while God often used different overseers as temporary spokesmen for specific occasions (sometimes James, sometimes Peter, etc.), no overseer occupied a position of supremacy above the others. The elders were not part of a chain of command that put them under Christ and over the church. They weren't part of a hierarchical pyramid. They were simply members of the body of Christ.

The NT elders provided oversight, they didn't monopolize the ministry of the church gatherings. They did not micromanage. Instead, they looked out for and helped guide the church as it experienced the rigors of community life. Please note that superintending is largely a passive role. The supervision of the elders didn't stifle the life of the church. Nor did it interfere with the ministry of the other believers. To be more specific, New Testament elders didn't operate like spiritual CEOs who presided over their spiritual enterprises. Instead, the elders were fully aware that the church didn't belong to them. It rather belonged to their beloved Master—the Lord Jesus. He alone had the right to “walk in the midst of the ... lampstands” (Rev. 2: 1 NKJV). A first-century elder, therefore, would no doubt cringe if you used

phrases like “his church” or “his people.” First-century elders were simply spiritually mature people— exemplary Christians who superintended (not controlled or directed) the affairs of the church. Elders were not organizational figureheads. They weren’t hired pulpiteers, professional clergy, or ecclesiastical chairmen. They were simply older brothers or fatherly figures carrying out real functions. Their chief task was threefold: to model servanthood in the church; to motivate the believing community toward works of service; and to mold the spiritual development of the younger believers. As overseers, the elders made sure that ministry was going well for everyone, but they did not do ministry for everyone else, but neither did they just sit back and watch others do ministry and then tell them how to do it. They were the ones who prayed with their eyes open you might say. They had their spiritual antennae continually raised to check for wolves. As seasoned believers, their wisdom was sought in times of crisis. And when they spoke, their voices possessed the weight of experience.

The elders in the NT church were not like some supervisor you see in the road construction zone just leaning on a shovel telling everyone else what to do. Those kind of supervisors get a salary to have the title of supervisor and then they get reprimanded if the job isn’t done but they don’t have to do much of the job themselves. That’s not the way leadership and ministry in the church is supposed to work. Everyone in the church has gifts and has a ministry. It’s just that some of the more mature believers are sought for their wisdom, and some of those more mature believers feel a burden to look out for their spiritual siblings.

In this way, the role of the elders can be likened to the human liver. The liver works invisibly, filtering out poisons and other toxic substances. It resists infections by producing immune factors and removing bacteria from the bloodstream. The liver organically detoxifies the human body, allowing it to function properly. But it does so in a quiet and hidden way. In a similar fashion, the elders detoxify the church behind the scenes so that the body can function without hindrance. Simply put, elders were spiritual facilitators who supplied

guidance, provided nurture, and encouraged faithfulness in the church. Eldership, therefore, is something that one does. It's not a slot that one fills. I think that is quite clear in the New Testament because, if Paul and the other apostles wanted to paint elders as officers, there were numerous Greek words they could have used to do so. Surprisingly, however, the following Greek terms are missing from the apostles' ecclesiastical vocabulary:

- arche (a rank-and-file leader, head, or ruler)
- time (an officer or dignitary)
- telos (the inherent power of a ruler)
- archisunagogos (a synagogue official)
- hazzan (a public worship leader)
- taxis (a post, position, or rank)
- hierateia (a priest's office)
- archon (a ruler or chief)
- despotes (a master or dictator)

The New Testament never uses any of these words to describe leadership in the church. Like that of Christ, the apostles' favorite word to portray church leaders is diakonos— which means a servant or a waiter. Therefore, the whole idea of having officers and professionals, if their attitudes are not Christlike, and if our understanding of those roles is not biblical, can potentially undermine the priesthood of all believers.

We are all priests. We respect those among us who have wisdom and experience. We appreciate those among us who look out for us. But we all minister to each other and to God on level ground. We all have gifts and we all have influence. We all serve and our service is equally valid and pleasing to God. And we all take orders directly from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Benediction: Rev 1:5b-6 To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.