

This paper is written and compiled from multiple sources over the years of my experience in teaching and preaching the gospel. I cannot recall all the people who have influenced me over the years, BUT, I am thankful for the consistency and authority of the BIBLICAL TEXT to keep the compass honest as we travel through life.

- Jeff Kenee

The Role and Function of Elders

Tradition plays a vital role in how we perceive many functions and aspects of ministry. Nowhere is this seen more often than in the function and role played by Ministers, Elders and Deacons in the Church. A good rule of thumb for anything that has opportunity to become habit, especially functions in the church, it to constantly revisit scripture with a fresh mind to hear what GOD says about such matters. Church work is far too serious a matter to be approached casually. God is a God of purpose and expects his followers to carry out that purpose to the very best of their abilities. The mission of Jesus is a very demanding one. He has given us specific evidence as to who and how he wishes this ministry to be continued. Those who he has specifically designated are listed in **Ephesians 4:11-13**. From this text and others it is clear that the primary function of these leaders is for the equipping of the saints for the work of service so that the church may become fully mature. This clear designation of teaching by leaders is also clearly seen in **1 Cor. 12:28**. As prophets and apostles (in a sense) no longer exist in our society this role falls on the shoulders of Evangelists, Elders (pastors) and Teachers. The role of the evangelists must be measured against Biblical instruction and not common tradition. His work is clearly spelt out in **2 Tim. 4:1-5**. Regarding all teachers, it would appear by our traditional methods of selecting and equipping teachers little or no attention is given to **James 3:1**. Interestingly, a common Biblical function for (pastors) Elders is one of teaching and equipping. **1 Tim. 2:2 & 1 Tim. 5:17** are good examples of this instruction and support **Eph. 4:11**. Elders are clearly identified as shepherds of the flock of God (**1 Peter 5:2**) which would of necessity include teaching, guiding and equipping.

The traditional organization model of the church of Christ today, has been greatly influenced by commercial history and the Roman Catholic church. Both have a distinctive structure that elevates man on an administrative flow chart with the prominent positions at the top and the laborers or laity at the bottom of the flow chart. This model is in complete contradictions to the Biblical model of organization; **Luke 22:25-27; Matt. 20:25-28; John 13:13-20; et.al.**

This secular model designates power by qualifications and election. However Biblical power comes through a voluntary surrendering of one's self to Christ and to appointed leaders. In the traditional church structure the Elders are the ones who have the power over the church and her appointed servants. However there is no Biblical authority for

Elders to appoint or control either evangelists or deacons. Deacons are selected by the congregation, see the example of **Acts 6**, and Elders of the New Testament are appointed by evangelists **Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5**.

The question of authority becomes critical to the traditional concepts of Elders. It is interesting that the word for “*authority*” (exousia) is found some 103 times in the New Testament and never once is it used to describe an Elders function or role. Elders are controlled by the same Biblical principle as all other church members; in areas of church doctrine – NO AUTHORITY TO TEACH AS DOCTRINE, ANYTHING NOT TAUGHT BY GOD. In non-doctrinal areas an Elder lacks authority because he cannot force anyone to follow his opinions. Elders do have legitimate authority as selected leaders of a congregation, and that authority is limited by the Bible. The example of an Elders life to raise his family and lead his family to Godliness is that which gives him authority in the Family of God. This quality is seen as it is listed among other qualities in **1 Tim. 3:1-7 & Titus 1:5-9** that are to be found in Elders.

Elders are responsible for shepherding the flock of God’s people by example (**1 Peter 5:2-3**), and teaching **Ephesians 4:12**. They should look to Jesus, the chief shepherd, for an example to follow. In **John 10:2-16**, there is a beautiful key explanation of the role of a shepherd. To understand the role of the New Testament shepherd it is informative and helpful to pay attention to the role of the elder in the Old Testament. Just as the Elders of the New Testament period are an example for Christians today, the Elders of the Old Testament were an example for those of the New Testament. Old Testament Elders were anything but authority figures. Elders of the Old Testament were representatives of the people (**Exodus 12:21, 19:7-8**). In order for them to do justice to this role, of necessity, they had to have an intimate relationship with the people in their spiritual care. Hence, greater is their need to be available than for them to have ability. Using the Old Testament as a school to be better understood and learn of the character of God and His relationship with His creation, it is insightful to read the passages that relate to Old Testament Elders. Most all of these passages come in the form of warnings to Elders – **Jeremiah 10:21; 23:1-4; Ezekiel 34:1-12; Psalm 23; Isa 40:11 and Ezekiel 34:11-16**.

The duties of an Elder in the New Testament are only inferred, and the inferences come from a very few passages. Peter gives most insight as he instructs that they are to shepherd the flock, but not to lord it over them. He also teaches that they should lead by example **1 Peter 5:1-3**. Paul records about the same thing in **Acts 20:28-31**. The other New Testament illustration that gives us insight to the role and function of Elders is that of a father. In a very real spiritual sense Elders are the fathers of the flock. Therefore as we look at **1 Timothy 3** we can see a clear link between Elders and fathers. This same instruction concerning Elders can be legitimately carried from **Ephesians 6:4 and Colossians 3:21**.

A list of Elder functions can be compiled directly from scripture. While many other

functions are inferred and traditional accepted. I believe that the following represents those functions specifically 'Biblically commanded'.

- Equipping. **Ephesians 4:11-12**
- Saving souls and nurturing them. **Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24**
- Meeting the needs of the flock. **John 10:2-16; Matthew 20:26-28**
- Praying with and for the spiritually sick. **James 5:14**
- Personal study and a close walk with God for the example to the flock **1 Thess. 5:12,13 by inference; 1 Tim. 5:17-22**
- Encourage and empower fellow Christians to work of service. **1 Tim. 4:14**

...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory... 1 Peter 5:2-4

The Shepherd helps the sheep (sg. or pl.) think about God in some of the following ways:

1. To reach for more and more areas where only God's will is heard.
2. To grow in more intense concern for God's concerns.
3. To increasingly agree with God over personal sin, ministry, and other values.
4. To more clearly determine what is good, valuable and beautiful as seen through the eyes of God.
5. To be more deeply engrossed in the beauty of God in worship.
6. To be possessed by an unbroken awareness of the presence and nearness of God.
7. To be so awe-struck by the majesty of God that awareness of sin, and a longing for its cleansing is a constantly pressing need.
8. To be constantly aware of the desire and ability of God to so fill our lives that sin will be expelled.

Scripture gives us the fundamentals of the character of shepherds who will lead God's people to **NEWNESS, WHOLENESS, AND FULLNESS.**

- **JEREMIAH 3:15** *"Then will I give shepherds after my own heart, who will lead you with knowledge and understand".*
- **JEREMIAH 23:4** *"I will get shepherds over them who will care for them and they will fear no more, nor be dismayed neither shall any be missing says the Lord".*
- **EZEKIEL 34:23-24** *"I will place them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd".*

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- **ACTS 20:32** *“Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified ... In everything I did, I showed you that by hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words of Jesus, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’.”*

As one examines the Biblical functions of Elders, the areas of temptation become evident. Using these same passages the more prominent areas that could divert Elders from their Biblical mandate are among the following temptations:

- That they would see themselves as the decision makers for the congregation. Interesting that there is no passage of scripture that calls the Elders to be the ones of a congregation to make decisions for the congregation.
- Develop pride because they see their role as a position and not an area of service.
- Paralyzing Fear – because of the possibility of making bad decisions. Elders are leaders not stoppers.
- Power – frustration because things do not get accomplished would tempt one to drive, coerce or force people to do what they wanted them to do.