

Eldership as Pastoral Oversight

Detailed Outline

Part 4 of 9

Introduction

A. Illustration: Hurricane Andrew and the Man who Built His House According to Code

Hurricane Andrew was one of the worst hurricanes to hit the Caribbean islands and Florida. After the hurricane, news reports witnessed tens of thousands of homes flattened to the ground. As they were filming, they saw one house standing. They went to that house and the owner was cleaning up the front yard. They asked, how is it that your house is standing? He said, I built this house and I followed the Florida state code for hurricanes. If the code called for 12-inch beams, I put in 12-inch beams; if it called for a metal brace to the beams, I put in a metal brace. I built the house according to the code and the house withstood the hurricane.

B. We need to build our churches on God's code in Scripture.

The Bible is the “code” for how we build the church. Paul gives specific instructions in his letter to Timothy and other portions of Scripture about how the church should operate and how we should act toward one another.

II. Defining Pastoral Oversight by a Plurality of Qualified Elders

A. The General New Testament Concept of Eldership: Pastoral Oversight

1. The New Testament concept of elders is **pastoral**, as seen in the following:

Pay careful attention to yourselves [guard yourselves] and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for [shepherd] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:28 ESV)

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: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight... (1 Peter 5:1-2a)

- a) Both of the apostles tell elders to shepherd/pastor the flock of God.
- b) This is your first priority as an elder.

2. Definition of Biblical Eldership:

“Biblical Eldership is pastoral leadership of the local church by a council of qualified, Spirit-appointed men.”

- a) This is Christian, New Testament eldership.

- b) We see eldership throughout the Old Testament, but in the New Testament, through the teachings of Peter and Paul, we learn more specifically what elders are supposed to do.
- c) The New Testament defines elders as shepherds, overseers, stewards, and leaders of local church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Tim. 5:17).
- d) Illustration: Church Staff vs. Elders

I was visiting a church once and wandering their hallways (I was a bit lost). At the front of the church, I saw a pyramid of pictures of this church's staff, with one person at the top – the senior pastor. A short distance away, there was a group picture of the elders.

I thought to myself, what an example – the church staff, and the elders considered as a separate entity. How demeaning to the elders, the ones called by the apostles to shepherd the flock of God!

3. Equality and Diversity within the Eldership

- a) 1 Timothy 5:17-18

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." (1 Tim. 5:17-18)

- 1) This is a very important passage in the study of eldership. Yet many books on church governance and leadership do not even mention this passage.
- 2) Some years ago, an internationally known Christian author was speaking in our city. I went to hear him speak and had the chance to talk to him.
 - (a) I asked him about this passage and what he thought it meant. His immediate response was, "Elders don't do that." Then he caught himself and asked me what passage that was.
 - (b) This passage about elders leading, teaching, and directing the affairs of the church wasn't in his frame of reference. He thought of elders as laymen, policy makers, and board members.
- 3) In eldership, you have both equality among the elders and diversity in their giftedness.

- b) Equality

- 1) All elders have been placed in the flock by the Holy Spirit as "overseers" (Acts 20:28).
- 2) All elders have been placed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd [pastor] the church (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

- 3) Many other verses emphasize the equality (parity) among the elders: Acts 15:6; 20:28-31; Phil. 1:1; 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 3:2, 10; 5:17-19, 22-25; Titus 1:9-13; Heb. 13:17; James 5:14.
- 4) But these verses need to be viewed along with 1 Timothy 5:17, which is also apostolic instruction.
 - (a) Among the elders, there may be some that do a more proficient job or are more gifted or spend more time doing the work of the elders.
 - (b) Paul says, these elders, particularly those who labor in preaching and teaching, are worthy of double honor.
- c) Diversity
 - 1) Although all elders must be able to teach, to refute false teachers, and be spiritually alert to the dangers of false doctrine, not all have the spiritual gift of teaching or evangelism or the same degree of proficiency at teaching or preaching the gospel.
 - 2) Not all elders labor diligently “in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). This implies that one or some elders will have a more prominent public role in the pulpit ministry to the whole church.
 - 3) Not all elders “rule well [a marked proficiency]” (1 Tim. 5:17). This implies that one or some elders will be more gifted in leading.
 - 4) Paul is speaking about those elders who are specially gifted in leading or in teaching. They are to receive “double honor” (compensation) for their labor. They work hard and make many sacrifices, studying and equipping themselves to be effective teachers and leaders. This implies that the elders and congregation acknowledge, set aside, and support those elders laboring in the gospel and equipping the saints by the Word (Eph. 4:11).
- d) In a council of elders, there is equality and diversity.
 - 1) Among the elders there is diversity of gift. There is diversity of experience. Some elders are more public people than others.
 - 2) Each elder will contribute his particular giftedness, interests, and time.
 - 3) Paul acknowledges this in 1 Timothy 5:17.
 - 4) We see this exemplified in the apostles.
 - 5) I call this principle “first among equals.”
- e) Two Extremes
 - 1) Remember that every eldership is different!

- 2) The one extreme is to sacralize and professionalize a gifted elder, making him in effect the Protestant priest or the chief shepherd, or the one who alone can bless, preach, and administer the sacraments.
 - (a) This is unbiblical! All elders must be able to teach, to defend the gospel (Titus 1:9).
 - (b) Every elder is equally responsible to protect the church from unsound doctrine and to know the Scriptures.
 - (c) If there is one person who has the final say in a decision, you do not have a Biblical Eldership. It is a tell-tale sign of this extreme.
- 3) The other extreme is to enforce complete equality among elders, allowing for no special giftedness, calling, function, or financial aid for any member.
- 4) By God's help, seek to represent accurately and completely Christ's and his apostles' instructions on this important subject.