

How To Develop Elders In Every Church

God's design for the local church involves there being elders (plural) in every church (Acts 14:23). So long as a church does not have elders, something is lacking (Titus 1:5). However, this is not a role that merely depends on volunteers, is subject to human standards, or can be filled by a hiring process. Instead, God has given specific characteristics a person must have to be appointed to this role (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). While many talk about the need for churches to have elders, the work begins long before elders can be appointed. Therefore, every church and Christian needs to consider if they are doing their part to help elders be developed.

1) God's part. God has a role in the development of elders and He (unlike others) always fulfills His role perfectly. Particularly notice that Acts 20:28 identifies elders as having been appointed by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who has helped these grow into this role and identified this role as one to be filled. Much of the work God does to develop men to become elders is accomplished through His written word (which was given through the Holy Spirit). All the ways in which God uses His word to cut and shape the hearts of these men over time are only known to God, but the result for those who have good and honest hearts is multiplying fruit in the kingdom of God (Mark 4:20, 26-29). Though no two paths to becoming elders looks the same, God's word works to convict people of sin, turn people to Christ, and develop people into useful and fruitful servants in His kingdom! In fact, the things God desires and requires of elders are fruits of a life that has been devoted to cultivating God's word.

2) The man's part. God does not do His work of developing a man into an elder contrary to the willing participation of the man. In fact, I suppose there have been many God has tried to mold into elders who resisted God's work (i.e. by not desiring to do the work, by not developing all the characteristics, by not leading their families as they should). To begin, a man who may one day serve as an

elder must be long before this committed to the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33; 13:44-46) and discipleship (learning from and imitating Jesus, John 8:31-32). As one is committed to Jesus in this way, the Holy Spirit will form the personal characteristics in this one's life (i.e. self-control, hospitality, gentleness, etc.). These are, after all, the results of turning from the works of the flesh and letting the Spirit work in a person's life (Galatians 5:19-24). To get to this stature measured by Christ's fullness, this one will also give himself to be equipped and instructed by others who have been working in the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). Then, this man must be so committed to Christ that he is willing to push himself to do as much as he can in Christ's kingdom (Romans 12:3-8). This will involve developing himself as a teacher of God's word (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9). And, the one who will be an elder will be diligent in leading his family in the ways of the Lord (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6; Ephesians 6:4). All these things will be working over time in a man's life who will be developed to one day become an elder (as he will not be a new convert and have a record of living for Christ, 1 Timothy 3:6-7).

3) The family's part. While many of God's requirements of an elder should be true about any mature Christian, there are some specific requirements of an elder that demonstrate the importance of his family (1 Timothy 3:2, 4-5; Titus 1:6). While this indicates much about the man's responsibility to lead his family well in the Lord's ways, this also indicates that his wife and children will also have a role in him becoming an elder. For example, his wife, must also be committed to being a disciple of Jesus in the same way as he is (1 Timothy 3:11). For, even if the man is a good and faithful disciple of Christ, his wife can disqualify him from the opportunity to lead others as an elder by her lack of spiritual maturity and faithfulness. Similarly, though a man does not control the decisions his children make (particularly when they are grown and leave the home), their faithfulness

or lack thereof will reflect on their father's ability to lead others to serve the Lord (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6). If his children do not follow Jesus, that man is unqualified to serve as an elder in the church, no matter how godly he may be.

4) The church's part. The entire community of Christians in the church is critical to the spiritual development of both a man and his family so he may one day become an elder. For example, the assemblies of the church the man and his family attend over the years should result in them being spiritually built up (1 Corinthians 14:26). The leadership in the church should help them all grow in knowledge and ability to serve God effectively (Ephesians 4:11-16). Older and more spiritually mature Christians should help the younger ones develop spiritually (Titus 2:1-8). Those who are spiritual are to correct others who err from the faith (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20). Opportunities and training should be given for the man to truly become able to teach publicly and privately (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9). Fervent prayer to God should be offered regularly by the church for the development of men to be sent into God's harvest as elders (Matthew 9:35-38; 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13). Then, the congregation must be desiring to appoint men to the work who possess the characteristics God has identified for elders – not being content without elders or binding human qualifications on them.

A church does not get elders simply by wishing them into existence. Rather, elders are developed through a process that involves these four parts. While God will always do His part perfectly, the other aspects of an elder's development must be carefully considered by all. A Chinese proverb says, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second best time is now." The same is true for developing elders!

Thought Questions

(2 Timothy 3:16-17)

Teaching: What did you learn from this lesson?

Rebuking: What are some ways this lesson challenges you to live differently?

Correcting: How does this lesson help you make positive changes for Christ?

Training & Equipping: How can you apply this lesson to be trained and equipped in God's service?