

THE WORK OF ELDERS IN EVERY CHURCH

It is God's design for every local church to have a plurality of men appointed as elders of the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). However, this role is not a meaningless office or honorary title. Instead, there is some critical work God recognizes that needs to be done in every local church. When qualified men (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) serve in the work God has designed, the entire congregation and cause of Christ flourish! Therefore, we should consider the nature of the work God has designed for elders to accomplish in every church.

ACTS 20:17, 28-31

One of the best ways to understand the work of those who will fill this role is to consider the three terms God uses to describe them (used interchangeably in this text; 1 Peter 5:1-4). They are: Elders, overseers, and shepherds. First, consider that they are elders (or, presbyters). This term helps us understand that they are older men. As such, they are expected to have the wisdom that comes from life experience. Even more importantly, however, is that they have the experience that comes from years of faithful service to God (1 Timothy 3:6). Therefore, elders know what it looks like to grow in faith, to face challenges, to overcome temptation, to lead a family to serve the Lord (1 Timothy 3:2, 4-5; Titus 1:6), to serve others, to be holy, to be knowledgeable in God's word, etc. This wisdom is critical in their work of helping guide others into spiritual maturity. As older men, they raise the bar for faithful service to God for the entire congregation to aspire to!

Second, consider that they are overseers (or, bishops). This term helps us understand that they watch over others entrusted to their supervision. Specifically, they watch over the local church among them (Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1-3), not over any other church or saints. Although there is a sense in which the entire congregation must oversee itself (Hebrews 12:15), the overseers have the responsibility of ensuring that things done by the congregation are done properly (as a guardian or superintendent). This oversight must be performed with the seriousness of stewards overseeing God's

church/household that has been purchased with the blood of Christ (Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:3)! Furthermore, their oversight is accomplished on two levels. They oversee that the things accomplished by the collective church are done as God desires (e.g., assemblies, fellowship, work). Then, they also oversee that the individual members of the church are living as God desires.

Third, consider that they are shepherds (or, pastors). This term helps us understand their intimate knowledge of and involvement with the flock (local church). As shepherds, they are looking out for the best interest of the flock (collectively) and each sheep (individually) rather than their own interests (in contrast with Ezekiel 34:1-10). As shepherd leaders, they are not dictators, micro-managers, sheriffs, CEOs, etc. Instead, they lead the congregation (not force people to follow) in a way that the flock will know their voice and desire to follow them (Psalm 23:1-4; John 10:27). They feed the congregation by teaching them God's word (1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17-18; Titus 1:9). They protect the congregation by watching out for wolves and dangers faced by the flock (Titus 1:9-14). They care for the wellbeing of the flock spiritually, and even physically (James 5:14-15). In their shepherding work, they must shepherd both the entire congregation collectively and the individual sheep who make up the congregation.

1 PETER 5:1-4

As you consider their role among a congregation, notice three contrasts given to describe their work. First, their work must not be done out of compulsion (by force, unwillingly, without desire), but willingly, out of the desire to serve God and do what they can to help others follow Christ (1 Timothy 3:1). Second, their work must not be done out of greed for money (1 Timothy 5:17-18), but out of an eager love for God and others. Third, their work must not be characterized as lording over the flock (as iron-fisted, domineering dictators), but as examples to the flock entrusted to their care who the flock will respect and desire to follow.

HEBREWS 13:7, 17

The work of the leaders described in these verses encompass several aspects that elders must do. First, they must set an example of godly living that is worthy of other followers of Christ carefully observing and imitating. Second, they must be actively involved in speaking God's word to others. Third, they must lead/rule the congregation with

authority from God to make sure God's will is carried out. Fourth, they must watch over the souls of the congregation as those who will give an account of how they stewarded God's flock. As they carry out this work, though, God demands that their work be done with joy rather than as a burdensome obligation!

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

God has placed various roles inside the body of Christ (universal church). These roles are important to the strength of God's people and accomplishing God's work. Today, although evangelists and teachers have roles, shepherds (elders, overseers) are vital to the local church. Part of their work is focused on helping each member of the congregation grow and be equipped for kingdom service. This involves helping them grow in knowledge, spiritual maturity, and ability to serve. They help protect members of the church from the deceitful false teaching in the world and aim to help the congregation be united in the pursuit of God's truth. Ultimately, the goal of shepherds is to help people in the congregation reach the maturity measured by Christ's fullness to be like Him and to be as useful as possible in the body of Christ!

TITUS 1:5-14

As the elders (shepherds, overseers) go about their work of feeding and protecting the flock, they must emphasize two things. First, they must be actively involved in encouraging people with sound teaching. This requires that they have an accurate knowledge of the truth and ability to communicate it. Second, they must refute those who work contrary to sound teaching. There will always be people who rebel against the truth and try to take others with them who must be withstood. Therefore, the shepherds must embrace this role of helping the congregation feed on what is good and not get poisoned by the many forms of error in the world!

CONCLUSION

A congregation is blessed to have elders who oversee and shepherd them in the way God prescribes! Both the congregation and the elders must, however, carefully learn what their work is so they are not consumed with work they have not been given (e.g., being financial managers, decision-makers of everything related to the congregation, errand-runners, maintenance men, facility managers, etc.). Their work is people and spiritually focused! Ultimately, their work is to help every member of the local church grow and be faithful in serving Christ!

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

What terms are used to describe the same role?

What does the word "elder" help you understand about their work?

What does the word "overseer" help you understand about their work?

What does the word "shepherd" help you understand about their work?

What three contrasts describe how the elder must do his work in 1 Peter 5:1-4?

What is the work elders must do according to Hebrews 13:7, 17?

What is the work elders must do according to Ephesians 4:11-16?

What is the work elders must do according to Titus 1:5-14?