

Elders: Spiritual Leadership at EBF

A Quick Overview

1. EBF is an **elder led** ministry. This means the responsibility for overseeing the ministry of the church and the final decision-making rests with the elder team.
2. The Biblical basis for an elder led church comes from the model of the Apostle Paul in placing elders over the churches he established throughout the book of Acts; Paul's teaching on elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1; and the instructions of Peter in 1 Peter 5.
3. Elders are men who **serve** the church by giving their time to prayer for the saints, interpreting and applying Biblical truth to equip the saints for works of service consistent with God's Word, overseeing church operations, and making wise decisions regarding the oversight and direction of our ministry.
4. The heart of Paul's teaching about elders is that they be men of **mature faith in Christ**. The Bible teaches that men who have demonstrated accurate and trustworthy interpretation of the Scriptures, Godly behavior in the conduct of their personal lives, spiritual leadership of their families, and their care for those within the body of Christ, are the ones whom God would have provide leadership for His church.
5. Elders are essentially **shepherds** of God's flock. They are primarily responsible for the spiritual well-being of God's people within their local body. This includes the responsibility to feed the flock God's Word, to lead the flock God's way, and to care for the flock with God's love and truth.
6. The Bible does not suggest a time limit upon the official service of elders. Their maturity and continuity of service helps provide consistency of leadership and care for the local body of Christ. On occasion elders may take a leave of absence from the board or may resign their position should they believe their time of service to be concluded.
7. Elders make decisions seeking to be **of one mind** as was true in the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. Elders make decisions by consensus. This means that we do not move ahead on a decision unless all elders are in agreement. We believe the mark of Biblical decision-making based upon the guidance and work of the Holy Spirit will produce "one mind" among mature, Godly men.

Local Church Leadership – A Biblical Perspective

Ensuring that Jesus Christ is Lord

EBF was founded with a deep conviction that the church must be focused upon the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is THE HEAD of His church, and because He is the RESURRECTED LORD He leads the Church by His Holy Spirit.

There are many different styles of church leadership today: congregational, Episcopal, Roman, Presbyterian, and others. It is our conviction that the best Biblical pattern for the local church was established by Christ Himself in selecting His apostles, and further explained through the selection of elders when churches were planted throughout the Mediterranean, as recorded in the book of Acts, Titus, and Timothy.

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Titus 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...

Note the following from these passages:

1. Elders were appointed, not elected. In America we value the principle of democracy and the “majority rule.” In the New Testament a higher standard than popularity was used. These standards are written in the next section, but Paul and Barnabas clearly were concerned that the leadership for these infant churches would have men who were committed to the Lord and capable of providing spiritual leadership.
2. Note also that Paul and Barnabas were not elected to serve in their roles of leadership. Paul was made an apostle by Jesus Christ Himself (Acts 9:1-22; Gal 1:11ff), and Barnabas was selected and approved by the leaders at Antioch (Acts 13), having already been proven a spiritual leader in the church (Acts 4:36; 11:22, 30).
3. It is also evident that the appointment of elders was a matter taken seriously by Paul and Barnabas. They prayed and fasted about this process and in their appointment committed these elders “to the Lord in whom they believed” as it was over His local church that they were to exercise oversight.

As Paul provided oversight for these churches, his letters reveal what the Lord intended regarding church leadership qualifications in the role of elder. Two particular passages are significant as he instructs his younger elders, Timothy and Titus, on what qualifies a man to lead the Lord’s local body:

1 Timothy 3:1-7 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife,² sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Titus 1:6-9 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. 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, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. 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.

There is much to be learned from these two passages, but note particularly the following:

1. Elders have an internal, Spirit-given, desire to lead God’s people.
2. The two primary qualifications for elders are: Godly character exemplifying the fruit of the Spirit, and sound doctrine and the ability to teach it. Note that Paul does not list a series of gifts, but rather of personal character consistent with the character of the Christ. The only gift mentioned is the ability to teach the Word of God, holding firm the trustworthy word as taught so that he may be able to instruct in sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it.

3. God has ordained men to be the God-honoring responsible leaders and teachers of His Church. This means that women are not called by God to exercise authority as elders (1 Tim 2:12; Genesis 1-2; Ephesians 5; 1 Corinthians 11). This does not mean that godly women do not have any role of teaching or shepherding, but rather that God has elected and commanded that the home and the Church be overseen by godly, qualified men. Therefore, elders at EBF must be men who fit the qualifications listed above.
4. An elder is not to be a recent convert. He must have the wisdom of the Lord, proven through his personal Christ-like character and how he relates particularly to his family. The conduct, attitude, and leadership in his personal life and family life become the criteria on which to judge his qualifications as an elder.

We believe that an elder form of government best ensures that Jesus Christ continues to lead his church for the following reasons:

1. Mature, proven, Godly men patiently pursue what God desires.
2. Mature, proven, Godly men understand the necessity of humble dependent prayer and the importance of Biblical authority.
3. Mature, proven, Godly men desire what glorifies God, being best for God's family, and are not motivated by fearful or selfish interests.

Because Jesus is the Lord of His church, it is crucial that the form of government to which a local church submits best enables the church to experience the Life, Leading, and Lordship of Jesus. Although any form of human government will be subject to selfishness, ego, and evil motives, it is Christ's desire and command that His Church be led by mature, proven, Christ-dependent men.

Insight from Peter

One of the most helpful passages regarding the leadership role of elders is found in 1 Peter 5. It reads as follows:

1 Peter 5:1-4 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: 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; ³ not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

This passage provides several helpful insights about the role of elders in the local church. Notice that Peter writes as a **fellow elder**. Peter was the leader of the church at Jerusalem, and describes himself as an elder. Notice also that the passage itself provides two definitions of an elder:

First, an elder is a **shepherd**. This term is perhaps the most basic image of what it means to be a **pastor**. It comes from the familiar sight of sheep and their caregivers all over the ancient Near East. It implies someone who cares for a **flock** or group. Whether we find our definition from Jesus' comments about Himself as the **good shepherd** in John 10, or return to the 23rd Psalm where the Lord is "**my shepherd**", the image is certainly that of caring for needs, and in this case the spiritual needs of the Christian congregation.

Secondly, an elder is an **overseer**. The word means: "to look or watch over." It suggests that overall responsibility and leadership of the congregation falls upon the elders. This was commonly understood within the community of Israel. It was the elders of Israel who were the acknowledged leaders in the

community, and the same is true of the Christian community. Elders are accountable to the Lord for how they oversee His flock (Heb 13:17; Acts 20:28-32; Jer 23; Ezek 34).

Note also that Peter writes to a **plurality of elders**. First, Peter includes himself as a fellow elder, not a chief elder or superior elder. There is only one Chief Shepherd: Jesus (1 Pet 5:4). It is the Lord's desire that elders will lead as a team. Churches are not led by one man, but rather by the corporate body of several elders. This makes sense if the ultimate goal of leadership is to determine the mind of the Lord and please Him. We acknowledge that elders are fallible people, too, who also need to be exhorted and instructed by each other through the Word and in the Spirit of God. This does not mean that individual elders cannot exercise the Spirit-given gift of leadership or that a congregation cannot vest a considerable amount of trusted leadership into an individual elder, but it does mean that the final decision-making process is not left to one person, but to a corporate team of Godly men.

Peter is clear, as well, about motives. Elders are not seekers of status or power or financial gain. Their entire motivation for being elders is to glorify God by serving His people, leading them toward Jesus as the Chief Shepherd through sound Biblical instruction and living as Godly examples of humble and obedient Christ-dependence. Jesus is the Savior of all believers, and He alone is the Lord and Shepherd of His flock. His people belong to Him. Therefore, elders will be held accountable to God for how they treat His people (Heb 13:17).

How Are Elders Selected?

The first elders were appointed or selected. In the case of Jesus, He prayed through the night in order to select those men the Father had determined that He should select. In the same way, Paul also prayed about those He should appoint, and the leaders in Antioch prayed and fasted after the Holy Spirit's selection of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13). We also desire for Jesus to direct, through His Holy Spirit and prayer, the appointment of elders at EBF. There are those who suggest that this approach can result in the selection of leaders that only the current leadership likes or approves. This is certainly a danger if the current leaders are not humbly dependent men of God who ground their decision upon the Scripture. However, if they are Christ-centered Spirit-filled men of God with the Word of God as their standard, then they are considered qualified and equipped to appoint other qualified Godly men. But, how does this happen specifically?

All candidates for eldership must meet the Scriptural qualifications given to us in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 while showing evidence of mature fruit of the Spirit.

At EBF we seek to annually review the current elder board to determine if new elders are needed. This can occur because of the current or anticipated workload, a need for men who are specifically gifted to fit shepherding needs which cannot be met by the current elders, or because one or more of the current elders senses a need for a sabbatical or to conclude his official service as elder. In the event that additional elders are available, an opportunity for members of the congregation to suggest potential elders will be made. Any potential elders will be subject to the review of the congregation for a period of one month. If there are no valid concerns regarding their qualifications, they will be added to the board upon the approval of the existing elders.

Practical Considerations

The most important consideration in appointing elders is that the instruction of Scripture is obeyed, but there are also issues which are not specifically covered in the Scriptures which may play a role in the selection of new elders.

1. There is no specified number of elders who officially serve the church. This would appear to be best based upon the size and needs of the local congregation, along with the availability of qualified men.
2. The only spiritual gift that is required to be an elder is the gift of teaching. This is the only ability that elders are required to have (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 2:2, 24; Eph 4:11) to effectively lead in the name of Christ. Apart from this gift, there are no spiritual gifts listed as qualifications to serve, but it would seem wise to appoint men with differing gifts to lead the church effectively. For example, an elder with the spiritual gift of leadership may view the needs of the church differently than an elder with the spiritual gift of mercy. As elders “submit to one another” in the context of serving together and making decisions together, the balance of gifts will contribute greatly to *how* these decisions are implemented.

What Do Elders Do?

Elders are *shepherds and overseers*, and they exercise all of the responsibilities which those designations would suggest. Areas of oversight include protection of God’s people through sound biblical teaching, correction of teaching which endangers God’s people, general counsel/teaching of the Body, Deacons, Staff, and Home Groups. For anyone who might consider serving as an elder at EBF, we recognize that it would be helpful to be more specific.

Serving as an elder at EBF is a significant commitment. Leaders of God’s people are held accountable by God and therefore bear a significant responsibility in their service. The elder team is **not a board of directors** or an automatic stamp of approval for the EBF staff. Elders serve as *shepherds of God’s people* at EBF with equal authority among them but differing areas of oversight.

As elders we have always affirmed the priority of God, family, vocation, and ministry as the commitment which each of us must maintain. As with any responsibility, being an elder often brings the other priorities into tension with that of serving as an elder. The elder team has always sought to work with these tensions as a team, believing that we are to *bear one another’s burdens*. This could mean rescheduling events or meetings or shifting our focus completely to the needs of an individual elder when needed.

Shepherding

As shepherds, elders are called to feed, lead, and protect the flock of God.

First, they **feed** the flock by proclaiming and applying the Word of God to the people of God, so that all God’s people will trust in Christ and glorify God. It is the elders who are called to interpret and apply Scripture in the life of the Church as the primary caregivers, being sure to feed with sound and healthy food, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, they **lead** the flock of God by following the Chief Shepherd and His directions. Elders are to be examples of Christ to the flock, by humbly repenting of their sins and weaknesses of faith and trusting in Jesus and praising His glorious grace. They are to be devoted to prayer and the teachings of Scripture, and demonstrate compassion and care for others, following the Holy Spirit as He leads us toward deeper dependence upon Jesus.

Third, they must **protect** the flock of God by guarding against false teaching, which leads away from the supremacy and glory of Christ and His Cross. It is the elders who guard and protect God’s people from erroneous faith and dangerous doctrine.

As the elders feed, lead, and protect the flock of God through prayer and the accurate teaching of the Word, all of God's people together will grow, by the Holy Spirit, into a greater dependency and praise of Jesus Christ, to the glory of God.

Oversight

The primary concerns of oversight are: decision-making, disciple-making, providing examples of godliness, and teaching sound doctrine and protecting against false doctrine. This is not an exhaustive list, but it gets to the heart of what an elder does.

Decision-Making

Our first commitment is to consider every aspect of the ministry of the Gospel at EBF from a place of dependent prayer. We commit a significant part of our time together in prayer, and with issues of great or immediate importance will usually consider them over a period of several meetings in order to enable each of us to pray and ask the Lord to reveal His will to us.

Elders make decisions under the authority of the Word of God. We seek to interpret and apply His Word to every situation as His Holy Spirit leads us into all truth. We believe that cultures change, but that this does not change the interpretation of the Scriptures. God's Word stands sure and steadfast. How we *apply* the interpretation of Scripture will vary according to the situation and the cultural context, but the meaning never changes. It is the elder's responsibility to exercise this authority with gentle boldness, which is why it is imperative that elders be Christ-like men of integrity and maturity.

The elders desire to always be aware of how a decision affects the entire flock of God. As the elders make decisions that affect people and ministries, we are constantly evaluating how such decisions impact those people and those ministries and we are careful to implement plans in a way that glorifies God and builds up the entire Body of Christ at EBF.

The elders consider issues primarily to glorify God through obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ. As we do this, the Lord has particular responsibilities for EBF in the immediate community and we desire to follow the Holy Spirit to impact this community for His glory with the greatest impact possible in each of our decisions.

Disciple-Making or Equipping

Elders are to be involved in discipling small groups of EBF members for the purpose of equipping them to do the works of ministry in the church. Elders equip others to fulfill the ministry to which God has called them and then encourage them as they do so. This discipleship seeks to produce men and women who are characterized by the fruit of the Spirit, competent in their understanding of God's Word and the ability to encourage others with it, and capable of walking alongside of others to do the works of ministry set forth in God's Word so that all God's people would stand firm in the Gospel both in word and in deeds. This calling to disciple is in accordance with the spirit of Matthew 28 and 2 Timothy 2:

Matthew 28:18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

2 Timothy 2:1-2 You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, ² and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

In disciple-making, elders are often functioning as **player-coaches**. Each elder is assigned to oversee at least one area of ministry. This means partnering with a full-time or part-time staff member in such areas as: children, youth, adults, worship, missions, etc. The elder is responsible to shepherd and encourage the leader of his area or areas of ministry. This means that he will meet regularly with the leader, be involved in observing the ministry of the leader, offer encouragement and feedback to help the ministry leader be successful in his/her ministry and walk with the Lord.

Additionally, disciple-making means that the elders are **walking among the sheep**. They should be listening to the sheep to discern their spiritual, physical, and emotional needs in order to bring them to Jesus and care for them. They are also to be alert to protecting the sheep from false teaching and self-dependence by equipping them to discern the schemes of the Enemy and to stand firm in reliance upon Christ Jesus and entrust themselves to His Word. These types of concerns should be shared with the other elders as matters of immediate concern to the welfare of the Body and the glory of Christ.

Delegating to Deacons

In Acts 6, Luke records the first major division of ministry within the leadership of the newly-formed church:

Acts 6:1-4 Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

Elders intend to focus on their ministry of prayer and the Word. Deacons are to be given the practical tasks of serving the needs of the Body. The elders oversee the Deacons in their ministries, but delegate such tasks in the hands of faithful people, full of the Spirit and wisdom.

Time-Commitment

The elders meet at least twice a month for a period of about 3-4 hours. When issues are pressing there may be a time when meetings are needed more often. These meetings of the elders are of the utmost priority in serving in such a capacity. This is our time to pray and oversee the Body together, seeking to lead the flock to a greater dependence upon Jesus.

We have least one weekend retreat per year and schedule other shorter periods of time when we need to work through an issue that requires greater time together.

Naturally, there is time involved in preparing for meetings, especially if there has been a specific assignment given to an elder. Elders are expected to come prepared to each meeting having given time in prayer and contemplation to the issues presented. In our times together we evaluate ministry oversight, update on ministry successes and struggles. Occasionally the teaching of a class or discussion concerning an issue of church discipline will require an additional time commitment.

Summary

Those who serve as elders do so because of their love for our Lord and the desire to see His people thrive to His glory. Serving as an elder is a significant responsibility and for those who are not on the church staff it represents a

large time commitment. It is a decision that should be made thoughtfully and prayerfully. However, the value of knowing that you are serving Jesus Christ with a team of like-minded brothers brings a deep sense of satisfaction and provides a climate of faith and security for God's people. In the final analysis, serving as an elder is worth the time, energy, struggle, and commitment, for the Lord is glorified in the joyful and passionate praise of His people.