

# WHO IS AN ELDER?

## God's Calling for Older Men

By Brett Kreider

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### Introduction—A Call for Men to Rise Up and Fill the Leadership Gap

*“I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.”*

*Ezekiel 22:30*

Today's church continues to face an intimidating leadership vacuum. Many challenges threaten and attack the soul of our potential leaders. Our culture presumes that men will pursue a comfortable life-style, promote compromised morals, pander to the desires and whims of our children, and even scorn the Biblical call for men to assume a leadership role. If that weren't enough, our generation faces gargantuan global issues that distract us from focusing on becoming the men God wants us to be. These issues include hostile terrorists, pandemic diseases, environmental deterioration, and a frightening economic recession.

On top of this, Satan is not satisfied with applying external pressures alone. He has dealt a crushing blow to the effectiveness of church leadership by attacking our ability to trust other men. We sometimes forget that the true leader of the church is God and that every member in the church, including the leaders is a sinner. When we see leaders' mistakes, it is easy for us to magnify them in our minds. Then we tell ourselves that “we won't get fooled again,” while we protect our hearts from being hurt. All the while, Satan knows that if we lose our trust, we will become even less prone to share our hearts, more prone to hide our sin, and more likely to be defeated.

Feel overwhelmed yet? It is no wonder that we as men find excuses to bury our heads into our work or decide that all we can do is take care of our own families and hope for the best. We can rationalize like the Pharisee saying that at least we are “*not like other men*” (Luke 18:11) who quit or abandoned our responsibilities. We are, after all, still Christians, even if we no longer heed God's voice calling us to “*become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life*” (Phil. 2:14-15).

Where do we go from here? On the one hand we know our weaknesses, our struggles, and our failures. We question in our hearts, “Who am I to step up and fill this leadership gap?” On the other hand, we know God, who “*calls things that are not as though they were*” (Romans 4:17). If we are to accept God's calling and rise up to fill this leadership vacuum—“*to stand... in the gap*”—we “older men” will have to sustain a counter-cultural lifestyle, dare to live differently, believe that God will use even us, and walk a narrow road.

While this paper alludes to some very interesting biblical issues, it is not meant to resolve questions that biblical scholars have already capably addressed. The endnotes provide several excellent references in which some great thinkers address the issues of the qualifications vs. qualities of elders<sup>1</sup>, whether “believing children” means that an elder's children must all be Christians<sup>2</sup>, the authority and roles of elders/evangelists/deacons<sup>3</sup>, and the politics of church organization<sup>4</sup>. Additionally, my thoughts have been influenced by F. LaGard Smith's challenge

for reexamination of the role of elders within the Churches of Christ<sup>5</sup>. Every attempt has been made to give credit to these references throughout this paper.

So, what is the purpose of writing down these thoughts? This paper aims to challenge older men to accept our God-given calling and emulate the qualities attributed to elders. It also calls the church to recognize and cultivate the God-given gifts and raise the profile of the older men in the congregation. To the older men, I hope my words will spur us on *“toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24)* by examining our own hearts spirituality and challenging our current thinking.

Specifically, I will address four topics:

1. God appoints older men as the spiritual leaders of the community
2. All older men need to grow in the qualities attributed to NT elders
3. As shepherds, older men must guard the gates, protecting and feeding the flock
4. The Elders' charge is to prepare people to use their gifts of leadership, administration, and feeding

## 1. Appointed and Anointed—God's leadership through men

*“The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”*

*Proverbs 21:1*

One leadership principle in the Bible is very clear: “God is God, and we are not.” He chooses to share his authority with men and put them in positions of leadership, demonstrating one of the most important characteristics of the relationship that he desires with us—trust. He perfectly models perhaps the most difficult area for us as physical beings—our willingness and ability to trust another being.

The Biblical examples are numerous: God put Adam in charge of the Garden of Eden; Noah captained the ark; and Abraham established the Nation of God. He raised up judges to rescue His people, Kings to rule His nation, prophets to carry His message, and even used men without faith (Cyrus, Artaxerxes, etc.) to accomplish His will. In every case, He entrusted men with the authority, position, and welfare of His people. God's Spirit moved in the hearts of sinful, imperfect men, often despite their own failings and inabilities. Today's practical application: God calls us to trust Him by commanding us to trust the men He raises up into leadership.

God consistently chose older men, “elders,” from among his people to be the counselors, influence decisions, and provide a collective wisdom and spirituality. These men were influenced (both positively and negatively) by the spirituality of the community that raised them. Yet when they became older men, God called them to Shepherd that flock and lead them spiritually. God clearly made no excuse for elders who strayed into the sins that were prevalent in their culture and led the community into sin<sup>6</sup>.

Throughout the Bible, God called older men to be the spiritual leaders of His people. There is no example in the OT of “qualifications” for elders (other than being an *older* man). Neither does God include any specifics on how to appoint OT elders. Nor was any excuse given to older men for not taking responsibility for the spiritual welfare of God's people. The principal we see in the OT is that ***God appointed all older men in the community as elders. When combined with faith, this triggered God's anointment to move powerfully by His Holy Spirit through the elders of the community to provide spiritual leadership.***

## 2. Office or Role?—The need for older men to grow in the qualities attributed to NT elders

So we find that OT elders (older men) were “ordinary” men who were influenced by the spirituality of the older men who led before them. The OT does not describe any special ceremony for appointing or anointing elders

(other than grey hair). God expected all men in the community to take on the role of spiritual leadership as they grew older.

A perusal of OT passages reveals that elders:

1. Were the “older” men of the city (by definition)
2. Often advised the kings and prophets (Moses, David, Elisha, Ezra)
3. Sat at the gates of the city, watching who came in and out and making judgments for the people (*Deuteronomy 21, 22; Joshua 20:4; Ruth 4:11, etc.*)
4. Were a larger group from which a select group of 70 elders were called out (*Exodus 24, Numbers 11*).
5. Were responsible for passing down wisdom to the next generation (*Deuteronomy 32:7*)
6. Reflected the spirituality of the nation/town (*Examples: Judges 11, 1 Kings 12:6*)
7. Were judged by their ability to shepherd the people (*Ezekiel 34*)
8. Were called to lead the people in revival (*Joel 1*)

The tradition of relying on older men for guidance and leadership in the community was not unique to the Hebrews. In the Bible, other nations also looked to their elders for leadership (*e.g., the Moabites in Numbers 22:7 and the Gideonites in Joshua 9:11*).

Turning to the NT, the Jewish elders also played a prominent role in Israel's leadership. Although they were under the authority of Rome, the Jewish leaders included priests, teachers of the law, Pharisees, Sadducees, the Sanhedrin, and elders. It is interesting to note that the Sanhedrin were simply a group of elders chosen in the tradition of the 70 select elders who served as the key leaders of the nation<sup>7</sup>. Unfortunately, these same Jewish elders in the NT sided with the temple priests and teachers of the law to question Jesus and ultimately turned on him. Note how many times the Jewish elders were directly mentioned in opposition to Jesus and the apostles (every mention in Gospels and most in Acts).

When the NT church looked for leadership, it is no surprise that they looked to the older men in the church, following the tradition of both Israel and the surrounding nations. Older men were expected to lead their community—in spiritual matters, in making key legal decisions and judgments, and in providing direction and wisdom. Without understanding this background from which the leadership of elders in the community is based, it is easy for us to misunderstand the NT role of elders. There was an expectation that ***all men as they age should be growing in their character to become the spiritual leaders for their families and their spheres of influence (their community)***.

How does the NT characterize these elders? The NT uses three terms interchangeably: Pastor (Shepherd), Bishop (Overseer), and Presbyter (Elder). Each word describes a much needed leadership quality: the compassion of a shepherd caring for his sheep, the leadership and administration of an overseer, and the maturity and character of an older spiritual man. This is not to say that every elder (or older man) in our church will excel equally in each of these roles. Many have recognized the fact that the word “elders” is plural and reflects a team of men. While no one man is able to be the perfectly mature shepherd leader (elder/shepherd/overseer), God has given every man unique qualities that He intends to be used to spiritually guide the community.

Perhaps this will help us understand the term “qualifications” for the eldership. As Oakes and Wright<sup>1</sup> have described, each older man possesses different strengths (and weaknesses) which he brings to the leadership team. If these qualities are taken as “qualifications” then elders were held to (slightly) different standards depending on the city they were appointed in<sup>8</sup>. As they point out, when we try to merge these independent lists, we imply that each list is not comprehensive. It is therefore very important to understand that these lists of qualifications were complete and written in the context of the specific leadership qualities needed in Crete and Ephesus at that time. Interestingly, right after describing the character of elders in Titus 1, Paul charges the older

men to adopt a similar (shorter) list of qualities in Titus—*“to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance”* (Titus 2:2). I want to urge us to be thoughtful as we apply these scriptures to our elder candidates today. In the context of this paper, my point is that the specific considerations Paul used to appoint elders as the church leaders parallels the character challenges he gave to all older men.

While we are examining the qualities of elders I want to challenge the church to consider the following questions:

- Are we, as a church, producing a generation of older men who are clearly demonstrating the qualities attributed to the eldership?
- Are we recognizing the God-given gifts in our older men and helping them to use those gifts to help mature and strengthen the congregation?
- Are we imitating God in his trust when it comes to entrusting older men with influence and leadership in the church?
- Do we as leaders in the church have the heart to respect and learn from the older men that God has put in our lives?

I am concerned that as a church we have tended to recognize the zeal and impact of the younger men and not held a high enough expectation for older men to grow into a mature spiritual foundation for the church.

### 3. Guard the Gates—The Shepherd protects and feeds the flock

In the OT, elders were found *“at the city gate”* (Deuteronomy 21:19, Joshua 20:4). There is no indication that these were specially appointed older men—the city gate may have been where all of the older men in the city were found. In any case, several conclusions can be drawn:

- Elders were accessible as leaders: people knew where to find them.
- The community looked to them for leadership, guidance, and decision making (Deuteronomy 21:1-8, Joshua 20:4). They served as the cities' overseers—they settled disputes, provided counsel, and helped provide direction.
- By patrolling the city gate, they knew who was coming into the city and who was leaving. They knew who was trying to influence their flock and who was leaving their flock.

In John 10, Jesus described the Shepherd who guarded the gates to protect the sheep from intruders and led the sheep in and out of the gates: *“the sheep listen to [the shepherd's] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... his sheep follow him because they know his voice.”* (John 10:3-4)

Some practical applications lead directly from this scripture<sup>5</sup>:

- **The shepherd knows the sheep.** Jesus calls Shepherds to take responsibility for the flock, knowing each individual sheep. They know the members by name and take an interest in their lives.
- **The sheep know the voice of the shepherd.** There is a bond between the Shepherd and the sheep. It may come through one-on-one conversations. It may happen in their home or yours. It may be deepened as the shepherd teaches and mentors the flock. Whatever the case, a relationship is established and maintained.
- **The shepherd watches the gates.** Shepherds know who is influencing the church for good and bad (wolves). They know who is entering (move ins, baptisms, visitors), and leaving (move aways, strays, fall aways) the church. Jesus considered this a shepherd's responsibility.

As we have seen, the older men of the church have been called to be those shepherds. ***When older men take on this role of shepherding the flock, it creates a layer of protection for the people, a sense of trust, and a security that the community will be shielded from harmful external influence.*** Many congregations have implemented practical methods to facilitate this, including:

- Caring for the Members—There is a great need to support disciples through major life events including hospitalization, weddings, funerals, and other needs.
- New Christian Class—This provides evangelism training, as well as grounding new disciples in the faith and establishing relationships with other members of the congregation.
- Welcoming Activities—Examples include care packages for Christians moving in, meeting with every new member in the elders' homes, and helping get people tied into small groups.
- Benevolence—Members who need benevolence are probably in need of more than money. There is a great opportunity to get older men involved to counsel and support members in their time of need.
- Family Ministry—Older men (and women) with exemplary families can help others strengthen their marriages, raise believing children, work with aging family members, and meet the challenges of running a household (finances, career, time management, etc.).
- Shepherding the Singles—Some congregations appoint mature couples to help shepherd specific ministries such as singles, campus, and single parents.

Although we could assume that these activities are the responsibility of the elders, we should remember that the elders (pastors) are called to *“prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13)*. Involving the older men in shepherding the flock will help mature the entire body, maximizing the impact of the gifts of each member (including the older men) and empowering the entire church to be involved in meeting the needs of the body.

The more the church grows, the greater the needs across the body, and the greater the need to utilize all of the strengths/gifts of older men to care for the flock. We cannot simply rely on those with leadership gifts to serve in all of these capacities. As the church searches for ways to meet these needs, we must also consider how to appoint and empower deacons to minister in the church (a topic for another paper).

#### **4. Elder, Overseer, Pastor—Leadership, Administration, and Feeding**

God has given spiritual gifts to all older men in the congregation *“to serve others”* and *“administer God's grace” (1 Peter 4:10)*, even if these men are not recognized as elders (*1 Corinthians 12:27-31*). The challenge for the church is to create a culture that identifies these gifts and encourages the older men in the congregation to actively use their spiritual gifts in this manner. These gifts may range across many areas from leadership to organization to serving.

In a similar way, those who are designated as elders will play different roles within a leadership team reflecting the three biblical terms elder, overseer, and pastor. Note that while 1 Timothy 5:17 holds up those elders who direct the affairs of the church, it also shows that there were various roles of elders. Some directed the affairs of the church, and some were involved in preaching and teaching. Presumably, some took on other roles in shepherding the flock. In a practical way, these roles can be described as: Leadership, Administration, and Feeding.

**Leadership.** The leaders of the local church in the Bible were the elders (note that the term “evangelist” only appears three times). When Paul addressed the church leadership, it was the elders<sup>9</sup>. The apostles appointed elders *“in each church” (Acts 14:23)*. The key leaders in Jerusalem were the *“apostles and elders” (Acts 15:2)*. Paul's letter to the Philippians was written *“to the saints together with the overseers and deacons” (Philippians 1:1)*. When he met with the leaders from Ephesus it was the elders (*Acts 20*)<sup>10</sup>.

Paul commended those elders with strong leadership qualities who were able to *“direct the affairs of the church” (1 Timothy 5:17)*. Paul lists qualities used to select elders in both Ephesus (1 Timothy) and Crete (Titus), describing 1) the character required to lead and 2) the vices that could discredit the potential elder.



1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 describe elders as men with maturity demonstrated by self-control, the ability to raise a spiritual family, and soundness in faith. 1 Timothy 3 and 1 Peter 1 describe men who have “*set their heart on being an overseer*” “*because [they] are willing, as God wants.*” **Elders who are called to direct the affairs of the church are not merely “older men” but just like the 70 were chosen in the OT, they have been selected from among the older men because they possessed the God-given gifts required to lead the church.**

**Administration.** Many leaders, gifted as they are, do not have the gift of administration (1 Corinthians 12:28). As churches prepare to appoint elders, there is a great opportunity to recognize older men with administrative gifts rather than employing a model that places all of the administrative expectations on those in the leadership role. As described in Jacoby’s paper on Church Polity, we often ask our leaders (evangelist or elder) to be the “super-pastor-preacher-administrator-organizer-motivator-husband-father-discipler-local leader”<sup>4</sup>. **If we accept the teaching that some elders direct the affairs of the church, we should expect to have other older men who focus on administration.**

When evangelists or elders play the super hero role, we are asking them to serve in areas where they are not gifted and risk putting them in danger of burn out. Furthermore, others will not be inspired to take a leadership role under this imbalanced model for fear that they are not gifted in every area.

Churches will benefit from sharing administrative duties across a wider range of older men (and women) including deacons. In this way, we will implement Ephesians 4:12-13 “*to prepare God’s people for works of service*” rather than placing such a heavy burden on the super-hero leader. There is another danger: expecting those with leadership qualities to take on administrative duties could lead us further into a clergy-laity mentality, with the congregation expecting someone to handle all of these responsibilities simply because we pay them<sup>11</sup>.

**Feeding.** Many scriptures describe the role of the shepherd in feeding the flock. In 1 Timothy 5, elders are commended for “*teaching and preaching.*” Many scholars believe the last two roles in Ephesians 4:11, “*pastor and teacher,*” describe one “teaching shepherd.” In John 10 the sheep follow because they know the Shepherd’s voice—which could certainly be interpreted to include the shepherd feeding the sheep spiritually through spiritual teaching. Jesus final charge to Peter was the tri-fold challenge to “*feed my sheep,*” perhaps leading Peter in his first letter to emphasize the shepherd role he played, acknowledge Jesus as the Chief Shepherd, and call others to shepherd the flock (1 Peter 5). **Shepherds are clearly called to feed the flock, including the “ministry of the word” (Acts 6).**

If we accept the charge that all older men have a role in shepherding, we can envision the charge to deploy the entire population of older men in the church across a broad range of opportunities to feed the flock. Imagine the impact to our congregations when every older man feels empowered to “*use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms*” (1 Peter 4:10). Members who use their gifts to serve the body not only feel fulfilled and invested in the church, they experience the multiplication of their talents (Matthew 25:16-17). **Once the older men feel empowered to use their gifts to feed the flock, they become a powerful force, serving in many of the ways described in the Bible—hospitality, teaching, feeding the widows, taking care of the orphans, praying for those with special needs, anointing the sick with oil, ministering to people with the word.**

## Conclusions

In summary:

- **God appointed all older men in the community as elders. When combined with faith, this triggered God’s anointment to move powerfully by His Holy Spirit through the elders of the community to provide spiritual leadership.**
- **All men as they age should be growing in their character to become the spiritual leaders for their families and their spheres of influence (their community).**

- ***When older men take on this role of shepherding the flock, it creates a layer of protection for the people, a sense of trust, and a security that the community will be shielded from harmful external influence.***
- ***Elders who are called to direct the affairs of the church are not merely “older men” but just like the 70 were chosen in the OT, they have been selected from among the older men because they possessed the God-given gifts required to lead the church.***
- ***If we accept the teaching that some elders direct the affairs of the church, we should expect to have other older men who focus on administration.***
- ***Shepherds are clearly called to feed the flock, including the “ministry of the word.”***
- ***Once the older men feel empowered to use their gifts to feed the flock, they become a powerful force, serving in many of the ways described in the bible—hospitality, teaching, feeding the widows, taking care of the orphans, praying for those with special needs, anointing the sick with oil, ministering to people with the word.***

As we envision older men stepping into a stronger role of influence in the church, let me encourage all of us older men to strive to grow in the qualities that Paul used to describe elders. My prayer is that we will not let our weaknesses, struggles, and failures stop us from serving as God intends. Let us carefully consider God's plan for spiritual leadership in His church, recognizing the potential of all older men to liberally contribute their God-given gifts to serve as shepherds, elders, and overseers.

#### (Endnotes)

- 1 John Oakes and Keith Wright, [Biblical Eldership: Qualities Or Qualifications?](#) 2004
- 2 Kelly Petre, [Believing Children](#), 12/2003
- 3 Gordon Ferguson, [Balance of Power or a Team](#), 1/2005
- 4 Douglas Jacoby, [Church Polity](#), 1/2002
- 5 F. LaGard Smith, [Radical Restoration](#), Chapter Nine, “When Shepherds are Sheepish,” 2001 p. 174 ff
- 6 For example, God addressed the sins of the elders in Ezekiel saying, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’”(Ezekiel 8:12). God responded with a harsh punishment for the people, starting with the elders (Ez 9), and He blamed the elders for the corruption of Israel (Ez 20), addressing their sin very directly in Ezekiel 34.
- 7 F. LaGard Smith, [Radical Restoration](#), Chapter Nine, “When Shepherds are Sheepish,” 2001 p. 174 ff
- 8 As Oakes/Wright point out, this raises the question of which version of the “qualifications” should each city choose to use (Ephesus or Crete). If we combine them are we saying that the individual lists (1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1) were not sufficient?
- 9 Although there is no NT mention of evangelists directing the affairs of the church, this is a clear role of the elders. The picture painted in the Bible of the Evangelist was to plant churches, preaching the word dynamically wherever they went, but rarely staying in one place for any length of time. Elders were appointed in each church (city) and remained as a stable leadership team. See Jacoby's paper on [Church Polity](#) for more detail.  
As a movement, the ICOC has predominately emphasized the leadership role of evangelists while elders have played a secondary role in leadership. As some have surmised, this may reflect a reaction to elders who exercise authority over the pulpit ministers, often to the detriment of church growth and innovation. The challenge for us as a church is to find the biblical dynamic which will provide a balanced leadership for the congregation—utilizing the strength of elders, evangelists, and deacons (ministers). For more on this subject, read Gordon Ferguson's paper<sup>3</sup>.
- Another side of the leadership issue is that elders who take on the challenge to direct the affairs of the church must remain Holy Spirit led and follow Jesus' example as servant leaders. Although this is outside the scope of this paper, it will help the elders maintain the heart of a learner (disciple) and never “lord it over” or “exercise authority over” (Matthew 20:25) those they lead. This would help produce leaders who walk side-by-side with disciples rather than coming across as men who are “above” them.
- 10 There was no mention of evangelists in Acts 20, though Timothy was an evangelist in Ephesus for a time. The apostles appointed elders “in each church” (Acts 14:23) but were never instructed to appoint evangelists as a church leader. As a matter of fact (perhaps the topic for another discussion/paper), no one man was ever described as the “Leader of the church.” My point is not to decrease the role of the evangelist, which is a Biblical role, but to highlight the role of the elder.
- 11 As LaGard Smith points out, we can be guilty of relegating leadership responsibility to a “hired hand” rather than expecting men to rise up and play the role of spiritual leaders.