



The following document represents our current understanding and expression of the Biblical office of elder at Community Bible Church in Fresno, California. It is in no way meant to be the last word or even the best one on the subject. It is posted with the hope that it may be of help, inspiration, and/or encouragement to other churches as they seek God's desire for their spiritual leaders.

DESCRIPTION

The New Testament teaches us that Jesus Christ is the head and Lord over all things pertaining to his church (Colossians 1:18-20). It is under Christ's leadership that the New Testament establishes the offices of elders and deacons within the local church. (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 3:5; Ephesians 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Following the example of their Lord, the elders and deacons conduct themselves as the servant leaders of the church (Mark 9:35, 10:43; John 13:14, 15). The elders are charged with the spiritual care and oversight of the local church while the deacons are given responsibility for the practical physical needs of the congregation. Though every member is gifted by the Holy Spirit and called to ministry within the body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), the two offices of elder and deacon represent Christ's loving provision for structure and order within his church.

The elders consist of those men in the congregation who desire to serve as elders, meet the Scriptural qualifications, and are set apart for the task by the Holy Spirit. Imperfect sinners saved by God's wonderful grace, the elders are to be spiritually mature men whose conduct and reputation reflect Godly virtue (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:28).

FUNCTION

During the physical absence of the Chief Shepherd, the pastoral care of the flock (shepherding) is the responsibility of his undershepherds, the elders. The Scriptures use the descriptive terms of overseer (or bishop) and shepherd (or pastor) to describe the man who is functioning in the office of elder. While it is Biblically correct to say the elder is a 'pastor', this label describes what the elder does rather than his Christ delegated role within the church.

Plurality

In the New Testament, churches are described as having multiple elders with no one elder elevated as above or in authority over the other elders. Therefore the elders operate in plurality, that is each elder is an equal part of a larger team of elders. One or more elders may exercise leadership for the purpose of orderly function in a particular area, but this leadership is simply a matter of function and is to be distinguished from a separated positional authority.

Agreement

The eldership functions in plurality with every elder in agreement regarding decisions, direction and doctrine. Unity (being in accord or harmony with one another) as well as unanimity (everyone free to completely support an issue) is necessary within the eldership. In instances of disagreement, action is postponed while the elders remain engaged in discussion, study and prayer until every man is in agreement that the correct decision has been made.

Waiting for unity and unanimity allows the Holy Spirit an opportunity to confirm decisions in every elder's conscience and helps protect the church from dominant personalities. Such functioning of a group of leaders requires a commitment to prayer, mutual submission, accountability and sensitivity to one another.

RESPONSIBILITIES

The elders, under the leadership of Christ, serve the church by providing for order, equipping, protection and discipline within the church as well as representation of the church before the community and civil authorities. The elder's responsibility for oversight includes the equipping of all the believers in the assembly for Christ-likeness and unity (Ephesians 4:11-16), thus facilitating the fulfillment of Christ's Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20). Employing the Scriptural description of the elder as 'shepherd', the elders are to lead, feed and protect the flock while modeling a lifestyle of Christian maturity. Specifically, this means the elders are to be:

Leading

- By overseeing the existing life of the church - evaluation and administration (Acts 11:30, 20:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:7).
- By evaluating new opportunities for ministry - decision making (Acts 15:4, 6, 22-29, 16:4; 1 Timothy 3:5, 5:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24).

Feeding

- By teaching - exposition of the Scriptures (Acts 6:2; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7)
- By discipling - exhortation to follow the Scriptures (Titus 1:9)
- By correcting - admonition to obey to the Scriptures (1 Thessalonians 5:12)

Protecting

- By guarding the flock from false teaching - heresy (Acts 20:28-31)
- By refuting false teachers and scoffers - heretics (Titus 1:9-11, 13-14; 1 Timothy 1:3-4)

Modeling

- By cultivating a dependent prayer life with Christ (James 5:14; Acts 6:6, 14:23, 20:36)

- By working hard at personal Bible study (1 Timothy 4:6, 7; Titus 1:9)
- By opening his home in loving hospitality (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8)
- By helping the weak according to their needs (Acts 20:35)

PERFORMANCE OF DUTIES

According to Gifts

Though qualified to fulfill all the responsibilities of an elder, each individual elder is particularly gifted by the Spirit for specific areas of leading, feeding, or protecting the church of God (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Each elder assumes responsibilities in accordance with his gifts and availability. The church depends on Christ to provide a balance of gifts, abilities, and availability in the plurality of the eldership.

As Part of a Balanced Christian Life

The elder is to be both a 'doer' and an 'equipper'; leading by precept and by example. Active and regular participation in the life of the church family is necessary to fulfill his duties. However, as part of a team, he has occasions when he is free from particular church duties and therefore able to fulfill other responsibilities. In this way he models and maintains balance in fulfilling his elder, family, devotional, employment, and civic duties.

In order to have time to accomplish his church responsibilities, an elder may be financially supported by the church. The elder thus freed performs his increased responsibilities as much as possible during the traditional Monday through Friday 'work week'. It is recognized that his duties may often require time other than normal office hours. The freed elder is directed to maintain flexibility in his schedule, giving a full time effort toward his duties while providing the appropriate amount of personal and family time during each week.

RECOGNITION OF ELDERS

It is really God who makes men elders by maturing and burdening them to fulfill such a ministry. As overseers in their leading and protecting capacity, it is the responsibility of the elders to recognize all of the men and yet only the men whom the Holy Spirit appoints as elders (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 4:14). The process of recognition of elders at Community Bible Church is as follows:

Identification

1. Anyone in the church family may, after prayerful consideration of the scriptural qualifications, recommend one of the men of the church to the eldership for consideration as an elder. Each person so presented is given serious consideration by the existing elders.
2. If the elders are unaware of any Scriptural reasons to not consider the man, they commit some time in contact with the man himself in order to determine with him God's will in this matter (1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2). With this information, the eldership prayerfully decides whether the man suggested is a true candidate for the office of elder.

3. Once agreed that the man appears to desire the office under the Lord's direction, the elders notify the congregation of the candidate under consideration. The church family is encouraged to pray and inform the elders of their input either personally or in writing.
4. Any areas of life in which the man is found lacking results in an invitation for a discipling relationship between a member of the elders and the candidate. In this way deficiencies are dealt with directly and the candidate may be considered for the eldership at a future time.

Consideration

1. Following the identification of a potential elder, the elders take reasonable time (typically 6-18 months) to get to know the candidate. This time provides for
 - o Prayer and fasting for God's will in the matter (Acts 14:23),
 - o A period to familiarize the man with the functions of an elder,
 - o A sufficient opportunity for the existing leaders to develop their relationship with the person and to evaluate his spiritual depth and character as one who might share in the ministry of equipping the saints (1 Timothy 5:22).
2. Any areas of life in which the man is found lacking are discussed lovingly, candidly and confidentially within the eldership. The candidate's continuation in the process of becoming an elder is determined by the circumstances of any deficiency that arises.

Presentation

1. Following the period of consideration, the elders, by unanimous consent, notify the congregation of their intent to formally commend the candidate as an elder. They further charge the church family to be praying specifically for this man and his family.
2. Approximately one month after the church family has been notified, the candidate is formally presented to the congregation by the elders. He is given opportunity to share with the church family his heart and sense of the Spirit's leading for him to assume the office of elder.
3. The church family is given the responsibility to pray and express themselves regarding the candidate. During this period the elders challenge the body to affirm the man or to bring to them any report which may affect his qualification for the office of elder.
4. Any objections concerning the candidate which might surface during this process are worked through in a constructive manner with the man involved so that any deficiencies or misunderstandings may be addressed and corrected.

Confirmation

1. After time is given for prayer and individual expression (usually 1-2 months), the elders formally ask the congregation to affirm the candidate in writing at a church meeting. Those who have prayed and

considered the matter are asked to either affirm the candidate or express any reasons they have to doubt that the Holy Spirit has in fact called the man to be an elder.

2. When the elders are assured of God's direction, of unity in the church family, and that any former objections have been dealt with properly, the new elder is publicly affirmed by the elders in the presence of the congregation.

Men who have served as elders in other churches are not automatically recognized as elders at Community Bible Church. They are subject to the same recognition process as outlined above.

The process of elder recognition outlined will be refined by the unanimous consent of the eldership in accordance with any further understanding received from the Scriptures. Such revisions are made available and explained to the congregation.

TERM OF SERVICE

The Scriptures do not indicate how long a man may officially serve as an elder in the local church. The Bible does clearly teach that God intends periodic rest for his creation. As an example for us, God rested on the seventh day after six days of creative work. The Jews were given a Sabbath rest each Saturday. The land of Israel was to be left fallow and not worked at all every seventh year.

In this spirit, each January the elders gather for a time of reflection and evaluation. At this retreat each man's work and life is candidly discussed. The retreat also provides an opportunity for the elders to appoint corporate officers from among themselves for the coming year (as required by state law). These officers include a president, a secretary and a treasurer.

In advance of the retreat, the congregation is asked to be praying for the men. The church family is encouraged to inform the elders of particular concerns they may have in any of the following areas:

- The continued qualification of a man to serve for another year in the office of elder,
- Any modifications to an elder's responsibilities appropriate for his current life circumstances,
- Whether a man is in need of a season of rest from the responsibilities of the office of elder.

All decisions concerning a man's role and work as an elder are made by the unanimous consent of the elders (including the elder under consideration). Any changes within the eldership, including the duration and duties of an elder taking a sabbatical rest, are communicated to the congregation in a timely manner following the retreat.

REMUNERATION

The Scriptures instruct that the worker is worth of his hire (1 Corinthians

9:3-14) and the hard working elder is worthy of 'double honor' (1 Timothy 5:17). The church's desire and obligation to free an elder from outside employment must be distinguished from viewing the elders as a professional class (clergy) whose position automatically receives a stated salary. The elders at Community Bible Church follow the Scriptural pattern of never demanding the right to be paid for their service (1 Corinthians 9:12-19; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Therefore, they do not automatically receive any financial compensation from the church for their service in the office of elder.

As the particular needs of the eldership warrant, the church may be able to free an elder to fulfill his responsibilities. The releasing of certain elders to serve in a more full time capacity should not be seen as interfering with the equality of the office shared by all the elders. A stipend is provided sufficient to free the elder from the distraction or concern for his financial obligations. The specific remuneration for freed elders (and all church employees) is established by the unanimous decision of the eldership. Such information is available upon request to anyone in the congregation.

Any number of circumstances may necessitate an elder to transition from being supported by the church to outside employment. The freed elder in transition because of a change in health, responsibilities or needs within the church (either financial or spiritual) is supported until outside employment is found. If the transition occurs as a result of discipline or disqualification of the elder, the circumstances will affect the church's on-going financial responsibility to the elder.

DISQUALIFICATION

Every member is subject to accountability within the church and therefore the elder may be disciplined according to Biblical principles (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15). Scripture does dictate that no accusation against an elder is to be taken seriously unless there are two or three witnesses to verify the charges. When a confronted elder 'continues in sin,' he is rebuked by the elders before the congregation, that 'others may fear' (1 Timothy 5:19, 20).

An elder is subject to scrutiny in areas which call for church discipline (unrepentant sin) and circumstances which might affect his continuing qualification to serve as an elder. When an elder ceases to meet those qualifications, he is asked to remove himself from the office for a time so that he may put his life in order in that area. Such action is taken only by the unanimous agreement of the other elders. If an elder himself feels unable to serve for any reason, he may request to be relieved from office either temporarily or permanently. The process of his possible reinstatement at a later time is determined by the elders in relation to the circumstances.

ACCOUNTABILITY

In carrying out his duties, the elder is immediately responsible to the other elders, continually responsible to his brothers and sisters in the congregation, and ultimately responsible to the Lord Jesus Christ.

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