

THE MINISTRY OF ELDERS AND DEACONS

INTRODUCTION

The New Testament regularly speaks of a plurality of church leaders, commonly called “elders,” “overseers,” or “shepherds.” In addition, deacons were appointed to meet various needs in the local church. As early as c. A.D. 50, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders . . . in each church” (Acts 14:23). A decade later, Titus was instructed to “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). Paul’s letter to the Philippians is addressed to the “overseers and deacons” at Philippi (Php 1:1), and the qualifications for overseers and deacons are set out in 1Tim 3.

ELDERS

The synonymous use of “elders,” “overseers,” and “shepherds” is widely accepted today. Three primary New Testament references can be cited:

- Acts 20:17,28: “Paul sent to Ephesus for the *elders* of the church. . . . Keep watch over . . . the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*. Be *shepherds* . . .”
- Titus 1:5-7: “appoint *elders* An *elder* must Since an *overseer* . . .” (qualifications are the same as those for overseers in 1Tim 3:1-7)
- 1Pe 5:1-2: “To the *elders* Be *shepherds* . . . , serving as *overseers* . . .”

“Elder” refers to a stage of life, significant experience of life in general and of Christian discipleship in particular, and commensurate status in the church. “Overseer” refers to the function of giving oversight to the entire church. “Shepherd” indicates the pastoral care given to members of the church (Eph 4:11-12).

Elders have authority to lead (1Thess 5:12; 1Ti 5:17; He 13:17) but are also expected to be an example to the congregation (1Pe 5:3).

As shepherds of the flock, the elders collectively share the responsibility for overseeing the teaching and discipling ministries of the church, pursuing the goal of making disciples of Christ and helping the church towards maturity.

The qualifications of an elder listed in 1Tim 3:1-7 are as follows:

¹ Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, ³ not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. ⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?) ⁶ He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. ⁷ He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap.

To this we must add Paul’s words in Titus 1:6-9:

⁶ An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. ⁷ Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁸ Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. ⁹ He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.

DEACONS

The deacons assist the elders by assuming responsibility for overseeing various facilities and specific areas of the church's life and ministry.

The qualifications of a deacon listed in 1Tim 3:8-12 are as follows:

⁸ Deacons, likewise, are to be men worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. ⁹ They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. ¹⁰ They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons. ¹¹ In the same way, their wives (*or, "the women"*) are to be women worthy of respect, not malicious talkers but temperate and trustworthy in everything. ¹² A deacon must be the husband of but one wife and must manage his children and his household well.

CONCLUSION

In the light of the above, candidates for the role of elder or deacon are interviewed to review their character, experience, spirituality and gifting for the role, and their ability to work well as a member of the leadership team. Suitable candidates are then brought to the church meeting to seek election.

The appointment of elders and deacons is an important part of the life of our church, and all members are urged to give this matter prayerful consideration.