

# CHRISTIAN ELDERS

**“Those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”**



What you should know about elders,  
about their training, their ministry, their appointment, their qualifications.

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## **1) What does the Bible have to say on the subject of training for elders?**

It is not easy to find anything in the Word that can be appealed to specifically. 2 Timothy 2:15 used to be quoted from the KJV to prove and emphasize the need for the Lord's servants to have a formal training, like seminary. The verse says: “**Study** to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth”. However, four centuries ago, when this was put together in England, the verb “to study” would be used in a much broader sense than it is nowadays. Its meaning was: “to wholeheartedly give yourself to a task”. Accordingly, the NKJV has: “**Be diligent**”.

Paul was writing to a church-planter, not to an elder or pastor. Timothy had had no formal training, as we would think of it in today's terms, and Paul was not telling him to now go in for anything of the sort. He was encouraging Timothy in his ministry of the Word to be careful that his “furrows” be straight ones, so that, accordingly, he might be approved (as God's worker). With crooked furrows he could not be ‘approved’, and would be ‘ashamed’.

A point may be made about the schools of the prophets, about John the Baptist and his disciples, about the Lord and his disciples, training them for three years. Paul could also be mentioned, training Timothy, Titus, Silas and others. But none of such periods of training, mentioned in the Word, focused on elders or on pastors. However, it certainly becomes clear that “training” is a Biblical concept, though a very different affair from what it usually is in our day. The training was always practical, but in balance with the spoken teaching, which illuminated and undergirded the experience in the field.

Biblical training for biblical ministries can be likened to the training given to a person going in for a driving license. The theory he gets is important, but means little until he sits at the wheel of the car and has to figure out actual traffic situations. It is then that the instructor is able to get the meaning of signs and the do's and don'ts to sink in, so that the would-be driver will never forget them. His attitude, his insight, his behavior all change accordingly. It is the way Jesus taught the disciples. It is also the way God's servants must be carefully coached and trained today.

## **2) The elders' ministry and authority are purely spiritual**

The church is not a human institution or organization. The Bible places much emphasis on it being the “Body of Christ”, and on it being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and

on the fact that absolutely *all* the members of that body (i.e. *all* believers) have some gift and ministry for up-building (Eph. 4). All these gifts and ministries, however, are not acquired and perfected by way of human intelligence, ability, talent, techniques, degree studies, etc. They are administered by the Holy Spirit himself, who operates in perfect harmony with the Lord Jesus, who is in the midst of the gatherings of his own (Mt. 18:20).

1 Corinthians 14 gives a lot of information about the meetings of the saints. It speaks repeatedly about the need for revelation, prayer and edification *in* them, *among* them, *through* them. In other words, while the character of their meetings should be truly natural, not artificial, at the same time, with Christ himself in the midst, the supernatural – the spiritual - character of their gatherings is undeniable.



Were there elders in Corinth? There probably were, but they are nowhere mentioned in this chapter, nor anywhere else. In our days that would constitute an unpardonable oversight by the apostle – just imagine, ignoring completely the leadership of the Corinthian congregations! It certainly shows us that their ministry needed no limelight, or even any public recognition from the outside world.

The word for “elder”, i.e. in sync with the Lord’s Ekklesia, occurs just eight times in the epistles: 4x mentioned by Paul, 1x by James and 3x by Peter. Paul only mentions the word ‘elder’ when he writes to two of his co-workers - 1 Timothy 4 and 5 (2x) and Titus 1 - never in any epistle to a congregation, although he does mention “overseers” in Philippians 1:1. Then, James 5 mentions them (1x) and 1 Peter 5 (3x). Though these passages certainly imply the need for thorough preparation, there is no indication that this translated into formal (theological) training.

An elder must be “apt to teach” (even though not necessarily in public), but, again, this is not a reference to him passing on teachings acquired while in seminary or something similar. In other words, he passes on, as the Lord “gives him utterance”, what he has learned in the “school” - in the discipline - of his Master. As we know from John 14-16, the Holy Spirit is the One who continually teaches every believer.

Let us just highlight what Peter has to say to the elders: ***“The elders who are among you I exhort...: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon him, for He cares for you”*** (NKJV).

Elders, says Peter, enter into their responsibilities...

a) ***“Not by compulsion!”*** - There is no human scheming or persuasion involved - no heredity and no orders from a hierarchy. Their “will” has been surrendered to the Lord’s “will”, and they simply and trustingly (i.e. “willingly”) obey him. We recommend

for your reading a modern illustration, which is both apt and thrilling:

<http://ntmu.net/?p=202>

b) ***“Not for dishonest gain!”*** – If there is any thought of material gain or ‘perks’, such gain becomes “dishonest gain”! There **must be** “eagerness”, the apostle says, but it is the eagerness of faith - to just be an instrument - for blessing and up-building in God’s hand.

c) ***“Not as being lords over those entrusted to them!”*** – One keyword is “over”. A “lord” is “over”, but the elders are servants “among”. Notice how the elders/shepherds are **among** the flock (verse 1), while the flock is **among** the elders (2). They are fully integrated, and the elders too are “submissive to one another” - whether the “another” is an elder or not. It is the only way to be “examples to the flock”, leading all to humble themselves ***“under the mighty hand of God”***.

### 3) Appointing NT elders

To be as clear as possible as to the identity of **elders**, there are two passages that show us that **elders** (presbyters) are at once **overseers** (bishops) and **shepherds** (pastors) of the flock. One is Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28), the other is found in Peter’s address to elders everywhere (1 P. 5:1-2). Whereas the word “**elder**” indicates their spiritual maturity, “**overseer**” and “**shepherd**” give a succinct idea of what their spiritual ministry is all about.

The first congregational elders we come across in the NT (after reading a lot about Israel’s elders) are the Jerusalem elders mentioned in Acts 11:30. Suddenly we find them there, and there is nothing that tells us how they were appointed. James stood out among them, being the Lord’s half-brother, but we do not know the names of any others (Acts 15:13; 21:18). Somehow the Holy Spirit didn’t think it necessary to give us certain details. However, we are told about the appointment of the first deacons in Acts 6, and we have no reason to think that the way elders were appointed would be basically different.

Then, in 14:23, we find missionaries Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in the Galatian congregations; and that one verse gives important information. Modern practice has influenced certain translations of this verse, but Young’s Literal Translation puts it this way: ***“And having appointed to them by vote elders in every assembly, having prayed with fastings, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed”***. Four things must become clear - directly or by implication:

a) The special times of prayer, as a congregation, were in accordance with the Lord’s principles, laid down in Matthew 18:19-20.

b) These prayer times preceded both the appointing and the commending!

c) Here and elsewhere it becomes clear that from the outset more than one elder was needed and appointed in every congregation.

d) Men from other congregations, whether near or far, cannot be “candidates” – the elders must be from the very congregation where they are to serve.

The Holy Spirit involves the whole congregation, wanting to give unanimity as the believers seek his will and submit to it. There may not be immediate unanimity on an issue like this. Yet the whole congregation needs to have assurance from the Lord as to who are the right men - chosen by him. Since unanimity is such an important principle, there **must** be insistence in prayer until every heart is clear about his will (Lk. 11:5-13; Phil. 1:27; 2:1-2).

We do well to remember that our own heart always tends to deceive us (Jer. 17:9-10). We need to know what is in the Lord's heart. What was it the Lord told Samuel when he needed to know who was to be anointed as the new king over Israel? ***"The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."*** Even a man like Samuel had to come to grips with this. He too found that becoming really sure about God's choice may involve a long process (1 Sam. 16).

#### 4) What are the qualifications required to be an elder?

The congregation is in need of elders and the believers look to God in prayer. So, as they pray, what qualifications must be kept in mind? The relevant passages (which must be analyzed carefully) are the following: Acts 20:17-35; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:7, 17 and 1 Peter 5:1-11.

For a believer to be an elder in a local congregation, we find there are three basic requirements that must be met. They are found especially in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:

**spiritual maturity** (consistent growth),

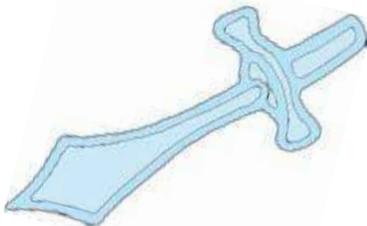
**spiritual testimony** (his life not contradicting his profession), and

the **spiritual gifts** needed for breeding, feeding and leading the flock.

For details of these three basic requirements, see the chart below. If, in the spiritual experience of a brother, there is a good deal lacking as regards to any of the three, that brother is **not** qualified to be an elder.

There is no fourth requirement of a certain academic standard that must be adhered to. That non-existent 4<sup>th</sup> requirement has, however, become requirement number 1 for the modern "pastor". If he is to feed the sheep, he must have lots of intellectual, academic stuff under his belt. So he concentrates on that during four or more years... What are the effects to be expected? He is sidetracked from the really important **spiritual** training - so desperately needed if he is to be useful in the Master's hand.

Consequently, what do we find? Many modern pastors - men who may be rated intellectual giants - are, in fact, no more than dwarfs when it comes to the spiritual values and realities! In the heat of the spiritual conflict of 2 Corinthians 10 and Ephesians 6 their nicely fitting sets of doctrines and procedures will not deflect the enemy's fiery darts, leave alone defeat him. They haven't really learned how to wield the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit - the word of God - and do battle on their knees...



The Son of Man, with his perfect knowledge of the spiritual realities, still is our supreme example, showing us how to confront the "prince of the world". He, the "LOGOS" - the "Word of God", knew how to make faultless use of the "word of God", i.e. of the sword of the Spirit, as He rebuffed all Satan's advances with his ***"It is written...!"*** The accounts in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 show us that even a physically weak condition need not afford the enemy the opportunity he is looking for.

Paul's experience also is very enlightening: ***"And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me,***

*‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness’. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Co. 12:7-10).*

Biblical Qualification(s)	Responsibility	Scriptural Reference(s)
Must be Above Reproach (blameless)	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6 / 1Tim. 3:9-10
Must be The Husband Of One Wife	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6 / 1Tim. 3:12
Must be Temperate (sober minded)	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7 / 1Tim. 3:8
Must be Prudent (self-controlled)	Elder	1Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8
Must be Respectable	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:2 / 1Tim. 3:8
Must be Hospitable	Elder	1Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8
Must be Able To Teach	Elder	1Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9
Not Addicted to Wine (drunkenness)	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7 / 1Tim. 3:8
Not Pugnacious (violent), but Gentle	Elder	1Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7
Not Quarrelsome (uncontentious)	Elder	1Tim. 3:3
Not A Lover Of Money (not greedy)	Elder	1Tim. 3:3
Manages His Own Household Well	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:4 / 1Tim. 3:12
His Children Obey Him	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:4-5; Titus 1:6 / 1Tim. 3:12
Not A Recent Convert	Elder	1Tim. 3:6
A Good Reputation With Outsiders	Elder	1Tim. 3:7
Does Not Pursue Dishonest Gain	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:8 / Titus 1:7
Not Two-Tongued (must be sincere)	Deacon	1Tim. 3:8
Must Have Children Who Believe	Elder	Titus 1:6
Not Overbearing	Elder	Titus 1:7
Not Quick-Tempered	Elder	Titus 1:7
Loves What Is Good	Elder	Titus 1:8
Must Be Upright, Holy	Elder	Titus 1:8
Must Be Disciplined	Elder	Titus 1:8
Must Be Tested	Deacon	1Tim. 3:10
<b>Likewise...</b> Wives Must be Dignified	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:11
Wives Must Not be Malicious Gossips	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:11
Wives Must be Temperate	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:11
Wives Must be Faithful in All Things	Elder / Deacon	1Tim. 3:11

## 5) The enabling

The prophet Zechariah had a message of great encouragement for Zerubbabel (Zech. 4). Both this descendant of David and Joshua, the high priest, functioned as the “elders” of Israel, but there was much to discourage them in their super-human task of reestablishing God’s people in Jerusalem and in their own land after the Babylonian captivity, and of rebuilding the Temple. Zechariah was to tell them: **“Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit...!”** At the same time a beautiful illustration is given. Being men of God, they are supernaturally supplied and enabled with golden olive oil - a picture of the Holy Spirit.

Could it be different today among the Lord's people? There are those who think of the church in terms of an "organization" that should run like a well-oiled machine - not so much as an "organism" (i.e., the Lord's body). Human talent is employed to achieve this, much the same as in a business company, right up to the "hiring" of the "CEO", the "pastor" who is hired and expected to do the job. There must be special buildings, pulpits, vestments, choirs, worship-leaders, music, a preacher who is eloquent, and so much more... All these "assets" heavily rely on human talent, and they are looked upon as essential...

The utter simplicity of Matthew 18:20 is frowned on as impractical... Yet Psalm 133 tells us that it is **there** where the precious 'anointing' oil comes down and where the Lord commands his blessing! Ephesians 4, which has much to say about the proper functioning of the congregation, tells us that the spiritual gifts are distributed by the risen and victorious Lord, the Head of the Body. "***To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift***" (4:7).

The contrast with human talent and ability could not be greater! "***Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit...***" (Mt. 7). If the believer, any believer, is to serve his Lord, then God's spiritual gifts to him or her (just as given to all the members of the Body of Christ) are truly indispensable. A passage that majors in the spiritual gifts in the Body of Christ is found in Romans 12, where a plethora of seven gifts are mentioned specifically.

Since no believer can lay claim to having **all** the spiritual gifts, it follows that a plurality of elders in any congregation is indeed no luxury... The scriptural precedents of such plurality certainly leave no doubt. The team of elders, then, must be very conscious of their need to seek the Lord about their own and each other's gifts. A proper understanding and exercise of these is crucial for their service.

***"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:***

- a) ***if prophecy, in proportion to our faith;***
- b) ***if service, in our serving;***
- c) ***the one who teaches, in his teaching;***
- d) ***the one who exhorts, in his exhortation;***
- e) ***the one who contributes, in generosity;***
- f) ***the one who leads, with zeal;***
- g) ***the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness"*** (ESV).



### 6) Paul's training – an example

Some, of course, will argue that the apostle Paul was a first class intellectual, having had a first-class, theological training, “at the feet of Gamaliel”. It is convenient, at this point, to remember two things. First: his thorough training certainly helped to shape him, but not into a follower of the Messiah, rather into a fanatical persecutor of the Messiah, as Jesus himself reproached him on the road to Damascus. Second: how did Paul himself evaluate all he had acquired at that time? This is what he testified: *“What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ...”* (Phil. 3).

God undoubtedly used Paul's trained mind and the fact that so much of the Old Testament had been firmly registered there, but it did have to “fall into the ground and die” (see below), before it could be a useful factor in bringing forth spiritual fruit.

It is not always realized that Paul did undergo another training – i.e. once he had come to be a follower of the Messiah. Some details that Luke missed out in his account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9 are filled in by Paul himself in Galatians 1:15-24. There were three years between his conversion to Christ and his leaving Damascus - by means of a large basket, let down from the city wall - and subsequent visit to Jerusalem. During much of those three years Paul was in ‘Arabia’, and he implies that, rather than “conferring with flesh and blood”, he learned at the feet of the Messiah himself, with “kneeology” being a main subject.

After that, of course, he never stopped learning. Following the Arabian training, he continued preaching in Damascus, then was in Jerusalem for 2 weeks and later was found “preaching the faith” in Syria (where Antioch was) and Cilicia (where his own city of Tarsus was). Barnabas found him there and took him to Antioch, where, for a whole year, both of them were wonderfully used in a teaching ministry (Acts 11:25-26).

There is nothing wrong with intellectual knowledge, but it must be strictly secondary to the true, the spiritual knowledge. It is what Peter says, *“Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2 P. 3:18). That growing knowledge must be of the person of Christ primarily. The more intimately we get to know *him*, the

more we also “grow in his grace”. The more we get to experience his abundant grace in everyday situations, the more we also grow in that ‘knowledge’ of HIM. The two go together.

## 7) The state of seminaries in general

A friend with great experience in the academic world, incl. seminaries, wrote just recently: “Philosophy and psychology answer valid human questions from a secular perspective, and in doing so come to many false conclusions. These types of thinking are not just influencing college students but are increasingly found in the church itself. In this way deceptions that are rooted in both atheism and pantheism are affecting believers and gradually undermining their faith life!” – *L. Chavady*.

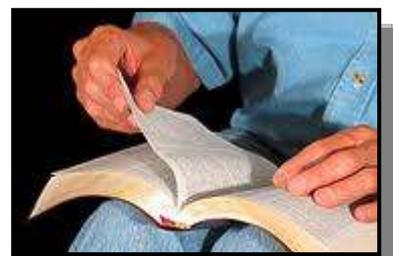
On one occasion we were able to interview the director of a famous seminary and some of his students. We asked about the studies given. We were told about the theological, philosophical and psychological studies. Then we asked about the Bible, and the answer was they did not do Bible study... This may be an extreme case; nevertheless, it makes you wonder, “What kind of men are being turned out by the seminaries?”

In the Bible we find a Diotrephes (3 Jn.), and, of course, he would hardly have been at seminary, but it may be feared that the modern seminaries in general are greatly contributing to the modern Diotrephes spirit and his demeanor of superiority. He is a professional, he is clergy – Reverend so-and-so – and he also is the “Pastor”! All the others are simply the flock, the “laity”. It is what the churches have come to expect; it has become normal and acceptable to them.

How many great minds - Christian minds - go for the Babel-label: “let us make a name for ourselves”, i.e. a name with great sounding titles after it. But the LORD said “no” to the Babel thing. Jesus said: ***“Do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*** The Greek word, here translated “teacher”, is “καθηγητης”. According to W.E. Vine it means “properly a guide”, and “denotes a master, a teacher”. Our modern world, also the “Christian” world, has fallen for the word “Doctor”, which is Latin and likewise means “teacher”. Jesus commands his disciples to be distinctly different from the would-be religious world around them. So..., what are we going to do with our (theological) “doctorates”, when there is this strict prohibition to be called “Doctor” (“Dr.”), i.e. “Teacher”? Or “Reverend” for that matter?

## 8) How is an elder trained?

In “Dear Pastor...” under “Answers for Workers”, at < <http://ntmu.net/?p=376> >, there is an appendix that speaks about the “angels” of Revelation 1-3, i.e. the messengers sent by the churches to the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos. These men would in all probability include elders, though obviously not all of them as faithful as they should be. These three chapters of Revelation, if studied closely, shed interesting light on the way the Lord views local congregations with their ongoing ministries, ups-and-downs, victories, failures. Much of the way in which the Lord addresses the congregations, and their conditions, reflects on the brethren in positions of leadership among them, i.e. on their elders.



What is the all important thing for the Lord's messengers, whether elders or not? If they are in his right hand, as He says (1:20; 2:1), it would imply they are intimately acquainted with the movements of that hand (cf. Ps. 123); they are not out of sync; in other words, they are true **men of prayer and the Word** (cf. Acts 6:4), who do not depend on any perceived "talents" – their own or those of others.

In John 12:24-26, the Lord speaks about his own and his servants' fruitfulness. He teaches his disciples one foundational lesson, which is on *how to bear fruit*. So how is fruit born? Only by laying down one's life, i.e. "***fall into the ground as the grain of wheat, and die!***" A brother who "desires" to be an overseer, as 1 Timothy 3:1 has it, but is not prepared to face John 12:24-26, may still have his head stuffed with good things, and he may have obvious talents for leadership, he may also be an eloquent speaker, but if he is not willing to "fall into the ground as the grain of wheat, and die", he will basically remain fruitless! His spiritual life and development are stunted.

Spiritual gifts may be there, yet with an obvious, or not so obvious, lack in the other two areas - of maturity and testimony - he could **not** be chosen and appointed as an elder. Why not? As he refuses "to fall into the ground and die", his 'fruit' can never be spiritual. It is produced by *him* and for his own glory, not for God's glory. At the same time, the saints are not being edified. He may well be a clever brother who may speak wise words, come to timely decisions, have some good ideas, and be loved by the people, yet all this may be produced by the "flesh", often so very creative, and not by the Holy Spirit. He is a "lone star" that gives some light, but nothing like the seven stars in the Lord's right hand.

Everybody is different. The time it takes to mature in Christ and discover the gifts He has given may also vary a lot from believer to believer. It took Moses 40 years... But the elders appointed through the ministry of Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14 had had no more than 2 years at the most since their conversion, although it is likely that most of them were Jews, already well acquainted with the Scriptures before they heard about the coming of the Messiah.

Having said all this, elders, or elders-to-be, who have the time and opportunity, and access to local seminary level studies (i.e. at a study centre of truly Biblical values), and whose responsibilities in their congregation would not suffer by going in for this, might very profitably learn more about useful subjects like e.g. Bible Survey, Hermeneutics, Church-history, Spiritual Counseling and Therapy (as in contrast to Psychology), NT Greek, Heresies – old and modern, etc.

***"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another..."*** (Col. 3:16).

**"If anyone serves me, let him follow me;  
and where I am, there my servant will be also.  
If anyone serves me, him my Father will honor."**

Juan 12:26