What Does It Take to Be an Elder?

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The Bible says that serving as an elder in the Church of God is a very noble thing to do (1 Timothy 3:1). In fact, we learn that serving in this special capacity is dear to God's heart and it will actually receive its own special reward in heaven in the form of a "crown of glory that will never fade away" (1 Peter 5:4, NIV). I must confess, sometimes at the end of a 'bad day at the office', I remind myself of this promise and it rejuvenates me with fresh zeal for the task. That said, what exactly does it take to be an elder in God's Church?

The Attitude of an Elder

Peter's road to eldership was paved with many, shall we say, 'speed bumps' along the way. The 'pastor's heart' did not seem to come naturally to him. In a particularly poignant moment when Jesus restored Peter to his calling on the beach, Jesus asked him the heart-wrenching question, "Simon do you love me?" and then He gave him the charge, "Feed my sheep" (John 21:17, NIV). And yet in the book of 1 Peter we find Peter giving his appeal, "as a fellow elder", to the other elders, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (1 Peter 5:1-2, NIV). It is a remarkable story. So let's look at what Peter has to say on the topic of eldership.

a. An Eager, Willing Heart

The first issue that Peter addresses is an issue of the heart that has to do with motivation. Elders are to care for God's people with a willing, eager heart, not from a sense of begrudging duty (1 Peter 5:2). Caring for people every day gets messy and can sometimes be quite exhausting. It is so easy to lose sight of the honour and privilege of being entrusted with God's precious children.

As a parent, you have to know that if I entrust you with the care of my little girl, I am entrusting you with the most precious thing I possess! With God, it is no different. It is a massive honour to be given the care of God's children, so we dare not slip into an attitude of doing it begrudgingly.

b. Not for Selfish Gain but Out of a Desire to Serve Others

Unfortunately, pastoring has become a very respectable 'profession' in many parts of the world, especially here in Africa. It is often thought of as a viable option for earning a quick buck. But Peter warns us that we do not represent Jesus, the 'Chief Shepherd', if we adopt a self-serving attitude (1 Peter 5:2).

In fact, Jesus said about Himself, "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28, NIV). Some of the harshest words in the Bible are reserved for self-serving shepherds. In Ezekiel 34, we read a strong judgment of God against those shepherds who "cared for themselves rather than for my flock" (v. 8). God said that because of this, "I will require My flock from their hand" (v. 10). These are very ominous-sounding words indeed.

Those imposters who regularly feature in the news for the abuses that they have carried out in the name of God will have to give an account before God for their actions, and it will be a dreadful day.

The pastor in the church is the greatest servant in all the congregation. Jesus said it should be so. While the function of an elder might be different, and they are not responsible for performing every task that needs doing, the attitude of the pastor should always be to serve others. We should not consider any job to be 'beneath us', as Jesus demonstrated by washing His disciple's feet.

c. Not 'Lording It Over' but Setting An Example

The role of eldership does come with much authority, but if that authority is motivated by self-interest or harsh and domineering, then it quickly becomes an abuse of authority (see 1 Peter 5:3 and Ezekiel 4:4). Christ Himself is not always 'meek and mild', but in all things He is an example of godliness, integrity and self-sacrificial love.

In the same way, elders in the church exercise genuine authority, but it is always in the interests and for the good of others, not themselves. The saints in your church should not simply be intimidated into obedience but inspired to follow because they see your example of faith.

What Qualifies an Elder?

When we turn to Scripture to discover what qualifies a man for eldership, we notice a very curious thing. Almost all the requirements have to do with his character! (1 Timothy 3:1-5).

a. Gifting vs Character

The one pre-requisite attribute for eldership that is not related to character is that he must "be able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:1). This is fundamental to his responsibility to "feed the sheep". So why is character so important? It is because an elder is called to be an example to imitate, as much as anything else. It is not enough for him to simply preach well on a Sunday. Is he worthy of being followed from Monday till Saturday? What is his work ethic? Is he a good father and husband? Is he responsible with his money? Is he faithful in his relationship with God?

It is one of the great tragedies of the modern church (or perhaps it is age–old) that elders are often hastily appointed because of their charismatic leadership abilities. But the real cost of this mistake is when their lack of spiritual maturity causes harm to the saints through abuse or a spectacular moral failure.

b. Spiritual Maturity vs Education

Another common misperception about elders is that they must be highly educated. In fact, one of the most remarkable things about the very first elders (Peter and John) was that they were "uneducated, common men" (Acts 14:13).

True wisdom is about godliness, not simply an accumulation of knowledge. The men who led the early church were men who had been discipled well and were qualified on the basis of the fruit of their lives.

c. Appointed by God vs Self-Appointed

The pattern for raising leaders in Scripture is that there is a collective witness within the church, by the Spirit, of what God has done when He sets people apart to lead His people.

Self-appointed leaders are acting in a different spirit to that of Christ. Whereas Christ was 'lifted up' by the Father, Satan grasped for a position of authority that God had not assigned to him.

Eldership is a calling which comes first from God, and then that call is recognised by the church

community. It cannot simply be an internal sense of calling. If the calling is truly of God, that calling must be affirmed by the church community as well and made effective by the laying on of hands.

A Great Need for Godly Elders

Jesus said that in the end times there would be an increase in wickedness and an increase in deception (Matthew 24:11–12). So there has perhaps never been a greater need for godly men to shepherd God's people with wisdom, integrity and genuine, self-sacrificial love. I pray the Lord will raise up a generation of pastors who would boldly lead God's people and lay down their lives for the protection and well-being of God's precious children.