



Nature and Function of an Elder

What is the task of the elder? Fortunately, the Scripture is not silent concerning the specified functions that characterize the nature of the office of elder. Note as well, these are shared areas of ministry functions.

- 1) **To oversee or rule well** (I Thess 5:12; I Tim 3:1; I Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17) The first function of an elder is to direct the affairs of the church (cf. I Tim 5:17). In a mutual-ministry approach, the shared responsibility of elder rule will minimize individual weaknesses and maximize strengths. Therefore, the proper administration of the church rests with the elders. The Elder Board may choose to delegate their responsibilities to the church staff, but the authority for the leadership of the church lies with the overseers.
- 2) **To shepherd the flock of God** (Acts 20:28; I Pet 5:2) A major function of elders is to shepherd the church. "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care..." (I Pet 5:2a NIV). The imagery of shepherding suggests tender care, protection, and feeding. These principles lie at the heart of the shepherd-minister who would serve as an elder. They form a Biblical framework for effective ministry.
- 3) **To be an example** (I Pet 5:3-5; Heb 13:7) In emphasizing this point, the writer of Hebrews noted the function in this way: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7 NIV). Elders cannot lead further into spiritual things than they have personally gone. Each elder within God's church must have the attitude of the Apostle Paul: "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ." (I Cor 11:1).
- 4) **To guard right doctrine** (I Tim 3:2; Titus 1:9) A critical ingredient to effective overseeing is the elder's command of Scripture. He is to be one who "...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." (Titus 1:9 NIV). Doctrinal purity is a prerequisite to spiritual health and vitality. Elders are charged with the task of maintaining the church on solid, Biblical ground.
- 5) **To confront and initiate discipline when necessary** (Matt 18:15-20; Gal 6:1-2; 2 Thess 3:14-15; see also I Thess 5:12) If the tasks of careful oversight and doctrinal purity are taken seriously, then a proper administration of church discipline will naturally follow. Spiritual discipline is never easy, but it is commanded. The elders must assume their responsibility for the care of the church. No wonder, then, that the local body of believers is encouraged in the following way: "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they

keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you" (Heb 13:17 NIV).

- 6) **To minister to the sick (or weak) and needy** (Jas 5:14-15; I Tim 5:3-16; compare also God's concern for the needy in Ps 12:5; 69:33; et al.; see also "hospitable" in I Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:8) A part of the elders' responsibility is to shepherd those in need. While there is debate as to whether the "sick" of James 5 are physically sick or spiritually weak, one definite principle is sure; the elders are to evidence their concern for those who are in need by faithful prayer. For certain, an elder's ministry reaches out to those in need.
- 7) **To appoint and commission leadership** (I Tim 5:22; I Tim 4:14; compare with Eph 4:11-12ff) As elders oversee and shepherd the church, they will, of necessity, be equipping the saints for the work of the ministry. Not only do elders care for the administrative organization of the church, but they are responsible for the raising up of new leadership as well. Such an ongoing task requires the utmost spiritual discernment and care.

Summary: Although the New Testament is flexible and uses interchangeably elder, overseer, and shepherd, the best description of the office of church leadership is elder. Therefore, Fellowship has a Board of Elders. Additionally, we have noted the necessity for a plurality of elders. Our Biblical conviction is that the Bible supports mutuality of ministry and plurality of leadership. Seven specific ministry functions are stated and briefly defined. These Biblical functions instruct the type of ministry the elder is to have.

Please Note: The Elders of Fellowship have rewritten the church's "bylaws" (1988). A distinction between the Elder Board and Shepherding Elders was made. The Elder Board's responsibility is to set the spiritual, theological, and philosophical direction of the church. Their role and function has been described above. Shepherding Elders are men who are Biblically qualified for the office, have been recognized by the church body, and function in the "Shepherding Elder Ministry" as described by the Board of Elders. These men focus on the shepherding rather than overseeing function. They are extensions of the Elder Board, but do not meet to set policy or direction.