

Eldership

Grace Church Position Papers

What is the Biblical Idea Behind Eldership?

Before ascending to heaven and physically departing from his followers, Jesus never explicitly prescribed a structure of leadership for the church. He did, however, establish his closest followers, the apostles, as those with the responsibility to lead and shepherd the church in the time directly following his ascension. The apostles were then led by the Holy Spirit to plant local churches and delegate the authority needed for leadership and shepherding to credible, faithful members of those congregations. Much of what we believe about the oversight and governance of the local church is derived directly from the earliest dealings between the apostles and the local churches that they had established and helped sustain.

The New Testament shows that as the early church began to grow and spread throughout the world, the apostles delegated authority and obligation of leadership to a group of trustworthy men within each local church congregation (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5). The Bible refers to men who are raised up by the Holy Spirit and appointed to this official position of church oversight as **elders**.¹

The exemplary lives and leadership of qualified, honorable men are two of God's main ways of promoting the gospel in the church. We believe that the biblical concept of the local church is inseparable from the institution of eldership. The well-being of the people, teaching, and ministry of the church are all vitally connected to the leadership of the church's elders. Every church needs to recognize and appoint highly credible men to this role who can effectively fulfill the role of elder while living a compelling life of integrity that puts the gospel on display both publicly and privately.

What is the Function of A Church Elder?

The Bible describes eldership as the primary office of responsibility and leadership within the local church; the core functions of the office are the teaching of God's Word and the exercising of authority in organizational oversight.² The apostle Paul's address to the first church elders at Ephesus gives, in summary form, the charge entrusted to these men:

“So guard yourselves and God's people. Feed and shepherd God's flock—his church, purchased with his own blood—over which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as elders.”

– Acts 20:28

Our elders are a small group of mature, qualified Christ-followers who are established by the Holy Spirit as those accountable to “guard,” “feed,” and “shepherd” the people

of the church and lead them by living lives exemplary of the gospel.³ Practically, this means they must guard doctrine (truth) and guard people who try to practice the truth. They are responsible for holding out God's Word, helping church members find community where they can pursue Christ, be encouraged, grow in godliness, and learn to live wisely. Elders must also continually guard the leadership within the church to make sure the church is always an environment in which these things are happening.

In turn, the non-elder members of the church are charged with the responsibility to submit themselves under the leading and teaching of the elder group, knowing that their authority has been given by God and they have been appointed to their role for the building up of the body of Christ.⁴ We all live under the shade our elders create, and the Scriptures are clear that believers must be under the authority of local church elders.

The Elders' Function Cannot be Separated from Their Character

The extent to which elders can effectively lead other believers toward a life of Godward obedience depends entirely on the degree to which they have modeled the Gospel with their own lives. The spiritual health of the church's leadership core will profoundly impact the rest of the church.

Therefore, each elder must be distinguished by a life of integrity and credibility that compels others to follow and obey their leading toward the church's overall mission. In fact, when the apostle Paul lists the qualifications for pastors and elders, the overarching requirement is a life that is “above reproach” (1 Timothy 3:1-7). The idea is that there should be nothing in the man's life that you can lay hold of that would disqualify him or discredit his integrity. The role of elder does not call for a perfect person, but for someone who is an ideal model of the Christian life; the duties of eldership demand a Christian character marked by maturity and stability, held up by a compelling home life and confirmed by a solid public reputation.⁵

Elders at Grace Church

Grace Church is an elder-led church, overseen by a group of governing elders and a number of shepherding elders who together fulfill the role described above as the guiding leaders of the church's development and direction. These men have been identified at various times in the church's history as men who meet the biblical qualifications for eldership and live compelling and credible lives worth following toward Christlikeness. We believe the terms “pastor” and “elder” are



the same office in the Bible, therefore all of our elders are pastors and all of our pastors are elders.

We believe that unity amongst the governing elders is absolutely critical for wisely making bold decisions that are in line with the will of God and aimed at furthering the work God is doing in and through our faith family. The main responsibilities of the governing elders of Grace Church as designated for this local church body are to:

- Guard the mission of the church
- Pray for specific physical needs (see James 5:14)
- Exercise church discipline
- Make big decisions (e.g. building projects, hiring teaching pastors)
- Oversee the staff
- Approve the budget
- Maintain the credibility of the church
- Shepherd one another

Functionally, the governing elders of Grace Church lead by way of plurality and consensus in making decisions; decisions are made only when all governing elders come to agreement about the direction that needs to be taken. There is no one governing elder who has more or less authority than another. This means that there is no senior pastor and all governing elders function with equality. If there is not a consensus on an issue, the decision will be tabled for a time as the governing elders commit to more discussion, prayer, and leading by the Holy Spirit. These men are committed to honesty and transparency as they listen to God for what he wants to do in our church, deliberate over what it may mean for our context, then respond in faithful leadership over the flock they've been entrusted with—knowing that ultimately, they are accountable to God for the role they serve in shepherding the people of Grace Church.⁷

The shepherding elders of Grace Church are on the staff of one of our campuses or ministries, meeting the needs of and shepherding the members for whom they are responsible.

Why We Don't Have A Senior Pastor

Grace acknowledges that the ultimate head of the Church is Jesus (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15) and operates by what is called an “elder-led” model. This means that instead of having a senior pastor who makes most, if not all, of the decisions for the church, we have a group of men who decide matters by a consensus. These men are chosen by the current governing

elder board based on their character and gifting as it is spelled out in Scripture (I Timothy 3 and Titus 1). The mandate for elders in church leadership is stated in Ephesians 4:1 and Acts 20:28. In addition, Grace is not what is typically known as a “congregational” church. This means that instead of the entire church body voting to make decisions, we have delegated that authority to a chosen few governing elders.

As the saying goes, there is strength in numbers. The governing elder board at Grace Church is not governed over by a senior pastor. The board only makes decisions after full agreement from every member. Roles and responsibilities do come into play. Board members are given influence in diverse places such as teaching and finance, but no one elder is given more power than any other.

This system also creates an atmosphere of spiritual accountability for those shouldering the biggest responsibilities at Grace Church. Governing elders are free to call each other out and challenge opinions without fear of being overrun by a tyrannical leader. An even playing field allows for the flourishing of the highest level of spiritual accountability and Godly leadership that can be modeled in church government. Through this model, Grace's leadership can be most effective. No one is seeking to hold onto a position of power, but instead all are freed to labor alongside one another in loving, communal plurality.

Ultimately, leadership can make or break the local church. Grace seeks to empower the local body through a system of leadership that is both biblical and strategic. By stripping away the senior pastor role, the weight of responsibility is carried through a plurality of elders. The equality here diffuses a tendency towards pride and power, opening the gates for genuine community through eldership. It also allows for a myriad of strengths and gifts to shape the decision making process instead of relying on one man. This environment permits our direction to be more fully focused on the glory of God through His bride, the Church.

¹ The terms elder, pastor, bishop, and overseer are used interchangeably in the New Testament.

² 1 Peter 5:2-5; Ephesians 4:11-13; Titus 1:9

³ Acts 20:28-31; 1 Peter 5:3

⁴ Ephesians 4:11-13

⁵ For a more detailed and thorough exposition of the list of qualifications for elders, please refer to “A Well Led People” (2012) and “Eldership: Credibility & Integrity in the Church” (2013).

⁶ Grace Church elders: Mike Chibbaro, Kevin Jones, Stephen Jones, Bill White, Matt Williams, Matt Gaymon, Matt Kelley, Tom Merritt

⁷ Hebrews 13:17

