

## **A Biblical Introduction to Church Eldership**

This paper is to help the community of The Gathering Ottawa prepare for the nomination of additional church Elders. It describes the role, responsibilities and requirements of Elders, providing some biblical background to our consideration of those we would nominate.

In his book, Biblical Eldership, Alexander Strauch writes, “... **the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than on other important church subjects such as the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Day, baptism or spiritual gifts. When you consider the New Testament’s characteristic avoidance of detailed regulation and church procedures (when compared with the Old Testament), the attention given to elders is amazing.**”

To begin, we require an understanding of the vocabulary used by the biblical authors in reference to leadership.

### **A. DEFINING THE TERMS**

Three nouns are used to describe the individuals who play a leadership role in the church:

#### **(i) ELDER (presbuteros)**

This is the most commonly used word to describe a biblical leader. It appears 130 times in the Old Testament and 69 times in the New Testament. Usually, the word refers to the leaders of the Jewish people. In the New Testament, the word first appears in Acts 11:30 to describe early church leaders. The passages, while not specifically describing the exact roles of elders in church leadership, usually refer instead to the quality of the individual’s character or work, such as 1 Timothy 5:17:

***“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.”***

#### **(ii) OVERSEER (episkopos)**

Sometimes translated as “bishop”, this word was originally a common designation for a variety of officials in Greek culture. It usually refers to the function of providing guardianship of spiritual oversight. 1 Timothy 3:1 says:

***“Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.”***

**(iii) SHEPHERD (poimen)**

Often used to describe the ministry of Jesus, this word is often translated as “pastor”. It usually refers to those who have a concern for the well-being of people in the church, such as in Ephesians 4:11:

***“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers...”***

In choosing the analogy of the earthly shepherd, the biblical authors are suggesting that the roles of a pastor include protecting the flock (remaining spiritually alert and courageous) (Titus 1:10-11), feeding the flock (John 21:15-19), leading the flock (using management skill, hard work, etc.), and caring for the practical needs of the flock (1 Timothy 5:3-10). A key feature of a shepherd found in scripture is a love for the Lord’s people.

As well, the nature of leadership in the early church was described by two principle Greek verbs:

**(iv) TO BE OVER (proistamenos)**

This term was used in 1 Timothy 5:17 (above) when Paul talked of the elders “ruling well”. He also uses it in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13:

***“Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work...”***

The term is also used by Paul in his letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:5) to describe how a husband is to rule and manage his household. Biblically, the term involves two functional roles. The first is to be the head of, to rule or direct. The second is to be concerned about, to care for or give aid. Basically, one role is to exercise authority while the other is to take responsibility for the welfare of those under this authority. This term was also considered by God as a spiritual gift (Romans 12:8).

**(v) TO LEAD (hegeomai)**

This term creates a similar picture of the activity of leadership as above. It is found in passages such as Hebrews 13:7, 17:

***“Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith... Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.”***

As illustrated above, this term often deals with people’s relationship and response to leadership as well.

## **B. DEFINING THE TASKS**

How then, are we to take the Bible’s use of the above terms? Is there a common denominator? Consider 1 Peter 5:1-3:

***“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ’s sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”***

All three nouns used to describe those who performed a leadership role in the New Testament church are used synonymously. This also appears in Acts 20:28:

***“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”***

It would appear that Peter, Paul and the early churches used these terms interchangeably. They were simply different words to describe the same type of people. Even in the ministry of Jesus, some of these terms were used in interchangeable and complementary ways to describe his role. 1 Peter 2:25 says:

***“For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have been returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”***

To summarize these verses, we can conclude that church leaders are elders (a person of spiritual maturity and character), who serve as overseers (a reference to the authority of leadership within the body), with the practical ministry of shepherding/pastoring (protecting, feeding, leading, and caring) the church. With reference to church leaders: the term “overseer” describes his/her position, the term “elder” describes his/her character, and the term “shepherd/pastor” describes his/her activity.

This leads us to several conclusions concerning church leadership. The first of which is that biblically, there is no distinction between an overseer, a pastor, and an elder. One who aspires to be an elder aspires to be a pastor of the congregation and nothing less.

The second conclusion that a biblical examination of leadership provides is that the role of a church leader is multifaceted—involving authority and responsibility, oversight and care. In his book, The New Reformation, Greg Ogden writes, **“So from among the whole body of Christ some are called particularly to provide oversight, rule, discipline, teaching and care.”** A leader of God’s church is intended to do a variety of things.

The third conclusion that is explicitly stated in 1 Peter 5:1-3 is that church leadership is to happen a specific way. Spiritual oversight is not to be driven by compulsion or guilt, but by an eager enthusiasm for the important task of leading the church. As well, the participation of those elders who receive a paycheck for their work should not be motivated by greed, but an eagerness to serve. Furthermore, the leaders of the church are not to function as authoritarian despots, but they are to be examples of Christian submission to God, each other and others.

### **C. DEFINING THE TEAM**

Considering the multidimensional nature of biblical church leadership, as well as the unique contributions possible by individuals’ spiritual gifts, it is no surprise that Scripture also refers to leadership being done in a team format. Strauch writes, **“The New Testament provides conclusive evidence that the pastoral oversight of apostolic churches was a team effort—not the sole responsibility of one person...It is strange that Christians have no problem accepting a plurality of deacons, but are almost irrationally frightened by a plurality of elders that is far more evident in the New Testament. Despite our fears, a plurality of leadership through a council of elders needs to be preserved just as much as a plurality of deacons”**

We can see the principle of a plurality of elders clearly modeled in scripture. Jesus commissioned a plurality of leaders in the Apostles. This example was followed by the early church in the book of Acts as well as Peter and Paul’s letters, which continually refer to a plurality of elders as the mode of leadership in local churches. Elders (plural) are exhorted to care for, teach, lead and pastor the flock. 1 Timothy 5:17 (above) clearly indicates that a team of elders ruled the church, and of that team, a subset was responsible to preach and teach.

Furthermore, in this plurality of leaders, no one elder was ever formally singled out as more important or “above” the others as churches have traditionally conceptualized the role of senior pastor. Rather, councils of biblical elders submitted to Christ and to each other mutually as a team of equals called and gifted by God to exercise authority over, and take responsibility for the flock entrusted to them.

From a practical perspective, shared leadership complements leader’s strengths, balances each other’s weaknesses and lightens the workload. It also provides much needed accountability for particularly gifted leaders, who, if left on their own, possess personality flaws and talent deficiencies that cause them and congregations considerable heartache. In Servant Leadership, Robert Greenleaf writes, **“To be a lone chief atop a pyramid is abnormal and corrupting. None of us are perfect by ourselves, and all of us need the correcting influence of close colleagues. When someone is moved**

atop a pyramid, that person no longer has colleagues, only subordinates. Even the frankest and bravest of subordinates do not talk to their boss in the same way that they talk with colleagues and equals, and normal communication patterns become warped.” Strauch echoes those sentiments when he states, “In a team leadership structure, however, different members complement one another and balance one another’s weaknesses. If one elder has a tendency to act too harshly with people, the others can temper his harshness. If some members fear confrontation with people, others can press for action. Elders who are more doctrinally oriented can sharpen those who are more outreach or service oriented, and the outreach or service minded elders can ignite the intellectually oriented members to more evangelism and service.”

Scripture would suggest that when it comes to leadership, *we are better together!*

## D. DEFINING THE TOOLS

Since the body of Christ is intended by God to do many things and is made up of many parts gifted for particular functions, it can be reasonably stated that not everyone in a local church is intended by God or equally qualified to be a leader. Of all the aspects of church leadership, scripture is most clear about what it takes to be an elder on a leadership team.

### (i) CHARACTER

The most obvious quality that church leaders must exude is the character of Jesus Christ, reflecting a vibrant and growing relationship with the true Head of the church. The Pastoral Epistles specifically deal with what Christian character looks like in an elder.

The character qualifications for elders in the church are summarized in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9:

<i>Above reproach</i>	Elders must lead by example and demonstrate a lifestyle free of patterns of sin.
<i>Husband of one wife, or wife of one husband.</i>	Elders, if married, must be devoted spouses. <i>(It should be noted that The Gathering is fully egalitarian and that gender is not a factor in determining Eldership or Pastoral roles. Men and women are both welcome to serve in all areas of ministry in the church.)</i>
<i>Temperate</i>	Elders must be self-controlled, enslaved to nothing, free from excesses.
<i>Prudent</i>	Elders must be sober, sensible, wise, balanced in judgment, not given to quick, superficial decisions based on immature thinking.

<i>Respectable</i>	Elders must demonstrate a well-ordered life and honourable behaviour.
<i>Hospitable</i>	Elders must be unselfish with their personal resources. They must be willing to share blessings with others.
<i>Able to teach</i>	Elders must be able to communicate truth and sound doctrine in a clear, non-argumentative way.
<i>Not addicted to wine</i>	Elders must be free from addictions and willing to limit their liberty for the sake of others.
<i>Not pugnacious or quick-tempered</i>	Elders must be gentle, patient, and able to exercise self-control in difficult situations.
<i>Uncontentious</i>	Elders must not be given to quarreling or selfish argumentation.
<i>Free from the love of money</i>	Elders must not be stingy, greedy, out for sordid gain, or preoccupied with amassing material things. Instead, they should be generous towards others and towards the church.
<i>Manage own household</i>	Elders must have a well-ordered household and a healthy family life.
<i>Not a new convert</i>	Elders must not be new believers. They must have been Christians for long enough to demonstrate the reality of their conversion and the depth of their spirituality.
<i>Good reputation with outsiders</i>	Elders must be well respected by unbelievers and free from hypocrisy.
<i>Not self-willed</i>	Elders must not be stubborn, prone to force opinions on others or abuse authority. They must be servants.
<i>Loving what is good</i>	Elders must desire the will of God in every decision.
<i>Just</i>	Elders must desire to be fair and impartial. Their judgment must be based on scriptural principle.
<i>Devout</i>	Elders must be devoted Christ followers seeking to be conformed to His image. They must be committed to prayer, worship, the study of Scripture, and the guarding of their own walk.
<i>Holding fast the faithful</i>	Elders must be stable in their faith, obedient to the Word of God,

*Word of God* continually seeking to be controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Character is of critical importance in church leaders for a number of reasons: Spiritual sensitivity is required to correctly follow the Spirit's leading in direction. Biblical astuteness is necessary to protect the church from heresy. Godly leaders provide believers with an example to follow. Mature Christians are capable at dealing with conflict graciously and courageously.

Before anyone is permitted to serve as an elder, the clear biblical requirement of Christ-like character must be obvious.

## **(ii) CALLING/GIFTING**

The other prerequisite for church leaders involves the combination of competency and commitment, otherwise known as calling.

God has gifted certain people from the body to lead and has mandated that they do so. Romans 12:8 says:

***"...If it (a man's gift) is leadership, let him govern diligently."***

Certain people will be endowed by God to lead His people. Their skill will be clear to the body through their contribution in other areas of the church. They will be able to creatively envision, strategically implement and critically evaluate God's moving in their local church. They will be able to think with discernment and wisdom, and to communicate their thoughts clearly. Through their spiritual enabling, church leaders will possess the skills that others in the body will naturally follow.

Aside from gifting, being called by God to lead His church also involves tremendous commitment. Spiritual leadership is not a part-time hobby, but a lifestyle of service to Christ and His church growing God's people into His image. It requires a deep love for the people within and around the church community. Whether paid staff or a lay leader, the leadership of a local congregation is a full time responsibility, requiring significant availability of an elder.

In addition, the relationship between our volunteer church elders and our Lead Pastor and paid staff must be considered. The following page illustrates church ministry as a tree, where the ministries performed by volunteer church members and driven (equipped, promoted, etc.) by the full-time energies of our paid staff are overseen by our elders. The primary role of our elders, in this model, is to protect the ministry that is promoted by pastors and performed by members. Elders are not the primary 'doers' of ministry, but the primary protectors of what is being done. As a result, the gift mix that is most suitable for eldership ministry involves gifts that protect the body of Christ—doctrinally, relationally, financially, etc. Such gifts (in addition to the Romans 12:8 leadership gift) include gifts like wisdom, knowledge, discernment, teaching, encouragement and shepherding. A person's familiarity with the congregation, as well, is another component to optimize their effectiveness—knowing the people, personalities and issues that require protecting.

To encourage a plumber to pilot an airplane, or a lumberjack to perform open-heart surgery, is to court catastrophic results for everyone involved. In the same way, successfully positioning the wrong people, or failing to position the right people into authority over the local church significantly hinders success. On the other hand, successfully positioning the right people and avoiding the positioning of inappropriate people in church leadership increases the potential of a local church to achieve its redemptive potential in the world. Strauch writes, **“Another misunderstood and sorely neglected aspect of biblical eldership relates to the process of appointing elders. It is in this area that many churches fail, with the sad result that unfit people are appointed as pastor elders, and/or qualified people are never developed or properly recognized.”**

***That’s where we, as a church, come into the equation. We are engaging in the following timeline for positioning TWO additional church elders:***

***November 22, 2015 – January 10, 2016...Prayer for discernment, submit nomination forms  
January 10, 2016 - February 14 2016... Nominee interviews & discernment by Nomination Team  
AGM – February 28 2016... Church affirmation of recommendations for the Board of Elders***

***Please pray through and complete ‘Eldership Appointment Nomination Form’—one per nominee—  
and submit them to Pastor Jeff Jantzi by no later than Sunday January 10, 2016.***

Thank you for participating in our Eldership Appointment Process!



## CHURCH MINISTRY AS A TREE

### “THE LEAVES”

- Visible ministry of church
- Performed by *ministry teams*

### “THE TRUNK”

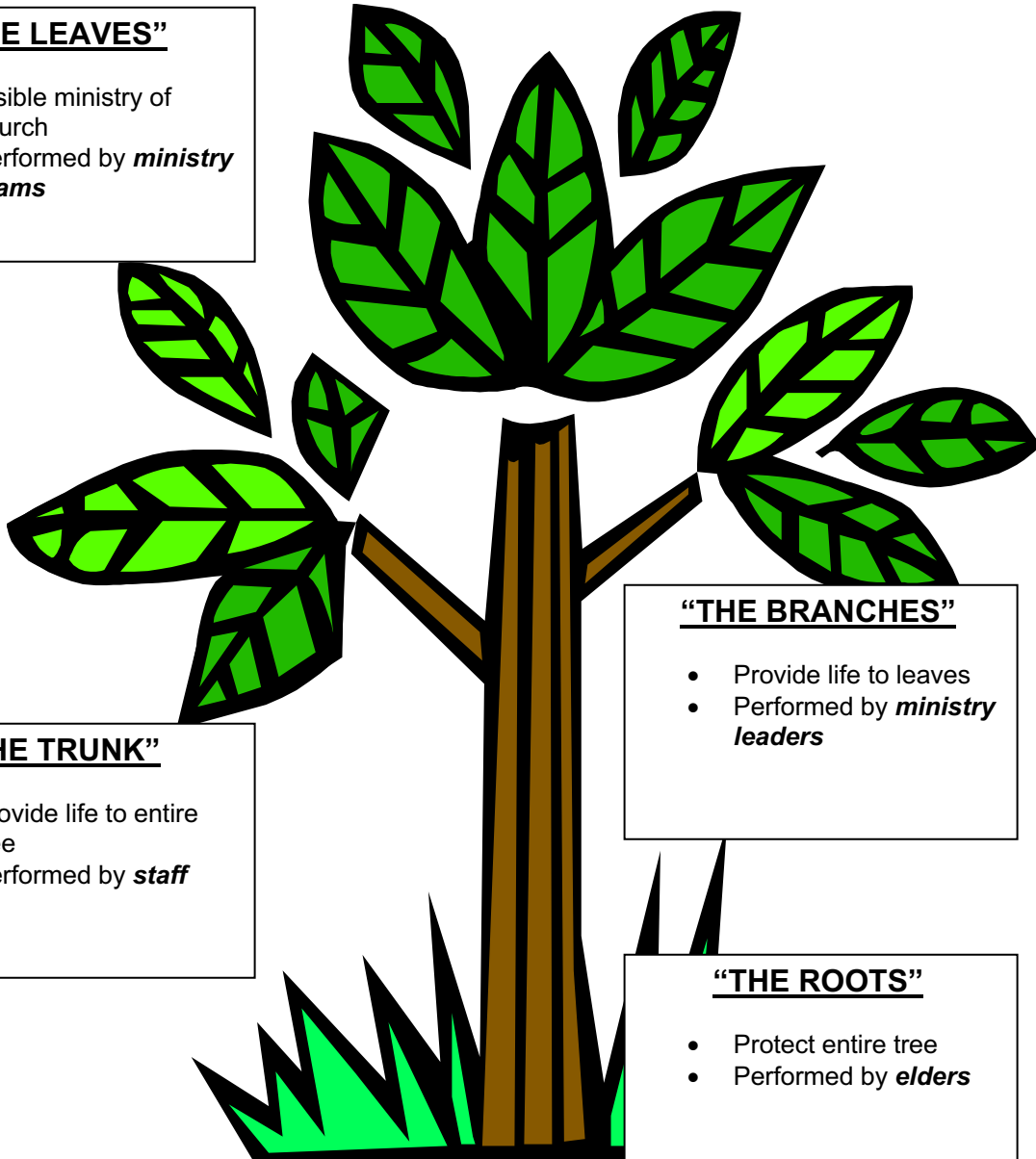
- Provide life to entire tree
- Performed by *staff*

### “THE BRANCHES”

- Provide life to leaves
- Performed by *ministry leaders*

### “THE ROOTS”

- Protect entire tree
- Performed by *elders*



*“An ideal form of church government will fulfill the biblical principles of order and the priesthood of all believers.”*

Millard Erickson