



A Vision for Leadership
At Living Proof Baptist Church
Williamsburg, VA

This document is intended to outline the biblical teaching concerning elders as well as to lay out a plan for selection of those elders for service at LPBC.

The Elder's Identity

- **Multiplicity of Terms**
 - Elder- *presbuteros*
 - Overseer (Bishop)- *episkopos*
 - Pastor- *poimen*

- **Singularity of Office**
 - **Acts 20-** "(17) Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders [*presbuteros*] of the church to come to him. (18) And when they came to him, he said to them...(28) "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock , in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopos*], to care for [*poimein*] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."
 - **1 Peter 5-** "(1) So I exhort the elders [*prebuteros*] among you, as a fellow elder [*sumpresbuteros*] and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker of the glory that is going to be revealed: (2) shepherd [*poimante*] the flock of God that is among you..."
 - **Titus 1-** "(5) This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders [*presbuteros*] in every town as I directed you...(7) For an overseer [*episkopos*], as God's steward, must be above reproach."
 - **Eph 4-** "(11) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds [*poimen*] and teachers."

- **Conclusion-** The terms "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" all refer to the same office in the New Testament. Each looks at the same office from a different vantage point: "elder" speaks of spiritual maturity, "overseer" speaks of governance, and "pastor" speaks of care.

"The prominent role of the elders in Acts and the description of the office in the Pastoral Epistles suggest that elders were spiritually mature men who guided the spiritual development of the local congregations (Douglas Moo, The Letter of James, PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000, 237)"

The Elder's Function and Role

- Of the two established offices in the local church (elder/overseer/pastor and deacon), the elder is invested with governing responsibility.
 - **1 Tim 5-**“(17) Let the elders who rule...”
 - **1 Tim 3-**“(4) He must manage his own household well...(5) for if someone does not know how to manage the his own household, how will he care for God's church?”
 - **1 Thess 5-**“(12) respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord...”
 - **Heb 13-**“(7) Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account...”

- Dr. John Hammett sums up the biblical data by offering four primary responsibilities assigned to elders. (John Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005)
 - **Ministry of the Word**
 - “Whether it is called preaching, teaching, prophecy, or exhortation, the ministry of the elder is emphatically a ministry that includes the communication of God's Word. It is primarily by means of his preaching and teaching that the elder exerts the influence of leadership in the congregation. (163)”
 - **Pastoral Ministry**
 - “One of the duties of a shepherd is to feed the flock; for Christians, our food is the Word of God. So the shepherd must provide his flock with healthy biblical food. Another duty of the shepherd is to protect the sheep...By teaching the truth, the shepherd provides them with protection. This protection is also spoken of in more general ways as ‘watching over’ the flock...This care would be expressed concretely in acts like pastoral visitation, personal counseling, and ministry in times of sickness and grief. Shepherds who love their sheep notice when their sheep are hurting and seek to be with them to care for them. (163-164)”
 - **Oversight of Leadership**
 - “This is why the term overseer is appropriate. This officer gives overall administrative oversight and leadership to the church...On one hand, church members are called upon to recognize their leaders' authority, submit to them, and obey them...on the other hand, the way leaders exercise their authority in the New Testament is never dictatorial, but with a humble spirit, open to the input of others, and seeking to lead the church in spiritually minded consensus. (164-165)”
 - **Example to the Flock**
 - “[This responsibility is] one that is easily overlooked because it is so basic, yet it seems to be the responsibility most clearly related to the qualifications for the office in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1...Leaders are to be set apart, not just to

honor them but to recognize them as setting forth the pattern of life that the congregation is to emulate. (165-166)”

*“I know the vanity of your heart, and that you will feel mortified that your congregation is very small, in comparison with those of your brethren around you; but assure yourself on the word of an old man, that when you come to give an account of them to the Lord Christ, at his judgment-seat, you will think you have had enough. (John Brown to one of his ministerial pupils newly ordained over a small congregation. Cited by Mark Dever in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin, Nashville, Broadman and Holman, 2007, 797.)”*

The Elder’s Moral Character

• Initial Thoughts on Moral Character

- The basis for determining the necessary moral character for an elder in the local church is primarily found in the following texts: **1 Timothy 3** and **Titus 1**. (Some would argue that Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 also include necessary character traits for elders. These texts seem to illustrate how elders with right moral characteristics function rather than determining the basis for their selection. They do not seem to be appropriate texts from which a church would determine specific moral character traits for its elders. Therefore, the texts found in Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus will be the chair texts for determining an individual’s qualification for serving as an elder.)
- Almost every moral characteristic listed in these texts is mandated elsewhere of all believers.
- The key to understanding the meaning of these lists of character traits is remembering that one of the responsibilities of elders is to set an example for the flock (1 Peter 5:3).
 - *“Such a person would not need to be perfect (such persons are in very short supply among fallen humanity) but would need a degree of maturity and proven character that would enable him to serve as an effective example, including an example of how to confess and repent when he does stumble (Hammett, 166).”*
- While there are several similarities between these texts, there are also some distinct differences. These differences imply that Paul was not trying to be exhaustive in these lists, but rather was giving a representative list of character traits an elder should embody.

• Five Major Areas Concerning Moral Characteristics

○ An Elder’s Morality

- **1 Timothy 3-** “(2) above reproach...sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable...(3) not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. (7) He must be well thought of by outsiders...”

- **Titus 1-** “(7) above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, (8) but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.”
- The elder is a person of integrity, good-judgment, and is worthy of respect. He serves as a godly example to the flock of God, and commands the respect of the outside world.

○ **An Elder’s Family**

- **1 Timothy 3-** “(2) ...the husband of one wife...(4) He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, (5) for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”
- **Titus 1-** “(6) the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.”
- A plain reading of the text within its proper context protects us from extreme interpretations of this area of qualification. If we are overly literal in our interpretation of “the husband of one wife,” then we are forced to exclude singles, widowers, and (as the most controversial element) divorcees. This method would have excluded Paul himself as an elder as he was unmarried. The feeling of this phrase carries with it the idea of “a one-woman man.” This points to a man who is, or would be, faithful to his wife, if he had one. Some circumstances may disqualify a man from serving as an elder during a particular time in life while it is possible that over time this same man could be found fit to serve in this office.
- The issue of the obedience/belief of children is also a controversial topic. We have no objective measure for what determines the right “obedience level” for the child of an elder in order to determine his qualification. The best way to proceed is to remember the purpose of these qualifications: Can this person serve as an example to the congregation in the area of parenting? If they are not able to do so, it would not be wise or loving to place him in a position of leadership over the church.
- The key question to be asked in this area is, “Can this person serve as an example to us in the area of marriage and family?”

○ **An Elder’s Gifts**

- **1 Timothy 3-** “(2)...able to teach, (3)...manage his own household...care for God’s church...”
- **Titus 1-** “(9) He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.
- The implication here is that the elder must have some degree of ability or giftedness in the area of communicating God’s Word, and must have an

understanding of sound doctrine. An elder should also give evidence of giftedness in leadership, revealed in his management of his own family.

- **An Elder's Spiritual Maturity**

- **1 Timothy 3-**“(6) He must not be a recent convert...”
- Again, there is no exact age or number of years given here to determine fitness for serving as an elder. Titus, while lacking the mention of the “spiritual age” of a prospective elder assumes that an elder would be a man of some years or showing a corresponding spiritual maturity. This qualification ought to serve as a warning when considering who is to serve as an elder. It is ideal for a young man to be mentored for a time under a man who possesses clear evidence of spiritual maturity.

- **An Elder's Gender**

- One final characteristic assumed in these texts is that the office of elder is limited to males. There has been much debate on this issue in varying denominations and at various times in history. A simple reading of these texts seems to constrain us to hold to male-only eldership. Hammett points out that “the nouns, pronouns, articles, and endings on adjectives all point to males as those in mind (170).” Furthermore, male spiritual leadership in the church keeps in step with the pattern of leadership established by God in creation and continued until now in the home. It is important to remember that essence and role are two distinct notions. The biblical position that man and woman are both made in the image of God clearly affirms that all people are of equal worth before God because all are of the same essence. Certainly equals in terms of worth can serve in different roles without losing any sense of intrinsic value. Christ himself subjected himself to the Father, but was never considered to less than God. We hold to the qualification that elders are to be male because this is the pattern God has ordained for his church.

The Elder's Call and Selection

- **Calling**

- The idea that there is a special divine call, unique to pastoral ministry, or the office of elder, is not clearly found in Scripture.
- Paul tells Timothy, in 1 Timothy 3:1, “the saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble-task.” This speaks of desire to invest your life in this particular vocation in the same way that a farmer would “be called” to farm or a teacher would “be called” to teach. Every believer is called to live a life worthy of the gospel (Ephesians 4:1), serve within their giftedness (1 Corinthians 12; 14), and be affirmed by the church for their course of life within the context of ministry (Acts 13:1-3; 2 Timothy 1:6; Titus 1:5). The church would be wise to look for men who are *scripturally qualified, willing to shepherd* the hearts of those who are a part of the flock of God, and who are *already demonstrating* the giftedness needed to fulfill this task.

- The “3 Lights” of the Puritans are helpful here. (1) The Scripture Light asks the question, “Is this person qualified?” (2) The Inner Light asks the question, “Does this person desire to shepherd the church of God?” (3) The Ecclesiological Light asks the question, “Does the church affirm this person’s desire and is it willing to entrust their spiritual care to this person?”
- A key question for each prospective elder to ask himself is, “Am I qualified, willing, and equipped to take the responsibility to shepherd the flock of God toward greater faith in Jesus Christ through my example, my teaching, and my leadership?”
- Hebrews 13:17 “Obey your leaders and submit to them, *for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give and account.*”

- **Selection**

- Scripture gives no explicit instruction regarding the selection process for elders.
- Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the churches they planted (Acts 14:23) and Titus was to appoint elders “in every town” in Crete (Titus 1:5). Beyond this, elders and overseers appear in the churches of Jerusalem, Ephesus, Philippi, and elsewhere with no explanation.
- There are two biblical principles that help to govern the selection of elders.
 - The biblical support for congregational church government would argue for a role for the congregation in the process.
 - The biblical teaching on the leadership role for elders would support their involvement in and oversight of the process.
- The following is the process for selecting elders that incorporates these two biblical principles. This process is adapted from one that John Hammett suggests in *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches* (186).
 - Careful, church-wide teaching on church leadership and qualifications for elders.
 - All members of the congregation would be invited to pray and submit nominees. These nominations would be accompanied by a rationale as to why this person meets the qualifications outlined in Scripture.
 - The existing elder body would screen the nominations and spend time in prayer and conversation to make sure that the nominees were, in fact, eligible.
 - Those the elder body consider to be qualified would be contacted concerning their willingness to serve.
 - Those who are willing would be asked to complete some material, evaluating their fitness to serve as an elder. They would also be asked some doctrinal questions, indicating their understanding of God, the gospel, the church, and other basic doctrines. They would also be asked to evaluate their own

marriage, family relationships, and other areas of qualification. This material will be seen by the elder body only.

- Those who are willing and qualified will participate in an ordination council made up of the current elders and any other individuals invited to attend by the elder body. During the ordination council, the nominees will be asked further questions regarding their fitness to serve as elders.
- Following the council, the elders will determine if they will recommend to the church that the individual(s) be considered to serve as elders.
- The names of those nominated and recommended for ordination as elders of the church would then, for the first time, be made known to the church at large. Those who were nominated, but not recommended would never be mentioned publically.
- A period of time (two weeks) would be given for any church member to give a reason to the current elders why a nominee might not be fit to serve. The current elders will investigate any such charge based on 1 Timothy 5:19. If found valid, the nomination would be withdrawn. If there were no challenge, or any challenges were found to be invalid, the congregation would be asked to affirm or reject the nominee.
- The selected individuals would be ordained by the church signifying that that the church affirms his qualifications to serve as an elder and recognizes his entering into ministry as one of their leaders.
- Elders will serve 3-year-terms. After an elder's first 3 years he can be immediately reappointed for a second term by means of a recommendation by the elder-body and an affirmation by the congregation. The elder can step away from his service as an elder at this time if he feels it would be the best for him, his family, and the church. After two consecutive 3-year-terms the elder will take a required 1 year sabbatical in order to give his time to other areas of ministry, explore and develop new areas of giftedness, or to simply rest from the responsibility of leading the church. The elder will be eligible to step back into active leadership in the church after this one year sabbatical is complete. He would do so per the nomination of a church member, followed by a recommendation by the elders and an affirmation by the church body.
- Church affirmation will be based on 75 percent of the membership voting in favor of selecting the individual to serve as an elder. Voting will be conducted via secret ballot.
- After selection, if an elder desires to step away from service before his 3-year-term is completed, he will notify the elder body and the elders will together work through the reasons and prayerfully determine if this is best for the individual and the church. If the elders, in agreement with the individual, determine that stepping away from serving would be the best decision, the elders will notify the church body at the next corporate gathering.
- If, during his time of service, a charge is brought against an elder that would stand to disqualify him from serving it will be handled in accordance with 1

Timothy 5:19. If this charge is valid, the elder-body will determine the course of action and notify the church body of any decisions made.

The Elder's Specific Functionality at LPBC

- Elders will serve as examples of godliness and faith to the church (1 Peter 5:3).
- Elders will be assigned a certain amount of families. It will be the responsibility of the elders to keep up with these families, regularly visit with them in order to help them assess spiritual victories and needs in their lives, and pray specifically, passionately, and regularly for them. The families will know the identity of their "Shepherding Elders" and be able to look to them for spiritual encouragement, support, and direction.
- Elders will be asked to teach and offer biblical instruction at various times and in differing contexts within church life.
- Elders will work together to seek the direction God has for the life of the corporate body of faith.
- Elders will serve according to their giftedness. While all are to be able to teach, it is clear that some are better equipped for this task. While all are to give oversight to the church, some are better able to accomplish this task than others. The pastor of the church will serve as the teaching elder and will bear the prime responsibility for teaching in corporate gatherings. Other elders will teach and administrate as gifted and needed.
- Elders will call upon the deacons and other members of the church when specific needs arise.
- The number of elders will be determined primarily by the amount of qualified individuals within the membership of the church and secondly, by the needs present within the congregation.