

Elders & Deacons

In the New Testament, *πρεσβυτερος*, (presbuteros) is translated as bishop (1 Tim 3:1 KJV), overseer (Acts 20:28) and elder (Titus 1:5). From 1 Tim 3:2,8 we see that the elder (overseer) and deacon are two different ministries. The elders replace and succeed the apostles in the local church; the deacons continue the work of the early deacons in managing all the necessary ministries of the local church – “serving tables” (Acts 6:1-6).

Paul appointed elders in all the churches he established (Acts 14:23). On his third missionary journey, as he returned home, it was the elders of the church in Ephesus that he called to himself. It was to them that he commends his ministry (so that they might speak on his behalf against false witnesses later?) and charges them to care for the flock as Holy Spirit – appointed overseers. They are made aware of false teachers who will come in as wolves. They must oppose such teachers by correct teaching and refuting error.

One assumes that the men Paul appointed (chosen first by the Holy Spirit – Acts 20:28) satisfied his own criteria presented to us in 1 Tim 3:1-7 and Titus 1-9.

An elder is to be: *above reproach, the husband of one wife, having self-control, wise, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, having no addictions, not argumentative or rebellious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must manage his house well, and have disciplined children. He must not be new in the faith and must have a good reputation among outsiders. He must love what is good and be able to exhort or refute by sound doctrine, holding fast to the Word.*

Note that in 1 Tim 3:8-13 the same high standard is required of deacons with the main difference being that the elder is ‘able to teach’. I would suggest that this does not mean an ability to stand up and give a lengthy teaching but rather, the readiness to take one to the scriptures whenever there is need of counsel or guidance (“apt to teach” KJV). A deacon would be more ready to give more practical advice. When the first deacons were appointed it was noted that they were also men filled with the Spirit and wisdom (Acts 6:3). Note further that the deacons must ‘*first be tested*’ before being placed in this very public office. The elders’ responsibility is the *spiritual ministry* of the church; the deacons’ responsibility is the *practical ministry* of the church.

I see no hierarchal structure here – one is not a promotion from the other. Both are to receive honour if they do their appointed ministry well (1 Tim 3:13; 5:17). However, for the elder who is a faithful preacher or teacher, there is ‘double honour’. One should note here that the same man is also subject to ‘double jeopardy’ should he fall into sin. He alone of all church members, must be ‘rebuked publicly’ (5:20) (so that the testimony of the church is above reproach?)

Of elders, Paul says they are **first appointed** by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:17) before being appointed (recognised?) by himself, Timothy or Titus. He also says they are a **gift of the ascended, glorified Christ** to His bride, the church (Eph 4:11 – where I recognise the ‘*pastors and teachers*’ as the elders of the local assembly). Deacons were chosen by men and had to undergo an “apprenticeship” (1 Tim 3:10). One assumes that long, faithful service is the ‘apprenticeship’ of elders. I picture the two ministries as being the warp and woof of a cloth – the tighter they bond together, supporting one another, the stronger the fabric upon which the Holy Spirit can ‘embroider’ the public testimony and ministry of the local church.

Personal view on the operation of these ministries: I do not believe elders should be subject to a vote among members. By a 'vote' I mean that, if we decide we want three elders and five names are presented, we vote to see who is eliminated. However, no man should be recognised as an elder if he does not have the approval of the members. In my mind, if there are five men considered and all five have the approval of a substantial part of the church (eg:80%), all five should be recognised; if none are recognised, none are appointed. They are elders whether they have a particular portfolio (eg: overseer of youth, discipleship, preaching, etc) or not. They may not even attend board meetings but are always available for advice on 'spiritual' matters (eg: discipline, ethical or doctrinal issues, teaching). They continue to be elders all the time unless it is evident that the Lord has withdrawn His hand from them. Deacons, on the other hand, are usually elected to particular ministries (eg; treasurer, secretary, administrator, etc) either by the congregation or within the elected board, and for a particular length of time.

The pastor should be an elder – the chief elder if you like, so long as he is mature enough, unlike many young pastors now filling our pulpits!). He is responsible above all others for the public testimony of the church. However he is only 'chief' among equals, demonstrating godly leadership by his servanthood and accountability to his fellow elders. He is to be willing to be last, least, the youngest, a child, a slave – descriptions that Jesus gave of those who are "great" in the kingdom of God!) His fellow elders should be his supporters, his shield (from antagonistic members) and his accountability group. All elders should be able to keep individual confidences, but not from the chief elder (pastor) in matters concerning other members of the church.