

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP



Developed as a study course by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.

About the Author

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This booklet is an abridgement of the author's book, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Eldership* by Alexander Strauch, available through Lewis and Roth Publishers (ISBN 0-93608-315-8). Original booklet copyright © Alexander Strauch. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

Biblical Elderships

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Published by:

Emmaus Correspondence School
(A division of ECS Ministries)
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First Printing 2009 (AK '09), 2 UNITS

ISBN 978-1-59387-107-9

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Printed in the United States of America

STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

Many thousands of churches worldwide practice some form of eldership because they believe it to be a biblical teaching. Unfortunately there is a great deal of confusion and unbiblical thinking surrounding the topic. This course will help you better understand the teaching about authentic biblical eldership and put it into practice in your local church fellowship.

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Course Components

This course has two parts: this study course and the exam booklet.

How To Study

This study has eight chapters, and each chapter has its own exam. Begin by asking God to help you understand the material. Read the chapter through at least twice, once to get a general idea of its contents and then again, slowly, looking up any Bible references given.

Begin studying immediately, or if you are in a group, as soon as the group begins. We suggest that you keep a regular schedule by trying to complete at least one chapter per week.

Exams

In the exam booklet there is one exam for each chapter (exam 1 covers chapter 1 of the course). Do not answer the questions by what you think or have always believed. The questions are designed to find out if you understand the material given in the course.

After you have completed each chapter, review the related exam and see how well you know the answers. If you find that you are having difficulty answering the questions, review the material until you think you can answer the questions.

How Your Exams Are Graded

Your instructor will mark any incorrectly answered questions. You will be referred back to the place in the course where the correct answer is to be found. After finishing this course with a passing average, you will be awarded a certificate.

If you enrolled in a class, submit your exam papers to the leader or secretary of the class who will send them for the entire group to the Correspondence School.

See the back of the exam booklet for more information on returning the exams for grading.

INTRODUCTION

While attending a sacred music concert, I received an insightful lesson in ecclesiology.¹ As I walked into the main foyer of the church where the concert was being held, I immediately noticed the photographs and names of the senior pastor and his staff arranged in a pyramid within a glass encasement. The senior pastor's photograph was at the top, his three associate pastors' photographs were below, and the rest of the church staff's photographs completed the base of the pyramid. As I walked further into the building and down a side hall, I saw another glass encasement that contained the photographs and names of the church elders. I immediately thought, *What a superb illustration of how the church elders have been pushed aside to a scarcely visible position in the church!* This is quite different from the New Testament model of eldership.

My first encounter with church elders occurred when I was a young teenager preparing for confirmation. During confirmation classes, I told the minister about my conversion to Christ, which had taken place the previous summer at a Bible camp. He was so intrigued by my youthful, exuberant testimony of Christ that he asked me to share my story with the church elders. So I met with the elders and told them about my new relationship with Jesus Christ. They sat speechless, looking totally puzzled. I was saddened by their response because I realized that they didn't understand what I was saying. That experience left me with little confidence in the elders or the church.

My next encounter with church elders, however, was altogether different. While attending college away from home, I was invited to a church that taught and practiced authentic biblical eldership. The elders of this church took seriously the New Testament commands for elders to be biblically qualified and to actively pastor the flock of God. They provided

strong leadership, loving pastoral care and discipline, sound Bible teaching, and humble, sacrificial examples of Christian living. As a result, they were highly esteemed by the church. The inspiring example of these men first awakened in me a positive interest in the subject of church eldership.

Later, while attending seminary, my growing interest in eldership was vigorously challenged. During a class on church polity,² which stubbornly resisted any notion of an elder-led church, I asked the professor, “But what do you do with all the scriptural texts on elders?”

He quickly responded, “Numbers of texts on elders mean nothing!”

I thought, but didn’t have the nerve to express it publicly, *Well what does mean something? Your nonexistent texts on clerics?* This and other similar experiences served only to stir my increasing conviction that eldership was a biblically sound doctrine that most churches either ignored or misinterpreted.

Several years later, I was preparing a series of sermons on the doctrine of the church. When I came to the subject of eldership, I was shocked to discover that there was no full-length book on the subject. There were small booklets, journal articles, and chapters within books, but no thorough treatment of the subject from an expository viewpoint. This lack of exposition was hardly believable, especially when I considered the elders’ primary role as leaders in the first churches and the number of scriptural texts devoted to elders. It finally ignited my desire to write on the subject of eldership.

I don’t believe any doctrine of Holy Scripture should be neglected or defined out of existence. Yet this is precisely what many churches have done to the biblical doctrine of eldership. Even among churches that claim to practice eldership, elders have been reduced to being temporary, lay, church board members, which is quite contrary to the New Testament model of pastoral eldership. Although such churches may have an eldership, it is not a biblical eldership.

Literally tens of thousands of churches worldwide practice some form of eldership because they believe it to be a biblical teaching.³ Unfortunately, because the advocates of eldership have been so terribly delinquent in adequately articulating this doctrine, a great deal of confusion and unbiblical thinking surrounds the topic among most elder-led churches. There are persistent, crippling misconceptions about eldership that hinder churches

from practicing authentic biblical eldership. This subject is too important to the local church to be bogged down in confusion and error.

To help remedy this appalling confusion over eldership, I wrote *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*. This book was aimed primarily at churches that practice eldership but which may misconstrue its true biblical Christian character and mandate. This booklet briefly summarizes *Biblical Eldership*. Hopefully it will whet your appetite to read the entire book, but more important, it will motivate you to study further the biblical teaching on eldership. Precious truths, no doubt, still await discovery.

1

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP DEFINED

Despite what all the New Testament communicates, the doctrine of biblical eldership has been sorely misunderstood. Even churches that claim to be governed by a plurality of elders have redefined eldership so that its original purpose and noble standing have, in practice, been eclipsed by the ordained pastor and his staff. To clarify biblical eldership in light of contemporary church practices, I present five distinguishing features of New Testament, Christian eldership: pastoral leadership, shared leadership, male leadership, qualified leadership, and servant leadership.

Pastoral Leadership

When most Christians hear about church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisers to the pastor. They think of elders as being policymakers, financial officers, fund-raisers, or administrators. I call these types of elders “board elders.” People don’t expect “board elders” to teach the Word or be involved pastorally in people’s lives. Victor A. Constien, a Lutheran official and author of *The Caring Elder*, illustrated this popular view of the elders’ role when he wrote, “Members of a congregation’s board of elders are not assistant pastors. They *assist* their pastor . . . elders help facilitate and strengthen the working relationship of the church staff.”⁴

Such a view, however, not only lacks scriptural support but flatly contradicts New Testament Scriptures. A person doesn’t need to read Greek or be professionally trained in theology to understand that the contemporary, church-board concept of eldership is irreconcilably at odds with the New Testament definition of eldership. According to the New Testament, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and

pray, and judge doctrinal issues. In biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.

Therefore, when Paul and Peter directly exhort the elders to do their duty, they both employ shepherding imagery. *It should be observed that these two giant apostles assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders.* Paul reminds the Asian elders that God the Holy Spirit placed them in the flock as overseers for the purpose of shepherding the church of God (Acts 20:28). Peter exhorts the elders to be all that shepherds should be to the flock (1 Peter 5:2). We, then, must also view apostolic, Christianized elders to be primarily pastors of a flock, not corporate executives, CEOs, or advisers to a pastor.

If we want to understand Christian elders and their work, we must understand the biblical imagery of shepherding. As keepers of sheep, biblical elders are to protect, feed, and lead the flock and to help meet the flock's many practical needs. Using these four, broad, pastoral categories, let us briefly consider the examples, exhortations, and teachings of the New Testament regarding shepherd elders.

Protecting the Flock: A major part of the New Testament elders' work is to protect the local church from false teachers. As Paul was leaving Asia Minor, he summoned the elders of the church in Ephesus for a farewell exhortation. The essence of Paul's charge is this: *guard the flock—wolves are coming:*

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church . . . *“Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert”* (Acts 20:17, 28-31; italics added).

According to Paul's required qualifications for eldership, a prospective elder must have enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to refute false teachers:

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach . . . holding fast the faithful word which is in

accordance with the teaching, *that he may be able . . . to refute those who contradict* [sound doctrine] (Titus 1:5-6, 9; italics added).

The Jerusalem elders, for example, met with the apostles to judge doctrinal error: “And the apostles and the elders came together to look into this [doctrinal] matter” (Acts 15:6). Like the apostles, the Jerusalem elders had to know the Word so that they could protect the flock from false teachers.

Feeding the Flock: Unlike modern, church-board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). Listing elder qualifications in his letter to Titus, Paul states, “[The elder must hold] fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9). In an extremely significant passage on elders, Paul writes about some elders who labor at preaching and teaching and thus deserve financial support from the local church:

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially *those who work hard at preaching and teaching*. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Timothy 5:17-18; italics added).

Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that he has taught them and the church the full plan and purpose of God: “For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27). Now it was time for the elders to do the same. Since elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), part of their shepherding task is to see that the flock is fed God’s Word.

Leading the Flock: In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or any group of people means to lead or govern (2 Samuel 5:2; Psalm 78:71-72). According to Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, elders are to shepherd the church of God. So, to shepherd a local church means, among other things, to lead the church. To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, “Let the elders who rule [lead, direct, manage] well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Timothy 5:17). Elders, then, are to lead, direct, govern, manage, and otherwise care for the flock of God.

In Titus 1:7, Paul insists that a prospective elder be morally and spiritually above reproach because he will be “God’s steward.” A steward is a “household manager,” someone with official responsibility over the

master's servants, property, and even finances. Elders are stewards of God's household, the local church.

Elders are also called "overseers," which signifies that they supervise and manage the church. Peter uses the verb form of *overseer* when he exhorts the elders: "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you . . . shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight" (1 Peter 5:1-2). In this instance, Peter combines the concepts of shepherding and overseeing when he exhorts the elders to do their duty. Hence we can speak of the elders' overall function as being the pastoral oversight of the local church.

Helping to Meet the Flock's Many Practical Needs: In addition to the familiar, broad categories of protecting, feeding, and leading the flock, elders are also to bear responsibility for meeting the practical, diverse needs of the flock. For example, James instructs sick members of the flock to call for the elders of the church: "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (James. 5:14). Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to care for the weak and needy of the flock: "In everything I showed you that by working hard in this manner *you must help the weak* and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35; italics added).

As shepherds of the flock, the elders must be available to meet the sheep's needs. This responsibility includes: visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved; strengthening the weak; praying for *all* the sheep; visiting new members; providing counsel for couples who are engaged, married, and/or divorced; and managing the many, day-to-day details related to the inner life of the congregation.

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP

EXAM BOOKLET AK '09 (2 UNITS)

STUDENT NAME

ADDRESS

CITY, STATE, ZIP

COURSE GRADE: _____

INSTRUCTOR



Exam developed by Emmaus Correspondence School, founded in 1942.

A NOTE ON THE EXAMS

The exams are designed to check your knowledge of the course material and the Scriptures. After you have studied a chapter, review the exam questions for that lesson. If you have difficulty in answering the questions, re-read the material. If questions contain a Scripture reference, you may use your Bible to help you answer them. If your instructor has provided a single page Answer Sheet, record your answer on that sheet. This exam contains the following types of questions:

MULTIPLE CHOICE

You will be asked to write in the letter of the correct answer at the space on the right. Here is an example:

The color of grass is

- A. blue C. yellow
B. green D. orange

 B

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

Questions headed this way are designed to help you express your ideas and feelings. You may freely state your own opinions in answer to such questions.

RETURNING THE EXAM

See the back of this exam booklet for instructions on returning your exam for grading.

First Printed 2009 (AK '09), 2 UNITS

ISBN 978-1-59387-107-9

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Printed in the United States of America

CHAPTER 1 EXAM

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP DEFINED

EXAM GRADE

Before starting this exam, write your name and address on the front of this Exam Booklet.

Directions: Read each question carefully and write the letter of the correct answer in the blank space on the right. Use the separate answer sheet if provided.

1. A term the Bible uses to refer to elders is

A. priests	C. king	
B. shepherds	D. reverend	_____

2. The best description of an elder's work is

A. commander	C. event coordinator	
B. entertainer	D. leader	_____

3. When an elder becomes aware of a teaching that is contrary to the Bible he should

A. refute it with the Bible		
B. set up a committee to consider it		
C. ignore it so people can form their own opinions		
D. consult denominational leaders about it		_____

4. When someone in the church fellowship teaches things contrary to the Bible, the elders should

A. keep everyone happy		
B. let only the pastor teach		
C. guard the flock		
D. allow the fad to run its course		_____

5. According to the New Testament, all elders should be

A. able to teach	C. poor men	
B. business men	D. dynamic leaders	_____

6. Elders who rule well should be considered worthy of double honor especially when they work hard at

A. fundraising		
B. generating excitement		
C. bringing in new members		
D. preaching and teaching		_____

7. In Titus 1:7 Paul refers to elders as God’s “stewards”.
A steward is a _____
- A. soldier C. household manager
B. holy man D. low ranking slave
8. Overseeing, leading, teaching, and ruling God’s flock are given to _____
- A. no man except Christ C. all elders in a flock
B. one elder or pastor D. denominational leaders
9. Paul exhorts the Ephesian elders to give special care and attention to _____
- A. weak members C. new members
B. wealthy members D. no one
10. All of the following are biblical responsibilities of elders *except* _____
- A. marriage counseling C. visiting the sick
B. planning fundraisers D. strengthening the weak

WHAT DO YOU SAY?

What are the biblical responsibilities that elders are most likely to neglect?
Have you prayed for your elders?
