

# A Framework for Recognizing Elders within Westbrooke Church

The Scriptures give surprisingly little information on how the leadership of the early church was chosen. In fact, only one procedure immediately emerges as obvious:

Elders were appointed, while Deacons were selected by the congregation.

## **Elders: Appointed**

In Acts 14:22,23 we are told that Paul and Barnabas came back through the cities they had formerly visited "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, 'Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.' And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The word "ordain" or "appoint" is used again to refer to the commissioning of elders in Titus 1:5 and, although not explicitly stated, it seems to underlie Paul's injunction to Timothy in I Timothy 3:1-7.

## **Deacons: Selected**

In direct contrast, in choosing deacons, the exhortation the apostles give the congregation in Acts 6:3 is set forth from among yourselves men of good reputation" and so on, seeming to indicate some form of the nominating and selecting process. The only further information we have referring to the commissioning of deacons is that they are to "first be tested" (I Timothy 3:10) and then allowed to serve if they prove to be above reproach. The first deacons were chosen to meet a particular need in the body. The Apostles designated a task to be done (Acts 6:1-3) and gave the congregation the responsibility of selecting men to accomplish that job.

## **The Emphasis: Spiritual Qualification**

Clearly the emphasis of the Scripture is not upon the method of selection, but upon the qualification of the men chosen. For each office Paul gives a detailed list of qualifications to be considered in choosing these men, (see Titus 1:5-9 and Timothy 3:1-13) but no method to follow in selecting them.

### **Summary**

In attempting then to find a biblical basis for selecting elders and deacons we are on rather sketchy ground except to say all such men must be thoroughly qualified according to the Scriptures (Titus 1:5-9; 1 Timothy 3:1-7 for elders; Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 for deacons). Elders are appointed while deacons are selected by the congregation. And deacons are to be tested in their role before being formally commissioned to serve.

### **Additional Observations**

To these facts some additional observations may be added. In Acts 20 as Paul addresses the Ephesian elders, he exhorts them to "shepherd the flock of God, over which the Holy Ghost has made you overseers..." While these men were appointed to their positions by an apostle or an apostolic representative, it is also evident that these men were chosen by the Holy Spirit and gifted by Him for their role in the church. In a sense they had first been tested, too, in that they had a shepherding ministry in the church even before the apostles laid hands on them.

The apostles then did not bestow any special gifts or ministry on the man they appointed as elders. Rather, they recognized the work of the Holy Spirit in raising up certain men as shepherds over the flock, making that position "official" and conferring their support of the ministry they saw in these men's lives by the laying on of hands.

To this a third factor can be added. From 1 Timothy 3:1 it is clear that a man should aspire to the role of elder if he is going to be appointed to function in this way. Peter underscores this principle when he asks elders to serve "voluntarily" and "not under compulsion." (1 Peter 5:2) If a man is reluctant for any reason, even if in false humility he holds himself back from the role of elder thinking he should be drafted first before showing an eagerness to serve, such a man should not be considered as an elder candidate.

## **A Biblical Framework**

A biblical framework for selecting elders then can be summarized by the following:

1. He should be thoroughly qualified according to I Timothy 3 and Titus 1.
2. He should already show evidence that the Holy Spirit has given him a shepherd's role in the church.
3. He should aspire to the role of elder and desire to function more fully as a shepherd of the body as a whole.

Then the existing elder board, recognizing that the Spirit of God has chosen such a person to be in a position of leadership within the church, may officially recognize or ordain such a man to set him apart for that work. The process for recognizing deacons can be outlined in much the same way:

1. The existing leadership should outline the task to be fulfilled by the deacon or deacons. This could be a onetime need or an ongoing one.
2. The congregation should set forth from among themselves thoroughly qualified candidates to perform that function.
3. The men so presented should be tested both in regard to their overall qualifications and their ability to perform the specific function in question.
4. The elders should officially recognize that man as a deacon in order to set him apart for that work.

Beyond this general framework the specifics of soliciting nominations and filling the needed positions are open to considerable variation, since the Scripture issues no direct command as to what method or methods to follow.

# Elders - Their Role at Westbrooke Church

The basic idea of church government in the Scriptures is the Headship of Jesus Christ.

The church is not a democracy or a republic; it is not governed by the people as a whole or by representatives acting on their behalf. Christ is the Head of the church. Therefore, the basic function of church government is to allow the Lord Jesus Christ to rule over the body of His people.

## The Role of Elders

The scriptures also make it clear that the Lord chooses to give spiritual direction to each local assembly of believers through certain men whom He designates and equips for this task. These are called by various names in the Scriptures. They are named "elders" in some places, "overseers" or "bishops," (the same Greek word) in others. In still another passages they are called "pastors" and "teachers."

All these titles refer to the same office, but they designate different frameworks in which that office is administered. The word "elder" looks at the quality of maturity, the ability to make mature judgments. As a result the passages referring to "elders" deal largely in the character of the men holding that position. The word "bishop" or "overseer" refers to the work the elder does. He has authority, superintendency over a group. He oversees the direction in which the church is going. The double word, "pastor-teacher", refers to the duties of elders as shepherds to see that God's flock is fed from His Word, and to meet the needs of the flock whatever they may be.

## A Team Ministry

No church in the New Testament ever had only one elder. The term is always plural, referring to a team ministry. In fact, in III John, Diotrephes is severely condemned for lifting himself up above the others in the church as the one preeminent leader. In all the other churches there were always several elders in charge.

## Appointed Not Elected

No church in the New Testament ever chose its own leaders. Elders were always appointed, at first by the apostles and then by apostolic representatives (See the position paper: A Framework for Recognizing Elders and Deacons Within the Local Assembly.) The appointments ran indefinitely until the elders' fitness to serve was for some reason hampered. But no flock of God in the New Testament ever chose its own shepherds. This was exclusively the work of the Chief Shepherd Himself. (Acts 20:28)

Responsibilities In the same way, God's appointed shepherds are not left to their own devices in order to run the church. They are carefully instructed as to their duties to "be on guard", "to shepherd the flock" (Acts 20:28); to "feed the flock", "exercise oversight" and "prove to be examples" (I Peter 5:2,3) and to "devote themselves to the ministry of the Word and to prayer". (Acts 6:4)

The elders do not decide all matters within the local church. They are supported by deacons who account to the Lord for their own ministries, and by the congregation of the saints who quite rightfully express their own convictions, concerns and support of the church.

But the elders' responsibility is to seek the mind of the Lord. They are not to determine their own will, or the will of the people, but the will of the Lord. We believe this is best accomplished by searching the Scriptures on any given issue, devoting that issue to the Lord in prayer and then seeking unanimous agreement as to what the Lord's will is in that matter. Only when we are unanimous as to the leading of the Lord Jesus will we act.

### **Christ's Church**

Westbrooke Church is not ours. It is Christ's church. It was bought with His blood. He cleansed and purified it by His Word. He has appointed His ordinances. He is the One who has chosen men to guide in spiritual matters and equipped them with the necessary qualifications to do the work. He Himself is the Head of the church. He hasn't left us on our own to decide things for ourselves. We can be sure that when He is in the midst of His church, direction will be given. And working through the leadership He appoints, Christ will lead His church into a fruitful ministry of His life, for His glory.

See also "A Framework for Recognizing Elders and Deacons Within the Local Assembly"