

## Where Do Elders Come From?

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by Paul Earnhart

The scarcity of functioning elders (bishops, pastors) in local churches has led some Christians to conclude that they are a rare breed with rare qualities. Otherwise, they reason, why would they be so difficult to come by? Contrary to this rather discouraging view, elders do not have to be imported from outer space. They are generated from ordinary human beings from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” and perhaps it will help identify the reason for their scarcity if we trace, step by step, where elders originate.

First of all, and elementally, elders come from strong Christians, men and women who by the power of God have been radically reborn (John 3:3-6). Now, here are some remarkable people. They have given up everything for the Lord’s sake, claiming not even their breath as their own (1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Romans 2:1-2). Theirs is a life of utter trust in the Son of God (Galatians 2:20). Why should we be surprised that something special should arise in the characters of folk like this? They will love God supremely and care about others in a self-sacrificial way.

Secondly, elders (Greek *presbuteroi*, older men), by definition, originate from Christians who are men. There is nothing special or remarkable or difficult here. From the outset, men as well as women have been touched by the appeal of the gospel (Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:12; 17:12, 34) and we can logically anticipate that wherever the gospel is preached, this will continue to be so.

Thirdly, elders are to be taken from among Christian men who are mature in years (older) and in the faith (“not a novice,” 1 Timothy 3:6). The bulk of the bishop’s required qualities are no more than would be expected in any mature disciple: “... sober-minded, orderly, given to hospitality ... no brawler, no striker; but gentle, not contentious, no lover of money, good testimony from them that are without...” (1 Timothy 3:7) “... Not self-willed, not soon angry, a lover of good ... just, holy, self-controlled; holding to the faithful word ...” (Titus 1:6-9). Every Christian, without exception, is expected to grow and mature into “a full grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...” (Ephesians 4:13). There is nothing unusual about the Lord’s servants becoming increasingly like Him. It is their failure to grow up that is considered aberrant (1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Hebrews 5:12-14).

Fourthly, elders are drawn from mature Christian men who are married. The Holy Spirit has indicated that the elder is to be “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6). Here, again, there is no special obstacle. As a matter of course, most men marry.

Fifthly, elders are to be taken from mature Christian men who are married and have children. His children are to be believers and those still in his household are to be respectfully obedient (Titus 1:6; 1 Timothy 3:4). There is nothing remarkable about a married man having children. Most married men are fathers, and from such a characteristic population new disciples were drawn in the past and will be drawn today. Nor should it be thought unusual for a Christian father’s children to be faithful disciples and obedient to him. Godly parents will, more often than not, lead their children to serve the Lord (Proverbs 22:6). In New Testament times, it was not uncommon for whole households to be converted (Acts 10:24; 11:14; 16:31, 33).

From among mature Christian family men with many different abilities there are bound to be some who are effective teachers (1 Timothy 3:2), able to nurture and train their brethren in the righteous ways of the Savior and protect them from the deceptions of false teachers (Titus 1:9; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-5).

Now, from all these qualifications of elders there is nothing so significant as the fact that they are devoted Christians. That they are men, married men, family men is not anything special. That they possess native skills as teachers gives them no distinction either. Many men who have no faith in Christ at all could say the same. In the case of elders, it is the unqualified devotion that these men have to Christ that gives meaning to their family relationships and to their God-given skills.

I cannot tell you how often I have heard complaints about the absence of elders in local churches and the difficulty of finding qualified men to serve. It is not helpful merely to describe the problem and complain about it. We need to find the exact source of this critical shortage and formulate some godly solutions.

One thing we must face is that the Holy Spirit makes elders out of devoted Christians and churches that are filled with half-hearted and indifferent disciples don’t have any material to work with. The answer to the shortage of every kind of worker in the kingdom of God is to get each child of God among us to be totally committed. If we can do that, the problem will take care of itself in time. If not, we will keep on complaining about the shortage of elders today and assure an even greater shortage tomorrow. Until we are willing to deal with our own shortfall in devotion, it is a little unrealistic to complain about the other fellow’s.