

Selection and Ordination of Elders: A Bible Viewpoint

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Introduction

The church or body of Christ consists of the saved or redeemed from the earth in all dispensations -Mt 16:18, Col 1:12-13, 18. It is indisputable that Christ is the owner and head of His church since it is His kingdom over which He reigns with his New Testament, from heaven above -Heb 8:1. In this gospel era, the church is manifest as local assemblies or congregations of disciples in geographical communities -1 Cor 1:2. Being a gathering of many individuals (1 Cor 12:12-14), the church has to be led by visible members. Like any group, it must be led by a few, not by all. In ancient Israel God permitted the appointment of elderly men to rule the clans and a council to rule a town, the Levites to manage the religious assembly, etc. In the New Covenant, God created various offices in the church to make for a smooth administration; namely the Head, the Apostles, the Prophets, the Evangelists, the Teachers, the Elders (governments), and the Deacons (helps) -Eph 4:11-13, Phil 1:1. Our focus is on the Elders (also known in the New Testament as Bishops/Overseers/Pastors/ Shepherds/Presbyters). **This treatise aims to present scripture-based guidelines that a congregation should follow in choosing and installing Elders.** Selection involves *picking from a pool of alternative candidates according to some process (methodology including criteria/qualifications)* whereas **ordination involves the formal act (ceremony) of putting the appointees into office with their job-duties and conditions of service known to all parties involved.** To most churches of Christ, it is oftentimes the practical aspects such as “methodology and ceremony” that seem vague or controversial and to which expediency is supposedly invoked to suit and justify ‘any and every approach’ conceived. We shall outline Bible principles implied by divine precepts and approved actions of God’s people in ages past; so such pattern could serve as a template for us and for future Christians in getting Elders (and Deacons). The lesson is structured as a series of questions and answers in order to carefully highlight pertinent issues.

Why are Elders needed in the church?

Since the word of God has settled matters of faith (such as the fact that the church must meet on the first day of the week -1 Cor 16:1-2; 11:23-26, 33, Acts 20:7) but gives us liberty to exercise discretion in many areas (such as where exactly and at what time of the day the service should commence and end), there is need for some mature members to guide the assembly at taking such discretionary decisions, to settle issues amongst brethren (1 Cor 6:1, 5), etc. Elders rule [in matters of opinion] and direct church affairs based on their knowledge and experience in life and in faith, as older ones. Their work entails decision-making and supervision, to ensure that the saints are doers and not mere hearers of the word. A Bishop is a local officer whose jurisdiction is limited to his immediate congregation where he was appointed. Besides, one cannot oversee what he does NOT see. Elders are to be ordained in EACH and every church -Acts 14:23 and these Shepherds are not charged with the oversight of a distant flock to which they are strangers, technically -1 Pet 5:1-2. 1 Tim 3 gives us many details. Their duties include:

- a) being an example to the brethren in character -vs 2,3,7, 1 Pet 5:3
- b) watching over and caring for the welfare of the flock -vs2, Acts 20:28, 1 Pet 5:2
- c) being able to teach sound doctrine and refute gainsayers -vs 2, Tit 1:9
- d) being able to rule well in matters of human judgment -vs 3-4
- e) being a considerate not an obstinate leader -Tit 1:7
- f) being hospitable and prompting the church to be too -vs 2, Tit 1:8
- g) being a good steward not obsessed with pecuniary gains -vs 2, Tit 1:7, 1 Pet 5:2,
- h) counseling and prayer -Jms 5:14, Tit 1:8-9

Who qualifies to be an Elder?

The criteria for would-be Elders and Deacons are spelt out in scripture:

Titus 1:5 *For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:*

6 *If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly.*

7 *For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre;*

8 *But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate;*

9 *Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.*

1 Timothy 3:1 *This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.*

2 *A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach;*

3 *Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;*

4 *One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity;*

5 *(For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)*

6 *Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.*

7 *Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.*

8 *Likewise must the deacons be grave, not doubletongued, not given to much wine, not greedy of filthy lucre;*

9 *Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience.*

10 *And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.*

11 *Even so must their wives be grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things.*

12 *Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well.*

13 *For they that have used the office of a deacon well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.*

It follows that an appointee for eldership position must be sound in knowledge of the scriptures, faithful, kind, contented, prayerful, calm yet firm, not a drinkard or notorious fellow, etc. Such must have been married to only one living wife, who is still with him (thus a divorcee/remarried, widower or one in marital separation is ineligible). Such must have raised a child in the home (whether biological or adopted) –who has embraced the faith. (A Deacon should equally rule his household well with his children/wards as Christians if such are of the age of accountability). Each of these officers must be a man of good reputation both in the brotherhood and the society. Even the wife must be a faithful believer and example unto others. A local church must know a man and his family over some reasonable time before he can be said to have qualified for this position, it is for those who have been observed or about whom others can testify based on interactions and verifiable reports. Yet it is not a post for a new convert even if he has lived in the neighbourhood of the church assembly for decades, the consideration is to be based on his spiritual and secular/public life over a reasonable period.

Who appoints and ordains Elders in the church?

It is God that does so! Inspired Paul said unto the Elders of the church of Ephesus: *“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which **the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood**”* -Acts 20:28. Yet the Spirit does not personally choose and announce eldership candidates unto the congregation. He allows the prime Teacher therein who is **an Evangelist to coordinate the process with the participation of the entire church**. No other member, no matter how prominent or influential is authorized to do it! The apostles Paul and Barnabas established several congregations. As preachers and prime teachers of those new congregations, they appointed Elders in every church **where qualified men were found**. *(And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the*

Lord, on whom they believed. - Acts 14:23.) In other places they mandated the minister left behind to ensure it was later done. This is evident in Titus 1:5 where the Preacher who was teaching and setting things in order was expressly given the task of ordaining Elders. Similarly Timothy was the one left to teach, organize and get the church behaved at Ephesus (1 Tim 1:3; 3:15). He was nevertheless reminded to do the work of an Evangelist which is primarily sharing the gospel with unbelievers in the world in order to bring them unto Christ for salvation -2 Tim 4:2, 5, Rm 10: 13-15.

What is the appropriate methodology to be adopted for selecting the Elders?

Many have suggested and practiced different approaches. I find it difficult to endorse or recommend procedures such as the following:

- Minister's Prerogative - the Preacher alone select and ordain those he considers worthy.
- Congregational Panel - men fill forms to indicate interest, then an investigative committee of the church interview & shortlist them for the Preacher to ordain. (After the Panel has considered confidential referential as well as opposition reports from members and from the public.)
- Democracy - the members of a congregation nominate some people and vote for them so the Preacher as the returning electoral officer may appoint those who are deemed most acceptable.
- Pastors Fiat - existing Elders unilaterally appoint new Overseers or Deacons all by themselves.

Such approaches are neither tenable nor viable for God has specified criteria and given us an example or implementation in His word. It should not be by anyone's whim (whether the Preacher or a clique) or by the societal practice of campaigning for election based on one's manifesto and popularity.

The right model is in Acts 6; the church selects while the minister(s) ordains.

1 *And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations.*

2 *Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.*

3 *Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.*

4 *But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.*

5 *And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch:*

6 *Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them.*

7 *And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.*

In ordaining Elders, it is advised that the Preacher "*lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins.*" When it comes to serving in spiritual leadership position no one should impose himself or others. Indeed "*no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God.*" **How then is a prospective candidate to indicate his desire for the office?** By working on himself and his family to ensure their meeting the scriptural qualifications are evident to others AND by already doing the work of the position in an informal capacity! For the eldership, direct self-nomination is not ideal; "*let others praise you and not thyself.*" The testimony of other witnesses by putting you forward is weightier. Thus when others see he is demonstrating the qualities expected and is proving himself capable they will notice and nominate him for the position when the time comes. That is why Deacons are asked to ALSO first be proved, it is because those considered for Elders post initially proved themselves fit and capable before their official nomination. When the need arises for proper leadership and after the minister/s has taught extensively on the subject, the church should embark on prayer and fasting to commence the endeavour as Paul and Barnabas did. Thereafter, the Preacher should tell the

congregation: “*brethren, look ye out among you men who meet the Bible criteria whom we may appoint.*” Nominations could be done verbally or in writing in a day or over a few weeks to ensure all members are aware and participating. The Bible sure permits some leeway here; **we are not inspired as the apostles or endowed with miraculous gifts as Timothy to discern, fast-track and do things swiftly.** If afterwards, sisters or youths are among the nominees it could be that the congregation has not understood the lessons and are not ready so it may be necessary to teach 1 Timothy 3 again and redo the nominations. When men that seem to have met the basics are the nominees, then such should be asked to confirm if they are personally eager and ready to serve in such office. Each should declare and know he will be “*taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind*” -1 Pet 5:2. Does it mean every nominee who accepts will be ordained immediately? Not really.

The church should agree on the number they want for the position of Elders. It might be two (as a minimum) or 3, 5 etc. depending on the size, work and resources of the congregation. [The church would have to offset bills eventual appointees will incur in the course of their duties even if they are not paid wages. So phone bills and transportation costs for official errands, etc. would now have to be covered.] Also, from the list of potential candidates who are willing, everyone in the congregation should be asked to identify if any is not blameless. It is necessary that the Preacher (if he is not a candidate, and I think he should not be amongst the pioneer set of Elders) with two or three brothers not vying for the position constitute a screening panel to treat plausible objections to nominees. A Preacher should inaugurate the committee and head it being the one given the divine mandate to ordain Elders. He may only excuse himself (and let the church invite another minister to assist here) if he is being considered for the position too for it is not ethical that one should be a judge in his own case. Since a minister is instructed that “*against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses*” (1 Tim 5:19), he may receive accusations against prospective Elders with two others as witnesses. An objection will have to be from a credible individual who has the interest/image of the church at heart be it a member or an outsider. S/he could be named later, if necessary (1 Cor 1:11, 1 Tim 3:7). Anonymous petitions which may be out of spite or unverifiable are unacceptable. There is really no need for the panel to start writing unto each nominee’s workplace or residence inviting his colleagues, neighbours etc. to submit opinion or petitions on his suitability. Members of the congregation should over the years, have been visiting one another at home and at work to have enough information on each other that may be useful to and forwarded to the panel. Nevertheless, any objection received should be fairly treated with an accuser requested to provide evidence and be cross-examined by a candidate. After private interactions with **both a candidate and his accuser/s meeting face to face** (Acts 23:28-35; 25:16), the panel could advice a candidate to step down after verification that he is unfit or clear him if the matter is not such as would impair on his present qualification and disposition to handle the job. The summary of findings of such panel should be presented to the church without necessarily going into too much details, the aim is to present those deemed suitable. It is only if a candidate protests the summary concerning him that the details of the accusation against him and of their investigation should be made open for the entire church to look into and judge. We must be careful to do things with a clear conscience and take steps to ensure that the entire process is “*acceptable to God, and approved of men.*”

If less than two persons are cleared then appointment into that position have to be truncated or suspended till a future time when more may be ready and qualified. No one should remain on the list that by man’s reasonable judgment could not be adjudged to have met the specified criteria. **If more than the desired and agreed number is presented by the panel as qualified, the list would have to be pruned by the Lord at this stage!** This is when **casting of lots** should come into play as exemplified in Acts 1:20-26. (It is a way to resolve doubts among men and recognize God’s will among seemingly equal/probable alternatives -Jonah 1:7.) This ‘lot’ is neither the people voting to ‘evict’ some as seen in TV reality shows nor the Preacher using veto power but is rather the candidates casting stones or something else which outcome might appear to be a matter of chance, **to ascertain whom God actually**

selects out of the list of qualifiers. “The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the LORD” -Prov 16:33. Those identified need further training as to how to go about their duties and adjust to the role, a kind of pre-orientation. Prospective Elders should be trained in the church by other officers, especially Evangelists -Acts 13:1, 1 Tim 3:2; 5:10 & 2 Tim 2:2. The men need to be taught the scope of their jurisdiction as Bishops that it is to care for the souls of every member including the Preacher, to manage resources be it funds or men or property and to oversee the worship, edification, benevolence and evangelism programs. They need to be aware that the Preacher remains a check and balance who may advise and call them to order when necessary in the course of their duty as Overseers -1 Tim 5:17-22. Additionally due to contemporary lifestyles, other brothers who are skilled professionals in various fields may also be invited to give them seminars such as ICT appreciation on using projector for Bible presentations, PC/Phones for social media to encourage saints, using (e)Library resources to be able to research the scriptures better or conflict management by believing administrators, counselors, etc. These seminars are desirable not compulsory. It depends on the exposure of the candidates relative to the rest of the church but their being spiritually ahead is more important than being technology savvy.

When and in which manner should the ordination (ceremony) be conducted?

To some individuals, families and the society, the event may be akin to the swearing in of public officials or the conferment of chieftaincy titles worthy of pomp and pageantry but it really is not. **It is a solemn and spiritual occasion.** The ordination ceremony need not be extravagant or the occasion to repaint the hall or replace broken chairs. Such should have been done much early or could be planned for later whenever noticed if the funds are available. There is nothing in scripture that mandates that the event of formally proclaiming them Overseers be an elaborate one or that it must be held on the first day of the week. If the church wishes to invite others (optional not mandatory) to send delegates to come witness the occasion and rejoice with them then it is advised that it be held on a Saturday! If held on Sunday then it should take place towards the end of the regular service to ensure most people have arrived AND worshipped. There should be an admonition reminding everyone of their duties and the need for members to submit unto and be cooperative with them -1 Thess 5:12-13, Heb 13:17. These men have to be given an express charge of the Lord by the Preacher to take care of the flock of God and each must signify acceptance of same. **At the nomination the question was something like ‘are you willing to...’ but at the ordination is ‘are you going to...’** The Preacher/s should ceremoniously lay hands on them as they pray to put them into office -Acts 6:6. It will be expedient for the congregation to also issue them recommendation or appointment letters (specifying role, duties, honorarium/allowances, etc.) so that others, even government may recognize if necessary, that these men have been put into the church’s leadership position -2 Cor 8:22-24. Their speech and conduct as Christians and servant-leaders should showcase them anywhere as God’s own *trustees* for his local church -2 Cor 3:1-2. The church is not obligated to serve meals at the ordination program especially if it is does not drag for long to get people famished, it could however choose to serve any refreshment based on its discretion and purse -Mt 14:15-16, Rm 12:10-15, 1 Cor 12:26. The congregation or the appointees may rather wish to celebrate the honour done them with distribution of mementoes / ‘take-aways’ for the felicitating audience.

Conclusion

The selection and ordination of Elders should be an aspiration of every congregation and is a task to be spear-headed by a Preacher. **It must be prayerfully, scripturally and modestly done in a way that will be pleasing to the Lord and honourable before men.** No ‘patch-patch’ (managing unqualified persons) or nepotism, favouritism should be exhibited or tolerated. **A successful exercise will leave a church more united rather than divided** and be of good report to be emulated by others. It will not lead to rancor, division, debts, etc. The Elders and Preacher/s should stick to their complementary roles as assigned by the Lord. Only then will such ventures last as a profitable legacy else the eldership or congregation might end up dissolved in the short or medium period. May the good Lord give us the courage and ability to do the needful as ministers and as members of his congregations in our era, Amen.