

# Biblical Eldership



## Definition of the Roles, Responsibilities, and Qualifications of a Church Elder

This document reflects the beliefs of Connections Christian Church regarding the roles, responsibilities, and qualifications of the Elders of our church. The beliefs and conclusions presented here were reached after a thorough process of individual and group bible study and prayer.

## Summary

Since the formation of the first churches in the first century, there's been a need for oversight to manage the affairs of the church. Biblical evidence shows this oversight is accomplished through a body of church members known as Elders - a complex term and office that carries a wide range of responsibilities and demands a broad set of characteristics from those who would aspire to hold it.

In this document, we attempt to convey our understanding of the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of Elders and to define the characteristics by which candidates are examined and tested before they undertake the office of Elder.

The following summary statements are developed throughout this document

***The foundational Biblical principle of church government is that Jesus Christ is the Head of His church (Eph 1:20-23).***

***The role of an Elder is to oversee the affairs of the church in full submission to the Authority of Jesus Christ.***

***An Elder must steward the responsibilities of governance, authority, protection, and shepherding of the church family.***

Given the potential for this type of authority to be abused, it's imperative that those appointed to the office of Elder be ***people of recognized spiritual maturity who have demonstrated the qualities and characteristics necessary to carry the responsibility and authority of overseeing the affairs of the church for the wellbeing of the church family.***

***1 Timothy and Titus describe the character necessary to fulfill and steward this complex role and, therefore, will be used as part of an evaluation process when considering someone who desires to become an Elder.***

We believe that those who assume a leadership role of this nature need to have a good understanding of and experience with the ministries of Connections. Therefore we have decided that ***in order to be eligible to be appointed as an Elder, a person must have been a part of the Connections family for at least two years and have partnered in a ministry at some point during those years.***

# Background and detailed development

There is a duality to God's chosen instrument for spreading His Kingdom on this earth: the Church. It consists of the individual members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-14,27), as well as the collective gathering of those members for the training up of the Body to full maturity (Eph 4:11-16). While the individuals of the Church are free to exercise their spirituality as each sees fit (submitting to Christ, of course), it's clear from scripture that the collective gathering of the church needs governance. The New Testament identifies governance as residing with a body of Elders, but it must be clearly stated:

**The foundational Biblical principle of church government is that Jesus Christ is the Head of His church (Eph 1:20-23).**

If there is to be governance by a body of Elders, but Christ is the head of His Church, how is this to be accomplished? In other words, what is the role of an Elder?

## ROLE

The church is a living **organism**, which is different from an **organization**, with Jesus Christ as the living Head. There is a subtle, but substantial difference:

An organization is "an administrative and functional structure"

An organism is "a living being wherein the activities of life are sustained by means of organs, separate in function but mutually dependent."

The church is the latter. While an organism is organized, it is more: it is living, responsive to the living Head. The church is a living organism in which every member is to be submissive and responsive to the Head and in mutual dependence and interaction with the other members, so that the will of the Head may be carried out in a harmonious corporate manner. If the members are living daily in submission to the living Head and seeking to obey His Word, then when they come together to take care of business, they are denying themselves and reverently seeking what the Lord is saying to His church collectively.

Having said this, however, it's clear that business can not be conducted effectively by the entire body of believers in the church. This requires, following the New Testament example, that there be a smaller body that is appointed to oversee a range of affairs of the church that includes doctrine and teaching, shepherding, operation, and governance. Christ exercises His headship over the church in these matters through this smaller body of believers. **Thus, the role of an elder is to oversee the affairs of the church in full submission to the Authority of Jesus Christ.**

There are multiple facets to this role described by multiple terms in scripture.

**Elder (presbyteros)** - a person of maturity, sometimes referencing age, but more often referencing experience/respected spiritual maturity, reputation, and standing among a group.

**Overseer (episkopos: over (epi) sees/watches (scopos))** - a specific position or office of authority and responsibility; conveying function and duty.

**Shepherd (poimainō)** - a caretaker or tender; leads, guides, protects, and looks out for the well being of a flock; when used to describe/define or in conjunction with **presbyteros** or **episkopos** it

indicates the tone or nature with which the oversight/leadership should be done; not at the expense of the flock, but for the wellbeing of them.

For Connections Christian Church the use of the term Elder refers to the full scope of these many facets: **Elders are people of recognized spiritual maturity who carry the responsibility and authority of overseeing the affairs of the church for the wellbeing of the church family.**

## **RESPONSIBILITIES**

In their oversight of the affairs of the church, Elders have the authority to fulfill certain specific responsibilities for the wellbeing of the church family. Scripture describes Elders having the responsibility to:

**watch/guard (prosechō & antechomai)** - be alert for, consider carefully, hold firmly, be devoted to yourself, the church family, (Acts 20:28) and the doctrine (Titus 1:9)

**steward/manage (oikonomos)** - one having authority and responsibility on behalf of another (Titus 1:7). This would include financial/resource management as well as personnel management

**govern/ruler (proistamai)** - guide, lead, direct, be active in helping the church family reach spiritual maturity

**oreach (logos)\*** - the act of speaking, giving the systematic treatment of a subject

**teach (didaskalia)\*** - provide instruction; communicate doctrine clearly, consistently, and decisively

\* Not all Elders carry these responsibilities at all times (1 Timothy 5:17) but every Elder is to have the ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2) and to give instruction/encouragement in doctrine (Titus 1:9, Hebrews 13:7) at least at the 1-on-1 level. This is one of the differentiating characteristics/responsibilities between Elders and Ministry Team Leaders.

**appoint (cheirotoneō)** - choose or establish a member of the flock in a specific role after prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23)

**care for/shepherd (poimainō)** - care for, guide, help the flock (1 Peter 5:2)

**rebuke (elegchō)** - expose, refute those in sin under your care (1 Tim 5:18)

**restore (kyroō)** - validate, ratify, reassure a repentant sinner (2 Corinthians 2:5-9, Galatians 6:1-2).

This responsibility is not strictly described as pertaining to Elder in these passages but is a natural outflow of the responsibility to rebuke. The goal of rebuking should be repentance, correction, and restoration - that is the heart and teaching of 2 Corinthians 2 - so it's reasonable to assume that the same body offering the rebuke would be the one to restore (as directed in Gal 6).

**pray (proseuchomai)** - carry petitions to God on behalf of or over the flock (James 5:14)

**anoint (aleiphō)** - pour, smear, or adorn with oil the sick (James 5:14), the restored, or the commissioned.

**lay hands on (epitithemai)** - for appointing, anointing, prayer, healing, restoration (e.g. Acts 6:6, 1 Timothy 5:22)

For Connections Christian Church the Lead Pastor's job description includes the responsibility as the primary preacher/teacher, therefore, given the above description of the responsibilities of an Elder, the Lead Pastor is a full member of the Eldership (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

## **QUALIFICATIONS/CHARACTERISTICS**

Given the potential for this type of authority to be abused by sinful people, it's imperative that those appointed to the office of Elder be equipped for the role and able to selflessly shoulder the responsibilities. But how are people who fit this to be found?

Scripture describes the desirable characteristics for those who would be appointed to the Eldership in two places: 1 Timothy and Titus. Individual character that can be described by these lists indicates the candidate possesses the abilities required to steward the office of Elder. Therefore the process of evaluating candidates involves seeking evidence that the candidate possesses these characteristics in different circumstances and different relationships. Among the characteristics to be used to evaluate Elder candidates are:

### **Qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7:**

**above reproach (anepilēmtos)** - a present state of not giving anyone a reason for criticism, not open to blame, unable to be charged (with character flaws)

**husband of one wife (mias gynaikos andros)** - literally "one wife's husband". Being married is **not** a requirement to be an Elder, but if the candidate is married he/she should be faithful to their spouse and fully honoring their covenant commitment.

#### **A note about gender as a qualifying characteristic for an Elder:**

While there is no outright statement about gender in Paul's list of qualifications for Elders in 1 Timothy 3, his use of masculine terms and pronouns implies it. This comes within the context of his statement in 1 Timothy 2:12 ("I do not permit a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain quiet"). In our study, we examined the broader scope of scripture to see if this statement was a timeless teaching (a Biblical truth that transcends time/culture) or culturally conditioned (a Biblical truth that has relevance in a specific time/culture, in this instance specific to the circumstances in Ephesus where Timothy was pastoring and where Paul had spent so much time as recorded in Acts 19 and 20). Based on other statements made by Paul commending women in leadership, and other scriptures describing women in leadership in both the Old and New Testaments, we concluded this was a culturally conditioned statement and does not represent a timeless restriction on women participating in church leadership, including serving on the Elder Board. For a complete and thorough analysis of our conclusion, please refer to our **Position Statement on Gender and Church Leadership** on our webpage.

#### **A note about remarriage:**

Every circumstance surrounding remarriage is complex and unique and needs to be examined in light of God's truths and God's grace. Remarriage is not a disqualifying condition for an Elder candidate, but the candidate should expect thoughtful and

honest conversations about their previous marriage circumstances during the examination/interview process.

**A note about couples serving simultaneously:**

We believe the home is the foundational environment of discipleship in the Kingdom, and the marriage is the foundational relationship in the home. Therefore, to not place additional stress or strain on the marriage relationship, we believe it is wise to not allow couples to serve simultaneously on the Board of Elders.

**temperate/sober-minded (nēphalios)** - restrained, controlled (has a specific connotation of wine/alcohol, but is most likely meant to be more generic in 'appetites' since specific prohibition to drunkenness is listed below)

**self-controlled (sōphrōn)** - prudent, sober/sound/safe-minded, sensible, discreet

**respectable (kosmios)** - moderate/modest, well ordered, proper, living with decorum

**hospitable (philoxenos)** - fond of guests, inclined to show care (to strangers)

**able to teach (didaktikos)** - skillful at instructing, able to convey instruction and information

**not given to drunkenness (paroinos)** - does not demonstrate a loss of self-control regarding alcohol, drugs, or other substances or temptations

**not violent (plēktēs)** - (literally 'a striker') is not prone to physical outbursts, or belligerence; but **gentle (epieikēs)** - considerate, non-retaliatory

**not quarrelsome (amachos)** - not contentious, not looking for a fight (opposite of peaceable)

**not a lover of money (philargyros)** - not greedy, not driven by monetary gain

**manage his own family well (proistamai oikos kalōs)** - leads/directs/guides his kin or lineage morally/correctly/healthily

**worthy of full respect/with dignity (semnotēs)** - lives with propriety, seriousness, sanctity

**children are obedient/submissive (en hypotagē)** - being a parent is **not** a requirement to be an Elder, but if a candidate is a parent, then it should be that the children demonstrate a willingness to be obedient

**A note about the obedience of children:**

As stated in the opening paragraph of this document, each member of the Body of Christ is free to exercise their spirituality as each sees fit. If a child of reasonable age chooses to resist submitting to Christ that is not necessarily an indictment on the ability of the parent. Since free will is a reality in the Kingdom the focus of this qualification should be more on the intent and implementation of family discipleship, not as much on the outcome.

**not be a recent convert (neophytos)** - not a novice, not new to the faith

**good reputation with/be well thought of by outsiders (martyria)** - having commendable standing as seen (witnessed) through first-hand knowledge by others

**Additional qualifications from Titus 1:5-9:**

**blameless/above reproach (anegklētos)** - free from/without ongoing accusation

**children are believers (pistos)** - faithful); not open to the charge of being **wild (asōtia)** - reckless, uncontrolled) and **disobedient (anypotaktos)** - rebellious)

**not overbearing (authadēs)** - not stubborn, not self-pleasing, self-willed, or arrogant

**not quick-tempered (orgilos)** - not inclined to anger, not short-tempered or irritable

**not pursuing dishonest gain (aischrokerdēs)** - shamefully greedy, prone to dishonest gain

**one who loves what is good (philagathos)** - right-minded

**upright (dikaios)** - righteous, just, in accordance with God's standards

**holy (hosios)** - faithful servant, pious, devout

**disciplined (egkratēs)** - self-controlled, masterful, temperate (with specific reference to sexual appetite)

**hold firmly to (antechomai)** - be devoted to, cling to) the **trustworthy message (psitos logos)** - faithful statement, trusted word)

**give instruction/encourage others (parakaleō)** - urge, plead) by **sound doctrine (hygiainō didaskalia)** - healthy/accurate instruction/that which is taught)

**rebuke/refute (elegchō)** - expose, show/convince the fault of) those who **oppose (antilegō)** - speak against, contradict, talkback against) it.

### Qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3:8-13

**Dignified (semnos)** - worthy of respect

**not double-tongued (dilogos)** - sincere, not two-faced

**not addicted (prosechō)** - unguarded, unaware) to much wine

**hold (echomenos)** - possess, retain) the **mystery (mystērion)** - beyond human ability to determine) of the **faith (pistis)** - believe to complete trust) with a **clear conscience (katharos syneidēsis)** - ritually clean/clear/pure distinguishing between right and wrong)

**managing (proistamai)** - guiding, leading, directing) their **children (teknon)** - offspring, those under care/responsibility/direction/authority)

(managing) their own **households (oikos)** - kin by blood or marriage and slaves/servants) well (*kalōs* - morally, accurately)

### Application of these characteristics to the evaluation of Elder candidates

Given that these lists are not identical in both letters, it's reasonable to assume they are not exhaustive, but descriptive. That is to say, they define a minimum set of characteristics but imply a larger set. It's obvious from scripture that there are other desirable, necessary characteristics that a candidate must possess that are not explicitly listed here but must still be examined. For example, no mention is given of lying, gossiping, etc. but these would be specific negative examples of the character being described.

Additionally, while Scripture does not state any time frame of participation in a church family before one is appointed as an Elder, we believe that those who assume a leadership role of this nature need to have a good understanding of and experience with the ministries of Connections. Therefore we have decided that **in order to be eligible to be appointed as an Elder, a person must have been a part of the Connections family for at least two years and have partnered in a ministry at some point during those years.**

## ASSESSING THE QUALIFICATIONS OF A CANDIDATE

1 Timothy 3 describes the testing of deacons (and, by extension, to the broader role of Elder). It is the responsibility of the current overseers to put Elder candidates to the test as described by:

**be tested first (*dokimazō prōton*** - examined before) then **serve (*diakoneō*** - render assistance or wait upon)

**prove themselves blameless (*eimi anegklētos*)** - exist/demonstrate being free from/without accusation

Only after successfully passing the “test” (which will include a thorough interview of the candidate and interview of several references) will a candidate be appointed to the role of Elder and put forth to the church family for affirmation.