



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH LAUREL, MARYLAND

The role of Elders and Deacons at FBCL

Preamble: The following statement has been written and approved by the Elders of First Baptist church of Laurel, MD and is both supported and taught in the pulpit ministry.

Elders

Elders: Who They Are

In Scripture, elders are also called pastors or overseers. While some people draw distinctions between these three roles, the terms are used interchangeably throughout the Bible (cf. Acts 20; 1 Peter 5).¹ Rather than representing three distinct offices of the church, the triplicate terms reflect three features that all elders should share in common. They are expected to be mature in the faith (elder); they are expected to shepherd the flock of God's people (the Greek word for pastor means "shepherd"), and they are given special responsibility to watch over the doctrine and practice of the church (overseer). In short, elders are concerned with the spiritual needs and leadership of the church.

The qualifications for the office of elder are given primarily in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. As the most robust of these passages, Paul's instructions to Timothy are worth quoting in full:

This saying is trustworthy: "If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work." An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. He must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God's church?) He must not be a new

¹ John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 161.

convert, or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil. Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap. (1 Timothy 3:1-7 CSB)

In this passage, as in Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5, elders are expected to exhibit exemplary spiritual, moral, and social character. Like deacons, elders live sincere, generous, faithful, self-controlled lives. They are students of Scripture, holding to sound theology. Their family lives prove that they apply the truth of Scripture in all areas of their lives.

The expectations for elders differ from those of deacons in one critical way. Whereas deacons are not identified by any specific responsibility, elders are described as men who are "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). Paul does little to elaborate on what he means by this phrase, but the picture of elders throughout the New Testament helps to complement the idea. Elders, as the leaders of God's people, bear a special responsibility to preach the word and protect the church from false teaching. (More on this in the next section.)

The Bible presents an overwhelmingly clear answer to the question of the number of elders. When one looks at the verses containing the words elder, overseer, and pastor, a consistent pattern of plurality emerges.² Luke, Paul, James, and Peter all refer to the office of elder in the church, with each assuming a plurality of elders per congregation (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-5).³ At FBCL, strictly from a pragmatic standpoint, we would hardly be tempted to limit eldership to one person. But our decision to have multiple elders stems fundamentally from biblical convictions, not pragmatic concerns.

Elders at FBCL undergo rigorous scrutiny based on the scriptural requirements listed above. They go through a process designed to assess whether they meet the moral demands of Scripture, whether they have a passion for shepherding God's people, whether they are leading in generosity and service, whether they have the ability to teach, and whether they agree wholeheartedly with FBCL's theology. Those who do not meet the biblical standards do not step into the role. We believe that the biblical depiction of elders precludes women from serving as elders. Scripture provides no examples of women who served the church in this capacity,

² Ibid., 178.

³ Dever, *The Church*, 57-8.

and the consensus from church history corroborates this perspective. More pointedly, the Apostle Paul forbids women from teaching with elder-like authority or exercising spiritual authority over men in the church (1 Timothy 2:12), two of the key functions that make up the elder's role. Women should be exercising all of the same spiritual gifts as men, including teaching. In fact, we need more women stepping up to do so! But in our efforts to promote more women in leadership, we seek to draw the same lines that Scripture does.

Elders: What They Do

Scripture calls elders to lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2), teach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teaching (Acts 20:17, 28-31; Titus 1:9) pray for the sick (James 5:14), and use proper judgment in theological and doctrinal matters (Acts 15).

While many people in the church will play a part in many of these functions, elders are uniquely called to lead in these ways. Every member of the church bears the responsibility to care about doctrinal purity, to teach others the Word of God, and to pray for others. Elders simply perform these functions with the authority (and weighty responsibility) of the church. They are expected to lead primarily by example, calling others to follow them as they follow Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Only secondarily are they expected to lead others by using their influence in order to shape the direction of the church.

Elders at FBCL are expected to devote themselves to prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4, 20:28). No elder can lead the congregation toward a deeper relationship with Christ unless he is following this path himself. Elders call others along to follow them as they dive deeper into the gospel, both through prayer and Bible study.

Elders at FBCL are engaged members. They are generous with their money, giving their first and best to the mission of the church. They are generous with their time, volunteering to serve, whether on a weekend team or through some other service outlet. They attend and lead during key events.

Elders at FBCL shepherd their congregation. This includes, but is not limited to overseeing communion and baptism, leading components of the worship service, teaching discipleship courses (like Starting Point), coaching leaders, and responding to crises.

Elders at FBCL lead. The congregation has given them the responsibility to guide them, teach them, and challenge them to pursue Christ more faithfully and more fruitfully. When not given specific instruction on how to carry out the mission of the church, elders have the freedom to be innovative and charge forward. But elders stand under authority. They know that they both are subject to the leadership of Christ as well as accountable to the church at large.

As it is the unique responsibility of the elders to steward their leadership with integrity, it is the unique responsibility of the congregation to submit to the leadership of the church. This does not imply mindless compliance: If members of the congregation believe that the leadership has deviated from our church's mission or the clear testimony of Scripture, we encourage members to speak out according to the process outlined in our bylaws. But unless they perceive the leadership to be violating the integrity and ignoring the counsel of Scripture, congregation members should allow the elders to exercise the jurisdiction of leadership that God has given them.

Elders and Staff

The pastoral staff are charged by the elders to assist in the shepherding, care, and doctrinal oversight of the body, and are thereby aiding in the accomplishment of the biblical function of an elder. Elders are encouraged in the "pastoral" duties of overseeing and shepherding, and are thus responsible personally and provisionally. (Acts 20:28) Elders are exhorted to "shepherd" the flock of God that is in their charge, which is also the description of a pastor (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1-2). Thus, their authority is entrusted to the staff team to ensure the proper care and oversight for the congregation.

At FBCL, we are Jesus ruled, pastor-elder led, and congregationally accountable. Jesus is the head of our church, as he is the head of every church. As such, he and he alone gets the responsibility of charting the course for all that we do. Through his revealed word in Scripture, we have our marching orders, given by the King of kings. All that we do must flow from that authority and follow the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

In his wisdom, God has given us a role in leading his church. We believe that the fundamental responsibility, under God, for maintaining all aspects of our public worship belongs to the congregation. It is to the gathered body of believers that

God gives the awesome and weighty role of sharing in his ordinances, unpacking the truths of his Scriptures, and spreading his gospel to the ends of the earth.

As with any gathered body of people, the church must be led.⁴ Those who lead the local church derive their authority both from Jesus Christ (who alone governs his church) and from the congregation (which holds deacons and elders accountable for their actions). The congregation entrusts its leaders with the responsibility of pursuing the mission of Christ in the spirit of Christ. In turn, the leaders honor the congregation by stewarding that leadership trust with faithful integrity. If either side of this relationship wavers, the church falls into an unhealthy place. Following the practice of the New Testament, FBCL recognizes two distinct offices within the local church—deacon and elder.

Deacons

Deacons: Who They Are

The word “deacon” (*diakonos* in Greek) simply means “servant.” Deacons are the servants of our church, who are qualified for the ministry of caring for God’s people. They handle many of the details of the church, allowing elders to focus on shepherding and teaching the church. Their role is to work closely with the elders as they both build the body of Christ up into all maturity.

At FBCL, deacons are nominated by the congregation, vetted by the elders, and voted on at a regularly scheduled member’s meeting. While the book of Acts lacks the word “deacon,” many scholars believe that Acts shows the appointing of the early church’s first deacons. In Acts 6, seven men are chosen to assist the local church in its ministry to widows. Apparently, the spiritual and physical needs of the church in Jerusalem had grown too expansive for the elders to manage on their own. The elders, wanting to remain faithful to their appointed ministry of prayer and the Word, appointed godly men to fill the need of the hour.

The men in Acts 6 are described as being “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3 CSB). Later, the Apostle Paul would offer a more comprehensive list of requirements for deacons. In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes,

Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a

⁴ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 47-8.

lot of wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons. Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything. Deacons are to be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently. (1 Timothy 3:8-12 CSB)

Nearly all of the qualifications Paul offers revolve around moral character. A deacon is to be respectful, sincere, generous, faithful, and self-controlled. Additionally, they must be students of the Bible, holding to sound theology. Of course, these qualities are not unique to deacons but are expectations for all believers. The responsibility of the deacon is not fundamentally different than that of the average Christian. As followers of Christ, we are all called to emulate the spirit of servanthood that he embodied during his time on earth. Deacons lead the way in this spirit of servanthood, which is why we often refer to them as “servant leaders.”

A discerning reader may recognize that the list of qualifications for a deacon looks remarkably similar to the list of qualifications for an elder. Indeed, while deacons and elders function in distinct roles, very little separates them in terms of their moral expectations. Those who minister to the local church, whether as elders or as deacons, must be those who allow Jesus to take lordship over every aspect of their lives. As the Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, “The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.” The greatest need of the people of FBCL is the personal holiness of its deacons and elders.

Conspicuously absent from Paul’s list is any consideration of specific responsibilities. This is not because deacons lack such abilities, nor because they are expected to do only the most menial work. Rather, by focusing on character, Paul opens the door for men and women with all spiritual gifts to serve the church.

Deacons: What They Do

Deacons have been referred to as the table servants or waiters of the church.⁵ They are concerned with the practical details of church life, including administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs.⁶

⁵ Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 19.

⁶ Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 231.

As Acts 6 demonstrates, these servants served the church by distributing food to widows. While this specific application may arise in churches today, the responsibilities of a contemporary deacon vary according to the needs of the local church. From the qualifications, we can infer that deacons will generally be meeting mercy needs and interacting with some of the most intimate details of people's lives. At FBCL, our deacons serve in a variety of areas. They make hospital visits to members who are sick or injured. They distribute meals to families in times of difficulty. They respond to a variety of other "benevolence" needs within the church—advocating for the needy and assisting them (when appropriate) financially on behalf of the church.

Our deacons also serve through the weekend worship service. They prepare and distribute the bread and cup for communion. They handle logistical details related to baptism. They serve on one of our many ministry teams at the church—First Impressions, students, production, prayer, etc.

Beyond these areas, deacons serve the church in a myriad of other ways. Some recruit and manage volunteers. Some lead the way in local outreach. Others create systems that make it easier for us to shepherd our people well. In short, if the church has a need, chances are you will find deacons in the thick of things, serving the church by meeting that need.

Conclusion

Whether we are elders, deacons, staff, or members of FBCL, every one of us looks not to human authority, but to the "chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) who exercised his authority by laying down his life for his sheep. In his eyes, none of us are shepherds, elders, or leaders; all are sheep, desperate recipients of his grace. This reality should instill humility and gratitude in us all.

Our chief Shepherd sends us out on his mission, distinctly equipping each of us to fill a needed role as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth. May we be found faithful in that mission, striving together as one flock, so that the voice of the Good Shepherd might be clearly heard—and that those not yet in his fold might come to know the saving grace of our glorious King.