

**“The Office of Elder”**  
**June 6, 2021**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**Introduction**

We have heard tonight from our three candidates for the office of elder. And now I want to spend a few minutes talking about that office itself and our process going forward.

And as we do, we’ll ask three questions. We’ll ask:

- What kind of roles are elders to fill?
- What kind of men are elders to be?
- And what kind of decision are you called on to make in the election?

So: what kind of roles, what kind of men, and what kind of decision.

And as we ask those questions, we will look at the Biblical data and at what our process is going forward from here.

**The Role of an Elder**

We begin then with our first question: What is the role of an elder? What kind of roles are elders to fill?

Now, I should say up front, as we answer this question, I will treat the office of elder as a distinct office from the office of minister. While there is some diversity in the Reformed tradition on this point, we have historically, and continue to hold to what is called a three-office view of church leadership. This is the view that the offices of deacon, elder, and minister are three distinct offices, each with its own role and calling in the Church.

We won’t dig into those distinctions tonight, but if you are interested in further thought on them, I would highly recommend Pastor Rayburn’s essay to you, which is titled, unsurprisingly “Ministers, Elders, and Deacons.”

But tonight, we will jump in by simply looking at what the Bible says about to role of elders. And while we won’t be exhaustive in our answer, we will consider four texts from the Old Testament that each give us a good Biblical snapshot of the role an elder is to fill.

**To Serve Over the Church**

The first text for us to consider is actually the first time the role of elders among God’s people is mentioned. We find it in Exodus 3:16-18. God is speaking to Moses, commissioning him to go and to rescue God’s people Israel. And then we read this:

<sup>15</sup>God also said to Moses, “[...]” <sup>16</sup>Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, “I have observed you and what has been done to you in Egypt, <sup>17</sup>and I

promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”<sup>18</sup> And they will listen to your voice, and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’”

We see in this passage a first aspect of the role of elders. Elders are to serve *over* the Church – over the people of God. They are to play the role of oversight.

In Exodus 3 this means a few things. First, we see that the elders are interacting with Moses on behalf of the people. God sends his messenger first to the elders. They need to deal with the situation first, as the leaders and representatives of God’s people.

Second, we see that the elders are interacting with Pharaoh on behalf of the people – on behalf of the Church. We often picture Moses alone before Pharaoh, but God sent the elders as well. They were to serve as representatives of the people of God to the unbelieving world.

Third, we see that the elders served over the Church by making important decisions on their behalf. We’re not told of a national vote in Israel about how to respond to Moses’s claims. The elders made a decision on behalf of the congregation. In this little snapshot we see all these ways that elders are called on to serve over the congregation.

In our own context, this looks a bit different, of course. We don’t have a Moses or a Pharaoh to respond to. But some of the same principles hold.

In our context, the elders are called on to make administrative decisions, financial decisions, legal decisions, institutional decisions, staffing decisions regarding oversight of the ministers, and so on, all on behalf of the congregation. Some of these things involve internal decisions. Some are more external, dealing with how we will interact with the unbelieving world. But we do not hold a congregational vote for every congregational decision. The elders are often called on to make those decisions on your behalf.

Elders are to serve over the church. And so in choosing elders, you should choose men you will trust with that authority.

That’s the first thing for us to consider.

### *To Serve Within the Church*

A second text for us to consider comes in Exodus 18:13-27. There’s a lot in this text, but our focus will be on the role that the men described are to fill. These men are never technically labeled as “elders” here, but their role is the same that elders in Israel would later fill, and there are some verbal cues that may link what is described here to the office of elders, as Pastor Rayburn has shown in his exposition of Ezekiel 7:26. [Rayburn, “Studies in Ezekiel No. 7”]

With that in mind, here is what we read in Exodus 18:13-27:

<sup>13</sup>The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. <sup>14</sup>When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he

said, “What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?”<sup>15</sup> And Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God;<sup>16</sup> when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws.”<sup>17</sup> Moses' father-in-law said to him, “What you are doing is not good.<sup>18</sup> You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.<sup>19</sup> Now obey my voice; I will give you advice, and God be with you! You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God,<sup>20</sup> and you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws, and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.<sup>22</sup> And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you.<sup>23</sup> If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all this people also will go to their place in peace.”

<sup>24</sup> So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. <sup>25</sup> Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. <sup>26</sup> And they judged the people at all times. Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. <sup>27</sup> Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

In this passage we see how elders are to serve within the Church by giving counsel and making judgments for the people concerning how the Word of God applies to their lives. In these ways we see that elders are called to serve *within* the Church.

And we should note that there is both a proactive element and a reactive element to this that is alluded to here.

The proactive element comes up in how Moses describes the work he is doing in verse sixteen – he says he is making “them know the statutes of God and his laws.” Now, Jethro emphasizes in verse twenty that Moses will continue this work. But we get the sense that the men appointed here will also extend that work – that while Moses will give authoritative teaching on the Word of God, these men appointed to these roles will see to it that either they themselves, or someone else under them, is helping the people understand and apply what they have heard in a proactive way.

But the role of these men is also reactive. They must decide cases. When a problem or an accusation is brought to them, they must make a judgment based on the word of God on how different accusations regarding sin among the people are to be dealt with.

In the same way, an elder today is called on to act within the people of God both proactively and reactively. And this takes the form of shepherding and discipline.

First, the elder has a calling to oversee the proactive shepherding of the people of God.

The church's work of teaching the word of God is not limited to what happens when we gather on Sundays. When the Apostle Paul described his ministry to the elders of the church in Ephesus, he says to them: “I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable,

and teaching you in public and from house to house.” [Acts 20:20] The leadership of the church is called to instruct the flock in public settings like this, and also house to house. That’s what the Apostle Paul did. And that’s what elders are called on to see done as well.

That may mean that they do it themselves, but it may more often mean that they oversee it. Our ruling elders generally do not publicly preach. Though some have done quite a bit of Sunday school teaching, others have not. But either way, they see to it that public preaching occurs here. In the same way, when it comes to house-to-house instruction, some elders may be gifted in shepherding in that way, but others may be less so. But either way, their role is to see that it happens. Even in Exodus 18 many of the men Moses appointed were in a role of oversight over this instruction rather than direct teaching. In the same way, we need elders who will see to it that the flock receives instruction both publicly, and also in some sort of personal, more relational setting as well. This sort of shepherding is the proactive aspect of how elders are to serve within the church.

But there is also the reactive element. We see here that elders are also called on to provide judgments in the form of discipline within the people of God.

Handling church discipline is an important element of how elders serve within the church. And just as you should choose men who will be committed to your proactive instruction, you should also choose men who you believe can be trusted when discipline is needed.

This means that you want elders whom you would trust in going to when you have been sinned against, and intervention is needed. It also means you should want elders who will confront you both in truth and love if *you* ever need to be confronted, and maybe even need to be disciplined.

In shepherding and discipline we see two key ways that elders are called on to serve *within* the church.

So we see how elders serve over the church. We see how elders serve within the church.

### To Serve on Behalf of the Church

Third, we see how elders serve *on behalf of* the church. And we see that in Exodus 24:1-11.

In Exodus 24 God has called his people together, and presented his covenant to them. And he confirms his covenant with them. And while all the people are involved in this in some way, at the very end, God calls the priests and seventy of the elders to draw close to him, and to come into his presence, on behalf of the people of God. The priests and elders draw close to God on the Church’s behalf.

What are we to make of that? What does that mean in our setting?

Well it means at least a couple things.

On one level it points to the call on elders to pray for the church. Elders have an increased responsibility to go to God in prayer on behalf of the church, and seek his blessing for the congregation.

But even more than that, elders are called on to live their spiritual lives not only for themselves, but for the church. Whenever we have responsibility for someone else, our lives are lived in some real way for them. We are not our own. And that is true in terms of our spiritual life as well. So, for example, if you have children, your Christian walk is not just for you, it is also for them and for their benefit.

And in a similar way, an elder's spiritual life is not their own. It is for the good of the church. Therefore they must take it seriously, and seek to care for the church by drawing close to God themselves.

### To Serve Under the Church

Finally, as we consider the role of the elder, we look at one more role they are to take on.

The text for this role is a long one, even in the somewhat abridged form in which I'll read it. But I think it is an important text when anyone, including our candidates, considers what it means to be an elder.

Please listen carefully to several passages from Numbers 11. God has rescued his people from Egypt, and now they are wandering in the wilderness. And then we come to this passage in Numbers 11:1-30. We read:

And the people complained in the hearing of the LORD about their misfortunes, and when the LORD heard it, his anger was kindled, and the fire of the LORD burned among them and consumed some outlying parts of the camp. <sup>2</sup>Then the people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. <sup>3</sup>So the name of that place was called Taberah, because the fire of the LORD burned among them.

<sup>4</sup>Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, "Oh that we had meat to eat! <sup>5</sup>We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. <sup>6</sup>But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

[...]

<sup>10</sup>Moses heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent. And the anger of the LORD blazed hotly, and Moses was displeased. <sup>11</sup>Moses said to the LORD, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? <sup>12</sup>Did I conceive all this people? Did I give them birth, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a nursing child,' to the land that you swore to give their fathers? <sup>13</sup>Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me and say, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' <sup>14</sup>I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me. <sup>15</sup>If you will treat me like this, kill me at once, if I find favor in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness."

<sup>16</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you. <sup>17</sup>And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you may not bear it yourself alone.

[...]

<sup>24</sup> So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD. And he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent. <sup>25</sup> Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. And as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied. But they did not continue doing it.

[...]

<sup>30</sup> And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

What should we take from this?

The Bible – especially in the prophets, but really in all sorts of places – repeatedly speaks about the burden and the suffering that not only very sinful leaders, but even mostly good-intentioned but still flawed and imperfect leaders can bring on the people of God. That is an important reality, and why we will shift in just a minute to talking about the character needs for elders. So that’s important, and we’ll get to that.

But the Bible does not present the effects of sin between leaders and God’s people as a one-way phenomenon. It goes two ways.

And so the role of an elder is not only to resist the effects of his sinfulness towards the congregation. The role of an elder is also to be someone who will continue to serve sacrificially under the congregation even when they mistreat him – even when they sin against him. The role of an elder is to bear the burdens of a congregation, even when those burdens are unfair.

Moses certainly experienced that. And when he complained to God, God did not argue with him. God gave him elders to help bear the burden of serving sinful people. That is what elders are called to. Elders must be men willing to fill that role, and able to fill that role.

So, we see how elders, in the Bible, serve over the church, within the church, on behalf of the church, and sacrificially under the church. That gives us something of a sketch of the role of elders.

## **The Character of an Elder**

And it leads us to our second question: What about the character of elders? What kind of character are elders to have?

We have already heard some of the character traits needed for elders in some of the previous passages, but we get a more focused list in First Timothy 3 and Titus 1. There is some discussion as to how much these passages are focused on the office of minister and how much they are focused on the office of elder, but either way they give us the description of the kind of man an elder should be – the kind of character he should have.

Let’s hear them.

In First Timothy 3:1-7 we read:

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.<sup>2</sup> Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,<sup>3</sup> not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.<sup>4</sup> He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,<sup>5</sup> for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?<sup>6</sup> He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

Then, from Titus 1:5-9 we read:

<sup>5</sup>This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—<sup>6</sup>if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.<sup>7</sup> For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,<sup>8</sup> but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.<sup>9</sup> He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

If we bring these lists together, we find a lot of overlap, and we come out with one long list of character traits for an elder. Let's consider that list briefly.

First, an elder is to be willing. We read that he is to “aspire” to the office. [1 Tim 3:1] That does not point to ambition, but more to the idea that ... even after reading passages like Numbers 11 he is still willing to serve.

Next, an elder is to be “above reproach” [1 Tim. 3:2; Tit 1:6,7] This does not mean he is perfect. But it does mean that he conducts himself in a way that does not damage the Church or the name of Christ.

Next, an elder is to be “self-controlled” [1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8] Which means that he is to be prudent and reasonable, able to control his impulses in order to make and carry out wise decisions.

Next, an elder is to be “respectable” [1 Tim 3:2], “well thought of by outsiders,” [1 Tim 3:7], “a lover of good,” “upright” and “holy” [Tit 1:8] Both in the world and in the Church he is to be marked by integrity and the ability to work with people – even people very different from himself – without giving unnecessary offense, but working with them for what is good.

Next, he is to be “sober-minded,” “disciplined,” “not a drunkard” [1 Tim 3:2,3; Tit 1:7,8]. He is, in other words, to be a man who can manage and control his appetites.

Next, he is not to be “a lover of money” or “greedy for gain” [1 Tim 3:3; Tit 1:7]. He is to be a man who can check his desires for worldly success, and keep such things in proper comparison when they are compared to the spiritual realities that are truly most important.

Next, he is to be “the husband of one wife” [1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6], “he must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,” [1 Tim 3:4-5], and his

children are to be “believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.” [Tit 1:6-7] For, as Paul notes, “if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?”

A few points are being made here. First, he is to be a man of sexual integrity. Second, he is to be a man who is faithful in his marriage. And third, he is to show his ability for ministry and spiritual care in how he raises his children. Now ... evaluating this can be tricky, because while a man's conduct is under his control, the conduct of others – including his family members – often is not. And so the point is not that his family puts forward a perfect image. The point is that as far as it is in his control, he is a man who, in both his marriage and his parenting, exhibits the kind of care, and nurture, and discipline that one would expect of a leader in God's household.

Next, he is to be “hospitable” and able to teach and give instruction. [1 Tim 3:2, Tit 1:8,9] This doesn't necessarily mean that he is a skilled lecturer when it comes to teaching, or that he is a skilled cook when it comes to hospitality. That is not the main point. The point is that he is to be one who will invite others into his life, and who is willing to enter into their lives, all the while pointing them to the Lord.

Next, he is not to be violent, or quarrelsome, or arrogant, or quick-tempered, but instead he is to be gentle. [1 Tim 3:3, Tit 1:7] In other words, he is not to puff himself up or pick fights or become forceful to make a point or to get his way or to lead a group. But he is to come alongside others with gentleness in order to care for and lead them.

And finally, he is not to be a recent convert [1 Tim 3:6]. He is to have some experience in the Christian life – a depth of knowledge of the Lord and what it means to follow him.

These are the character traits Paul gives for an elder. Those are the kind of men elders are to be.

### **The Election of an Elder**

Now, that is a lot of information. And so you might feel a bit overwhelmed as we come to the last question: And what kind of decision are you called on to make in this election?

You might feel now as if you're not qualified to vote one way or the other. After all, how can you say whether these men meet all of those character requirements? How can you say whether they can fill the roles we've laid out from the Scriptures?

But here it is important to note that you are not alone in this decision. But both you and your current elders are to work together in evaluating these men.

That process is not something invented by us. It was wisely established in our denomination's *Book of Church Order*. [BCO 24-1]

The process, if you remember, began with your nominations. These men were not selected by the session to begin – they were nominated by you, the congregation.

But next, they were examined by the session. These men were each interviewed by the session regarding their Christian experience, and their personal character, and their management of their family. After that, they received training on the nature and the work of the office of elder, as well as the doctrinal standards of our denomination, and the constitutional elements of our church government. That training involved not only me, but almost all of the elders gave some form of instruction in that process, as did one elder emeritus. After that, these candidates were given written exams on their knowledge of the Bible, on our system of doctrine, and on our system of government. Within our training, we established their understanding of the office of elder, considered their theological views, and confirmed their willingness to serve.

It's been an involved process. And each of these men is coming before you now because the session has determined that they are eligible for election: as far as we can tell, they meet the requirements for the office of elder.

That whole process is important. And it should be a relief to you because it means that you do not need to shoulder the responsibility on your own of quizzing each man on his knowledge of the Bible, or digging into how he handles various temptations in life. We have done that.

But our having done that does not make them elders. That's not how it works. We, the session, do not choose your elders. You choose your elders.

Our *Book of Church Order*, which is the part of our denomination's constitution that sets out our church government begins with eight preliminary principles. The sixth one is this – it says: “Though the character, qualifications and authority of church officers are laid down in the Holy Scriptures, as well as the proper method of officer investiture, the power to elect persons to the exercise of authority in any particular society resides in that society.”

Now, what does that mean? Well, it means that the Bible may set the qualifications for the office of elder. And the session's job may be to evaluate men to see if they meet those requirements. But the congregation gets to choose its elders. The session doesn't get to just choose the candidates it likes. And for that matter, the session doesn't get to just eliminate qualified candidates they don't personally like. We examine candidates. We don't choose them. The congregation chooses them.

And that is in significant part because you will need to submit to them. When a man is ordained and installed onto our session, they will take a number of vows. But you will be called on to take a vow as well.

Here is the vow you will take. I will ask the following question, and you will be called on to respond, “We do.” I'll ask you: “Do you, the members of this church, acknowledge and receive this brother as a ruling elder, and do you promise to yield him all that honor, encouragement and obedience in the Lord to which his office, according to the Word of God and the Constitution of this Church, entitles him?”

You will vow to give each new elder the “obedience in the Lord to which his office [...] entitles him.” But, before you do, as a congregation you will vote to determine the men you will be called on to submit to.

There are two errors you could fall into as you think about this. One is to raise the bar for such an office so high that no man (or very few men) could actually fill it. Now, you have the right to decide that you don't think a candidate is qualified. But I would encourage you to consider seriously the examination the session has already done of these men, and the fact that we have said that as far as we can see, these men do meet the Biblical requirements to serve as elders.

But the other error you may be tempted to make is to think of your vote as just rubber-stamping a session decision. But that is not right either. This is your decision. And, in fact, our congregation has particularly emphasized that fact. In our bylaws we have raised the percentage of votes needed for a man to be elected, over and above what is required by our denomination. The point of that is to stress the fact that your decision as a congregation is a real one. You must decide if you would have these men to serve over our church, within our church, on behalf of our church, and sacrificially under our church.

The election, as we have said, is after the evening service on June 27<sup>th</sup>. You need to be physically present to vote. The men are not running against each other, but you will vote yes or no for each man. All three can be elected, or two can be, or one, or none. That is up to you.

In order to be elected, a candidate must receive affirmative votes from two-thirds or more of the voting members who are present at the meeting. That means that two-thirds of those voting members present that night need to vote yes for each candidate in order for them to be elected. And so, in this election an abstention is effectively the same as a "no" vote.

The election will be in three weeks. You have heard from these men. I encourage you to prayerfully consider your vote, to take some time to get to know these men, and to consider the session's evaluation of these men.

For myself, I am excited to see the Lord's work in the process, and to see how he will continue to shape and bless our session going forward through the men he will bring onto our session.

It is a big decision for us. But God is sovereign over this process. And we entrust it to him.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

Rayburn, Robert S. "Ministers, Elders, and Deacons" in *Order in the Offices: Essays Defining the Roles of Church Officers*. Edited by Mark R. Brown. Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993.

Rayburn, Robert S. "Studies in Ezekiel No. 7" March 11, 2007. <https://www.faithtacoma.org/ezekiel/2007-03-11-pm>

Taylor, Justin. "What Are the Requirements to Be an Elder?" *The Gospel Coalition*. June 21, 2019. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/what-are-the-requirements-to-be-an-elder/>