



An Overview of the Office

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be an elder in the church today? Do elders still have a real function, or is their office just an antiquarian curiosity from the past? One sometimes gets the impression that elders are not always honored in the measure that their office would warrant. Indeed, experience teaches that it is not unusual for this office to be undervalued, even by those who stand to gain the most from it, namely the members of a local congregation. Faithful elders are typically the unsung heroes in many Presbyterian and Reformed churches, and their toil is often neither fully understood nor appreciated.

And yet this office is needed more than ever in the church today. The eldership is a great blessing from God. Elders can be encouraged by the reality that they stand in a long line of elder office bearers whom the Lord our God has been pleased to equip and use for the benefit of his people. After all, the office goes all the way back, not just to the New Testament church, but to the Old Testament people of God! This tremendous heritage is usually not fully appreciated. However, if we can uncover and understand the key normative principles underlying the faithful execution of this office in Old and New Testament times, we will rediscover what a precious gift this office is. We will also be better equipped to meet the challenges facing the church today.

History has shown that the office of the elder cannot be taken for granted. It needs to be constantly rediscovered and its

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great value reappraised again and again. This book therefore wishes to serve teaching and ruling elders, theological students, church leaders, and interested church members by encouraging a renewed appreciation for this office. We hope to reach this goal by determining and considering the crucial normative features of the eldership as found in the Old Testament and developed further in the New, and by seeing how these principles impact the well-being of the church.

By way of orientation we begin by reflecting on:

- What is an ecclesiastical office?
- The continuity of the office in the Old and New Testament
- The discontinuity of the office between the Old and New Testament
- The plan of this book

This initial survey will help us to understand the need to go all the way back to the Old Testament in order to do justice to the office of elder and realize its significance for today.

What Is an Ecclesiastical Office?

An elder is called an office bearer—that is, he has a certain office. What precisely is an office? An ecclesiastical office can be defined as a task given by God for a specific continuous and institutional service to his congregation with a view to its edification. Such a special office is to be distinguished from the general office given to all believers. As the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us in Lord's Day 12, all Christians share in Christ's anointing so that as prophets they confess Christ's name, as priests they present themselves as living sacrifices of thankfulness, and as kings they fight against and triumph over sin and Satan. This book concerns itself with the special office of elder.

Now when God gives a task, he also provides the necessary gifts. However, the right to ecclesiastical office does not reside

in the gifts that one may have, but in the Lord who calls one to the office. As John Murray noted, “For office there must be a corresponding gift, but not all gifts bestowed by the Spirit and necessarily exercised within the unity of the body of Christ and for its edification, invest the participants with office in the sense in which this applies to apostles, prophets, pastors, rulers in the church, and diaconate.”¹

Our egalitarian and democratizing age is unsympathetic to the idea of authority, including the special office, that is, of someone being given a specific task by God with all the connotations of authority and divine legitimacy this concept brings with it. Yet, if we are to fully grasp the biblical notion of office and more specifically the office of elder, we need to be clear about this point. The exercise of authority by one person over another is justified and can be justified only by the fact that God gives the office. God is the source of this authority, not the congregation. God also sets the limits of this authority. God alone is sovereign.²

A Task Given by God

God in his good pleasure calls certain persons to serve him in a special office. What a daunting truth! He is the living God of heaven and earth whose appearance on Sinai brought fear and trembling to the people (Ex. 20:18–21). And he, the Holy One, not only covenants with humankind but also gives certain individuals a specific task among his people so that these office bearers can be his instruments and even his voice.

Needless to say, the Lord has supreme authority and therefore he can set someone over others for a specific service in different ways. For instance, we are informed in quite some detail how the priests were ordained to office and started their work amidst an awesome display of the glory of the Lord (Lev. 8–10). The process of being recognized as an elder with authority in

1. John Murray, “Office in the Church,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–82), 2:358.

2. See K. Sietsma, *The Idea of Office* (Jordan Station, ON: Paideia, 1985), 37–40.

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Israel was considerably less dramatic, but this did not in any way diminish the authority of this office and the respect that was to be shown to it.

There were apparently two basic ways of coming to the office of elder in ancient Israel. The first we could characterize as being directed by the providence of God. In this scenario, no specific moment of being ordained to office is noted, but because of the structure of Israelite society at a certain point in history, some individuals acquired a position of leadership and became elders, be it elders of the people (Ex. 3:16) or of a tribe (Judg. 11:5) or of a city (Judg. 8:14). That such elders indeed held office is evident from the term “elder” being used with or in place of official titles (Josh. 24:1; Judg. 8:14; 1 Kings 8:1; Ezra 10:8).

The second way of coming to the office was by being appointed after having been chosen by the people (Deut. 1:13–16). The involvement of the people in the Old Testament dispensation in the receiving of office bearers with authority over them is noteworthy.

With respect to the New Testament church, Paul and Barnabas appointed (*cheirotoneō*) elders in every church during their first missionary journey (Acts 14:23). It is quite likely that what occurred is relayed here in a compressed manner so that only the last act, the appointment, is mentioned and the intermediary steps, such as the participation of the congregation, are left out. The NIV text note thus suggests that they “had elders elected.” Similarly, when Paul charged Titus to appoint (*kathistēmi*) elders in Crete (Titus 1:5), this duty did not mean that the congregation had no part to play.³ Such participation would not be unexpected given the involvement of the congregation in the Old Testament in the receiving of office bearers. Indeed, the congregation had chosen the seven in Acts 6. The apostles had then laid their hands on them and set them aside for the distribution of food among the needy. The churches also chose (*cheirotoneō*) a brother to accom-

3. See George W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 288. The basic meaning of *cheirotoneō* is “stretch out the hand, for the purpose of giving one’s vote in the assembly.” See G. H. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, *A Greek-English Dictionary*, 9th ed. with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1986a.

pany Paul and Titus (2 Cor. 8:19). Furthermore, that the apostolic letters are directed to the congregation, and not just to the leadership, underlines that the congregations were responsible for their own affairs and could therefore be expected to participate in the selection of their leaders. This office belonged to the local church (see, e.g., Acts 20:17; 1 Peter 5:1). Indeed, the Didache, or Doctrine of the Twelve Apostles, probably a first- or early-second-century document, instructs the churches: “And so, elect [*cheirotoneō*] for yourselves bishops and deacons who are worthy of the Lord.”⁴

Today one usually becomes an elder through a process that includes a recognition of one’s gifts and election by the congregation, followed by the appointment to office by the session or consistory. At his ordination the elder acknowledges this to be God’s way of calling him to the office. In the Reformed tradition, this acknowledgment takes place when he affirmatively answers the question: “Do you feel in your heart that God himself, through his congregation, has called you to this office?”

Because the elder receives his office from God, he represents God himself in the execution of his task. This gives great weight and solemnity to the office. Since the origin of the elder’s office is from God, his authority does not, for example, derive from a church hierarchy, nor from the congregation but from the head of the church, Jesus Christ. It is through Christ that God gives the office today.⁵

The divine commission of the eldership places great demands on the office bearer, which he of himself is unable to fulfill. He therefore needs to do his task prayerfully in consecrated dependence on the Word and Spirit (Acts 14:23).

A Specific Service for Edification

The service of the elder in Israel differed from that of the priest, prophet, or king. We will see in more detail later that the

4. Didache 15:1. For the text and translation see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA / London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1:440–41.

5. See chapter 6, under the heading “The Congregation of Christ.”

eldership had two key tasks. Elders were to give sound leadership and guidance to the people and their affairs in a manner pleasing to God. Elders were also to act as judges. In this way they participated in the discipline of God's people and watched out for their welfare.

As will become evident in the course of this book, one could sum up the task of the office of elder as preserving and nurturing life in covenant with God. The task was to be a very positive one. As God's representatives in their areas of jurisdiction, the elders had to bring their wishes and desire to bear on the people. Through their office, something of the glory of God who set his people free and who wanted them to enjoy life with him was to be seen and experienced.

Finally, it should be noted that the service of the elder for edification is indeed to be characterized by serving. This is in keeping with what the Lord of the church said: "I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:27; Mark 10:43–45). There is, therefore, to be no lording over the flock, but rather a seeking of its well-being (1 Peter 5:3). The admonition of the apostle Peter also counts for office bearers: "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. . . . If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 4:10–11).

The Continuity of the Office of Elder in the Old and New Testament

Is it legitimate to compare an ancient Israelite institution with what we find in the New Testament and then relate all that to today? Although we will be returning to this issue in more detail in chapter 6, it is important to consider this question in a preliminary way at this point. Sometimes Old Testament Israel is simply seen as a nation from the distant past with no direct relevance for the church today. Yet the church of the Lord today

has a direct continuity with the people of God in the Old Testament. This fact impacts how we view the office of elder.

We first need to note that the Old Testament nation of Israel was God's chosen people (Ex. 19:6; Deut. 7:6) who had received the promises of the coming messianic king and suffering servant (Gen. 49:10; Isa. 53). When the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, came (Luke 24:25–27), those who believed in him continued to be God's special people. Thus, Peter, for instance, could call the recipients of his first letter "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Peter 2:9). Such a manner of referring to Christians was obviously an allusion to similar words spoken by God from Mount Sinai when he promised that Israel would be for him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). Indeed, the church is even specifically called "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The New Testament church is therefore the new Israel of God, and those who believe in the Christ are children of Abraham (Gal. 3:7).⁶

As the new Israel, the church has retained the use of the old office of elder. That the Christian eldership is rooted in the Israelite and Jewish office need not be doubted. When Luke mentioned this office for the first time (Acts 11:30), he did so without any explanation because none was needed. For the same reason, he also first introduced the appointment to this Christian office (Acts 14:23) without explanation. To the first Christians who were Jewish and had grown up with the synagogue and its elders, it would have seemed a matter of course that the eldership would be instituted in each congregation as it was established. Continuity with the past was maintained.

That the old office of elder became a Christian office indicates its abiding significance. At the same time, this continuity also shows that the eldership as it now functions in the church cannot be properly understood without the Old Testament background. After all, there is a long history behind this office.

6. See further O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000); and Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 71–84.

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This history did, however, involve much change and upheaval. Profound political transformations took place, especially from the time of the exile and through the intertestamental period. Yet the essentials of the office of elder in giving godly leadership for the nurturing and preserving of life in covenant with God basically stayed intact. The elders continued their work both in exile (Jer. 29:1; Ezek. 8:1) and in postexilic Judah (Ezra 5:3–11). The manner in which they exercised their responsibilities, particularly on the national scene, was influenced by historical developments. When the tribal units were in effect dissolved, individual families gradually became more important and certain families achieved national prominence. Elders from this nobility had the leadership. By the second century B.C. there was evidence for the existence of “a council of elders,” which consisted of seventy or seventy-one members and was the forerunner of the Sanhedrin (1 Macc. 12:6; 14:20). At first the members were generally spoken of as elders (*presbyteroi*). As time went on, this term became used more and more to distinguish the “lay” members, who probably came from the nobility in Jerusalem, from those with a priestly lineage, as well as from those who were scribes. This situation is reflected in the New Testament where the triad of chief priests, scribes, and elders is often referred to as the Sanhedrin (e.g., Mark 14:43, 53, 55; 15:1). This body is, however, also referred to as “the council of the elders” (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5).

During the upheavals of exile and return, the system of local elders continued (Ezra 10:7–17). It is this local eldership that is especially important for our topic since it retained the fundamental features of its ancient Israelite counterpart. Each Jewish community had its council of elders (Judith 6:16). When the synagogue became an established institution, the elders directed its activities and, as could be expected, were responsible for godly leadership in what they perceived were God’s expectations for his people. They were also responsible for the discipline in the congregation. Although the Gospels show that the zeal of the synagogue and the elders associated with it was

often misguided, their desire to safeguard their understanding of the Scripture is evident. Two examples come to mind. First, the elders had decided to discipline anyone who confessed Christ by excluding him from their synagogue (John 9:22; Luke 6:22). Second, the ruler of the synagogue, who was probably chosen from the elders, was indignant that Christ healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14). Such instances show that the elders, though mistaken, took their task seriously.

When the first Christian congregations were established by Jewish believers, these were considered, not surprisingly, to be new synagogues. Thus in what appears to be the oldest Christian document, the letter of James,⁷ the Christian assembly or meeting is referred to as a “synagogue” (*synagōgē*; James 2:2). Although James also refers to the church (*ekklesia*; James 5:14), the fact that he uses the word “synagogue” is notable, given the Jewish connotations it carried. Elsewhere in early Christian writings the term “synagogue” is also used to describe the Christian assembly or place of assembly.⁸ This usage underlines the continuity of the Christian congregation and the synagogue assembly which the Jewish Christians left behind. Indeed, it could even be construed as an implicit challenge to the synagogue in the sense that the Christian church is its legitimate successor. Now as the synagogue could not be imagined without the office of elder, neither could the Christian church. Without implying that the Christian church adopted the entire organizational framework of the Jewish synagogue, which it definitely did not do, the New Testament office of elder can nevertheless be seen as coming out of the Jewish synagogue heritage, which in turn has deep Old Testament roots.

It is this office, with which the first Jewish Christians were only too familiar, that continued in the Christian church under the direction of the apostles. There is therefore continuity with

7. James was probably written in the middle 40s A.D. See the discussion in Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids/Leicester, England: Eerdmans/Apollos, 2000), 9–27.

8. See G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961), 1296.

the past. However, while this is so, there are also areas of discontinuity that need to be noted by way of orientation.

The Discontinuity of the Office between the Old and New Testament

A major difference between the Old and New Testament periods with respect to our topic is that in the Old Testament there was a very close relationship between what we today call the church and state. The societal and civic tasks of the elder, as described in the Pentateuch, were at the same time done within the religious congregation of the Lord. Israel was a theocracy. Now to be sure, the covenant assembly and the nation were not identical. Only the circumcised who lived within the borders of Israel were part of God's holy congregation (Ex. 12:38; Josh. 8:35). Yet, in the functioning of the elder, it would have been very difficult to categorize or differentiate his tasks as strictly belonging to either the civic or religious realm. The elder's giving leadership and judging took form according to the governing civil structures in place. At the same time they were done within and for the benefit of the people of God.

This Old Testament situation no longer holds true for the New Testament church. This changed context means that we have to be careful in distilling principles regarding the work of the Old Testament elders which are to have abiding significance in our day and age. To take an obvious example, neither the elder nor the church today has any civil authority to mete out the death penalty. This, however, does not mean that this Old Testament legal material is of no relevance now for the task of the elder in today's church. One could argue that as the death penalty removed unrepentant members of the Old Testament church from the body of God's people, so the application of church discipline by excommunication does essentially the same today. But the point is clear. In deriving the relevant principles for the task of the Old Testament elder for today,

we need to be sensitive both to the abiding truths and to the changing outward circumstances. An assessment of the relevant New Testament data will be indispensable for achieving such a balanced understanding.

The Plan of This Book

Our chief concern is to obtain a renewed understanding of and appreciation for the office and task of the elder by taking into full account the relevant Old Testament material. To that end we will first consider the general image of the shepherd and his flock since this metaphor is fundamental for a good understanding of the leadership offices in Scripture, including that of elder.

After looking at the basic meanings and implications of the Old and New Testament terms for “elder,” we will focus on the Old Testament elder and his leadership and judicial duties. Since the Old Testament does not contain a “handbook” on the office of elder, we will need to go through the evidence and sort out the relevant information so that we can form as coherent a picture as possible about this office in ancient Israel. Only after we have a clear understanding of the place and practice of the eldership in ancient Israel will we be able to derive the principles that carry through into the New Testament church and are still relevant for today’s elder.

When describing how the Christian church inherited this office, we will also consider the Old Testament background of the apparent distinctions of ruling and teaching elder made in the New Testament. Furthermore, the elder’s leadership and judicial roles in preserving and nurturing life in the covenant community today will be examined in the light of the Old Testament principles discussed earlier.

In the concluding section of this book, we will briefly consider two current issues: whether Scripture opens the office of elder to women, and definite or indefinite tenure of the eldership.

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Finally, we will reflect on the privilege of this office both for the elder and for the congregation.

In summary, by integrating the Old Testament principles of the office into an examination of the New Testament elder we hope to rediscover the abiding relevance of these principles. In the process, we also wish to give the elders today, as well as all those interested in the eldership, a clearer sense of what this office entails. We cherish the hope that all of this may be of some assistance for the actual work of the elders.