



Elders are not mentioned directly in Paul's sketch of the structure of the local church¹. From the profile sketch of elders/overseers that he gives in his letters to Timothy and Titus it appears that Paul places these functions under the chapter 'management'.

Who can be elders in the church and which tasks they fulfil are elaborated in this study.

Profile sketch of elders/overseers.

The profile sketch of the elders/overseers, as Paul describes them in his letters to Timothy and Titus.

From the first letter to Timothy:

- *Now the **overseer** is to be above*
- *reproach,*
- *faithful to his wife,*
- *temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable,*
- *able to teach,*
- *not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.*
- *He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?)*
- *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.*
- *He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. (1 Timothy 3:2-7)*

From the letter to Titus:

- *The reason I left you in Crete was that you might ... appoint **elders** in every town, as I directed you.*
- *An **elder** must be blameless,*
- *faithful to his wife,*
- *a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient*
- *Since an **overseer** manages God's household, he must be blameless*
- *not overbearing, not quick-tempered,*
- *not given to drunkenness, not violent,*
- *not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable,*
- *one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined.*
- *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught,*
- *so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:5-9)*

Paul apparently attaches much importance to the personality and integrity of elders/overseers in the church because they fulfil an exemplary function in the church.

Much of what he writes in his profile sketches needs no further explanation.

¹ Study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 – Structure of the local church.

A few points are considered in more detail nevertheless.

Elders or overseers.

The **overseers (episkopos)** are only mentioned in 5 places in the New Testament.

On the other hand, the **elders (presbuteros)** are mentioned in 66 texts, sometimes both in a function in the church as well as in society.

Paul writes to Titus that he is leaving him in Crete to appoint **elders** in every town and then he writes: *Since an overseer manages God's household, ...*

It can be concluded from this that Paul makes no distinction between elders and overseers.

When 'overseers' are mentioned they are done so rather as a description of the terms of reference of the elders.

'Elders' is the translation of the Greek '**presbuteros**', which is a general indication of someone who is older in age, as, for example, in the text:

- *Do not rebuke an **older (presbuteros)** man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father. Treat younger men as brothers, **older (presbuteros)** women as mothers, and younger women as sisters, with absolute purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)*

In Biblical times governors and judges of the people were chosen from among the older men, in the expectation that older people have more wisdom of life.

The 'elders' in society therefore also refer literally to those who are older in age.

Elders in the church are also expected to be 'old', spiritually adult, and living in a deep relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul also writes that: an elder *must not be a recent convert*.

Above reproach / blameless.

Paul writes to Timothy that an elder must be **above reproach**.

Elders have an exemplary function as managers of the church and they also represent the church in the outside world.

This is why it is important for them to be respected for their pure lifestyle in the Lord, both in the church and in the outside world.

In contact with the outside world it is important for them to guard themselves from worldly practices.

Therefore:

- *He (the elder) must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap.*

He writes to Titus that an elder must be **blameless** and:

- *He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.*



It must be clear from the lifestyle of the elders that they submit themselves to the authority of Jesus Christ and His Word, the Bible. They must be capable of educating others in this, beginning with their own family.

This is also the reason for the remark that an elder *'must manage his own family well'*.

Otherwise, how would they be able to encourage or correct church members, if they have not put it into practice in their own family?

Faithful to his wife.

Introduction:

In the Old Testament there are many references to men who are married to two or more women. We find no examples of this in the New Testament.

As far as is able to be ascertained, polygamous marriage apparently hardly occurred in the (Roman) culture of that time - or not at all.

Statement:

When Paul writes both to Timothy and to Titus that an elder must be faithful to his wife, he is probably not thinking about polygamy, but of God's view of marriage.

Motivation:

Jesus teaches about marriage:

- *For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? **So they are no longer two, but one flesh.***
Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. (Matthew 19:5-6)

And about remarriage after divorce:

- *"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another man, she commits adultery."* (Mark 10:11-12)
- *Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* (Luke 16:18)

To which Paul adds:

- *To the married I give this command (**not I, but the Lord**): A wife must not separate from her husband. But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.* (1 Corinthians 7:10-11)

Explanation:

From this it appears that, in the spiritual world, a marriage is not dissolved by a divorce.

Man must (can) not separate what God has joined together.

Marriage is only dissolved by death as far as God is concerned.

Remarriage after divorce is identical to adultery according to Jesus' teaching, because the first marriage has not been dissolved by God.

As a result, anyone who marries again, after a divorce, has married twice as far as God is concerned.

‘Faithful to his wife’ therefore means that a man who has divorced and remarried will not be designated as an elder in the church.

From that standpoint an elder cannot be married to a divorced woman, because he is then living in a state of adultery.

The task of the elders.

Paul writes to Timothy about an elder:

- *He must **manage** his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God’s church?)*

He writes to Titus that an elder must be:

- *... a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient*

An elder has the task of running, managing the church.

As Paul said to the elders of the church in Ephesus:

- *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**. **Be shepherds of the church of God**, which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)*

And he writes to Timothy:

- *The **elders who direct the affairs of the church well** are worthy of double honour, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 2:17)*

Managing means in principle that policy is laid down and leadership given to those who are responsible for the practical execution thereof.

With reference to this, the elders keep watch over the correct functioning of the church as a whole, correcting it where necessary.

To achieve this, each elder will take a specific responsibility upon himself so that they run the church together, **as equals**.

A father of a household is not only responsible for practical matters; he also keeps an eye on the education and the good spiritual health of the members of his household.

This is how the elders bare the responsibility for educating the church members to live a healthy spiritual life.

According to Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:28, God designates apostles, prophets and teachers in the church for its spiritual welfare.

The elders will have to ensure that, through their contribution, the church grows in its relationship with God, the Father, with Jesus Christ as the example and supported by the Holy Spirit.

If necessary they will have to point out to the apostles, prophets and teachers, in consultation with them, that they should correct their teaching.

How this function of elders/overseers is carried out in practice will strongly depend upon the size and the type of the local church.



In small churches tasks will probably be combined, as Paul remarks to Timothy, that elders apparently add preaching and teaching to managing.

In this respect it will be necessary to check that plural leadership is maintained and that all leadership functions are not grouped in one person.²

Appointment of the elders.

According to 1 Corinthians 12:28 it is God who designates people in the church to a position of eldership.³

It is the responsibility of the church members and their leaders to identify who these people are and to recognise them in respect of the task to which God designates them.

In order for them to be able to fulfill their responsibilities well, it is necessary for them to be officially appointed to their function and for the church members to grant them the necessary authority.

A good example of this is the coronation of Saul as the king of Israel. (1 Samuel 9 en 10)

When the people asked God for a king, He designated Saul to the task and sent the prophet Samuel out to anoint him to be king of Israel. So that the people would also accept him as king, Samuel then had to call together a gathering of the people, in which Saul was elected as king in a plebiscite.

This is why Paul commissioned Titus to:

- ... **appoint** elders in every town,

Appoint is the translation of ‘**kathistemi**’, which the OLB translates as:

- to set down, to place
- to appoint someone over something
- to appoint someone to an office

As Titus was to ‘appoint elders in their office’ in every town he will certainly have done so by first consulting the church members.

With the profile sketch Paul gave him in his thoughts, they were thus able to discover people who God designated as elders in the churches and Titus appointed them officially to their office.

Something similar is described in Acts 14:23:

- *Paul and Barnabas **appointed** elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, **in whom they had put their trust.***

Appointed here is the translation of ‘**cheirotoneo**’, which, according to the OLB means something like:

- to vote by raising of the hand
- to appoint

² Study: Leaders.

³ Study: 1 Corinthians 12:28 - And God has placed



Both the consultation of the church members and the appointment are formulated in one word here.

The appointed elders were then placed under Jesus' authority with prayer and fasting.

In whom they had put their trust, literally means: *to whom (the church members) had given their trust*.

Does God also designate women to be elders?

It is important for the management of the church to not be an exclusive matter for the men. Women must certainly have a place in this as well, even though no confirmation of their being designated by God as elders is found in the Bible.

Elders have the task of managing the church as good fathers of the household. A good father of the household is also a good husband and he manages his family in consultation with his wife.

Background:

At the time of the creation God already said that man and woman are an inseparable unity in marriage, as Jesus also repeats:

- *'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.'* So they are **no longer two, but one flesh**. (Marc 10:7-8)

One flesh means that, in marriage, man and woman, by virtue of their personality:

- **are one soul**, i.e.: their personalities, with their own desires, wishes etc. synchronize with each other.
- **are one body**: this has a double meaning.
From 'being one soul', setting oneself up in behaviour towards the outside world as a unity (as one body, one person), and, alternatively, experiencing sexual physical unity.

Within this unity God gives both of them his/her own tasks in the family, according to the hierarchy that He established in the world when He created it.

Man and women manage the family together, in unity, with shared responsibility.

The husband is the 'head' of his wife within this unity, as Paul writes:

- *Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord (place yourself under your husband, as towards the Lord). For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour.* (Ephesians 5:22-23)

God holds the husband responsible for the running of affairs within the family.

His wife is expected to voluntarily accept the authority, which the husband has received from God.

According to Paul's teaching God has established this with a clear goal:

- *It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, **because of the angels**.* (1 Corinthians 11:10)

God has established this hierarchy 'because of the angels', which means: in view of the spiritual world.

Satan was able to seduce Eve because she acted independently in a question that also related to Adam. She should have consulted him, as her 'head', her authority, because he was ultimately responsible.

The relationship between God and man was broken by **Adam's** disobedience, although it was Eve who allowed herself to be seduced and who first ate the forbidden fruit.

In order to fulfil the important task a wife has within the family well, God establishes her **husband** as **ultimately** responsible. In this respect she acts under his authority and is exempted from a number of responsibilities which God, protectively, places on her husband's shoulders. It is indeed the intention that the husband and wife constantly consult one another, so that harmony within the family develops.

Back to the church.

Paul writes about marriage:

- *This is a profound mystery - out I am talking about Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:32)*

God maintains the same behavioural principle as in marriage as far as the functioning of a women in the church is concerned.

Paul sees only one condition with reference to the tasks which a woman can assume in the church. (translated freely):

- *I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume **authority** over a man; ... (1 Timothy 2:12)*

Only in this verse of the Bible is '**authority**' the translation of the Greek '**authenteo**', which represents:

→ **acting on one's own account, being an absolute ruler.**

From this it is to be concluded that whatever task a woman assumes in the church, she is only intended to do so **in consultation and under the ultimate responsibility** of one of the leaders in the church.

Conclusion

This divine behavioural principle is the basis for Paul's declaration to Timothy and Titus that an elder must be a man.

Remark

If a man is able to manage his family well if he lives in unity with his wife, he will also be able to manage the church well if his wife is behind him.

This advocates the appointment of **couples as elders**, whereby the spouses are jointly involved with the running of the church, whereas the **men**, the **elders**, bear the responsibility towards the head of the church, Jesus Christ, for the decisions that are to be made.