

How Does the New Testament Define
Deacons and Elders

Multi-Session Study developed for
WYOMING BAPTIST CHURCH
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Session 1: Elders

***The corresponding participants sheet for this session is:
“Elders and Deacons in the New Testament
session 1: Elders in OT and NT”

Where Do We Begin

Initial Questions about Elders and Deacons

As one makes the commitment to study scripture to better understand what elders and deacons are, there may be some typical or traditional scriptures that we might default to. Paul’s letter to Timothy includes some of the most commonly referenced material that describes what kind of person an elder or deacon ought to be. Its a thorough list, but by no means the only thing the New testament has to say on the matter.

So, where does one start? Not only what text do we seek first, but what questions are the right ones to start with? Many quickly come to mind:

What exactly does the bible say about elders and deacons?

What are the differences between the two?

Where do all the different names and terms come from?

(elder and deacon, overseer, bishop, teacher, pastor...)

Is the New Testament early church the definitive model for us today?

If so, how can there be so many different styles of church leadership?

Does church governance really matter in the end?

While these are surely not the only questions that we might have, the intent of this material will be to provide some of the answers to the most relevant and pressing questions about elders and deacons as described in the New Testament.

Notes:

Elders in the Old Testament

Some History on the Term and Position

One of the first things we will find helpful in understanding the elder of the New Testament is the recognition that the idea doesn't begin in the New Testament. The office of elder in the New Testament church has roots not only in Old Testament Judaism, but further back than that.

The presence of elders is not exclusive to Israel, nor is it only a term with respect to faith or religious communities. In the same way we might understand some communities or villages today identifying certain people as elders or people of insight, especially in eastern cultures, we find the same practice in early Old Testament stories. In Numbers 22, the elders of Moab and Midian come together to consider how they might confront the threat of Israel. While this reference cannot be considered a pattern for elders in the New Testament, it does show us that the presence of elders in a community is a practice that runs deep through human history. It simply does not start with the church.

Israel looks to have practiced the same, even before they are an established nation. God relays his plans for the passover to Moses, and in turn Exodus 12:21 tells us that "Moses summoned all the elders of Israel" to put the word of God into action among the people. Again, we may not see an obvious parallel between this example and the elders of the New Testament church, but we do see the presence of elders in the community from a very early scriptural reference.

In Leviticus 4:15, the elders play an integral part in obtaining forgiveness for the unintentional sins of the whole community. Although it was specifically the priest who made sacrifices in Old Testament law, this particular type of sacrifice called on the elders to participate as representatives for the people as a whole.

What is lacking for us in the Old Testament is a clearly defined list or text that tells us exactly what the elders do, or what they are responsible for in the early nation of Israel. It is worth noting, that even if there was such a passage, ancient Israel was specifically unique from the church today in one respect - they were not a gathering of believers subject to a separate external secular context. Ancient Israel was not a democracy, they were a *theocracy*, government was faith, *the word of God was their government*.

The Old Testament references then, simply inform us that Israel always identified a specific group as "elders of the community". To better understand what their function and responsibility was, especially in the early church, we must move ahead to the New Testament.

From very early references in the Old Testament, we find elders having a unique relationship as representatives of the community as well as close connection to the priest(s). We will see this pattern continue into the New Testament.

Notes:

Elders in the New Testament

Function in the Early Church

One of the most intriguing things we note about the earliest references to elders we find in the New Testament is that even before the church comes to form, the interactions that Jesus has with the elders as told through the gospels is predominantly **negative**. In multiple references through the gospels (Mat 15:2, 21:23, 26:3, 27:1, Mk 14:43), it is the elders, often in company with chief priests and teachers of the law who are the most vocal opposition to Jesus. If these were the only references we had in scripture to elders, we would have to conclude that their primary function is to oppose Jesus.

While we know that not to be true, it is particularly alarming that it is the very people who were trusted to discern and teach scripture, lead the people in obeying God, and live according to his word were the ones who instead led them in failing to recognize the messiah when he showed up. In their blindness, these community leaders not only deceive themselves, but they lead others into the same ignorance.

It is that harsh reality that highlights for us the overwhelming burden that is inseparable to the task of the elder. We will find throughout the New Testament that the elders of the early church are called to teach, instruct, protect, preserve, guard, and promote the word of God in the community of his people. Perhaps it is not surprising that these instructions are repeated so often given that they seemed to have done the complete opposite even before the church had begun.

Certainly part of understanding what the elders role in the early church was is a clarity of understanding what it was NOT. The primary role of the priest in Old Testament Israel was to accept and make sacrifices for the people - individuals, families, whole communities. One might expect that since the elder was so closely and commonly associated with the priests in the gospels that perhaps their function would somehow also be closely tied. However, both 1 Peter 2:5-10 and 1 Tim 2:5 clearly state that in the New Testament church, the function of the priest as moderator before God is no longer needed. The elder of the early Christian church is NOT a replacement of the Old Testament priest, nor is his function that of an intermediary between God and his people. Elders must then serve the interest of the church in some other manner.

To simply scan the New Testament for the word "elder" would provide too many references to be helpful for a discussion. We will reflect closely on only a few with the understanding that the kinds of descriptors and insight found in these passages is repeated in many others.

Both Paul and Peter highlight that the role of the priest is no longer need in the New Testament church, since Christ has accomplished what was truly needed. Hebrews 5 and 8 expand the same principles.

Acts 20:28-31 - Instruction to the elders in Ephesus

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God,[b] which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.

Note what Paul instructs them to do: pay attention to yourselves and the flock, care for the church of God, be alert. The instructions are all about providing guidance, oversight, protection (even from some among themselves), assuring a sound gospel is repeated.

1 Timothy 5:17 - Pauls instructions to Timothy re: elders

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

Repeated throughout the New Testament is the concept that elders provide direction, boundaries and leadership for the church. In this one sentence, Paul not only picks up on that principle, but articulates two ways in which they will accomplish that - preaching and teaching. Direction, preaching and teaching. These are responsibilities we most commonly find in the job description of the pastor in today's church - and rightfully so. It's a thought worth noting however, that in the early church, those tasks were assigned to the elders. Is there a crossover between elders and pastors? Be patient, we'll get there.

Titus 1:9 - Description and Responsibility

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

Paul has left Titus in Crete for a specific purpose: "straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders..." (1:5). In verses 6-8 he describes what kind of a person an elder is to be, a daunting list of qualities for any person to consider. In verse 9, he makes a comment on how that kind of character would be shown. The elders Titus is to appoint are to hold firmly to the sound teaching that Paul has provided, using it to encourage others in the faith and to correct those who want to teach something false. Again, the emphasis is for an elder to be a protector of sound doctrine in the church, and encourage people as they do so.

Heb 13:7, 17-19 - A mention about them, not to them

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. (7)

Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you. (17-19)

These particular passages are not directed to the elders, and in fact, do not name elders specifically. However, the way in which the "leaders" in these passages are described seem to echo the same kinds of responsibilities and accountability that elders are described in other New Testament passages, some of which we've already highlighted. The more general term "leader" is used here possibly because it is addressing a different congregation that used different labels. It's a good reminder that the terms are fluid in the NT, and function is more important than labels.

The church leaders mentioned here have "spoke the word of God" (past tense), and "watch over" the church (present tense). They are noted as having some measure of authority, and it is an authority for which they will be required to "give an account". Although the overall essence of the book of Hebrews isn't necessarily a focus on leadership, this particular section draws a clear picture of the role of leaders in that place.

1 Peter 5:1-5 - An appeal to a standard of living

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favour to the humble."

Peter identifies himself as a "fellow elder", perhaps something worth noting that an original disciple, an apostle also identifies as an elder. He writes to the churches in Asia minor who are under significant

Overlapping Terms and Phrases

What's the differences in all the terms

Elder, overseer, teacher, leader...

Who's who? Can an elder be a leader but not a teacher? Are there leading elders and teaching elders? (1 Tim 5:17)

There is something about the names and terms that needs to be addressed as we process this material. Depending on what version of the bible you might be reading, some of the texts we have just reviewed may have contained one of several words: Elder, overseer, teacher, leader, pastor, even bishop in some versions. It presents us with a valid question: What's the difference between them?

The simple answer is, very little.

The terms elder and overseer are two versions of the same word, and refer to the same person (or office) in the New Testament. (See Titus 1:5-7). "Pastor and teacher" are named together in Eph 4:11 with the responsibility to "prepare the people", "build up the body", the same language used to describe the work of elders. The verb form of the word "pastor" (poimaino) means "to shepherd, oversee, and is used to describe what the elders are to do.

In Acts 20:17-31 (noted earlier), Paul calls together the **elders** at Ephesus and reminds them that their task is to **pastor** the church of which they have been made **overseers**. The **leaders** mentioned in Hebrews 13 are said to have the same responsibility.

Summary:

Background of Elders in Scripture

1. "Elder" for the New Testament church has roots in Israel and Jewish faith, but acknowledgement of community elders is not exclusive to Israel.
2. Throughout Old Testament, elders were commonly associated with the priests and teachers, this continues into the New Testament.
3. Function of the New Testament elder is NOT a continuation of the Old Testament priest.

Function in the New Testament

1. General oversight of the church, direction and discernment
2. Teaching scripture, boundaries of doctrine
3. Encourage, care support, provide example of Godly living

Notes:

Session 2: Deacons

***The corresponding participants sheet for this session is:
“Elders and Deacons in the New Testament
Session 2: Deacons in the NT”

Many Forms of the word

To have a fuller grasp of who a deacon is, or what they do, we need to have a little lesson in language, with the understanding that there is not a straight simple line between Greek and English. It is not always the case that one word translates to another, much depends on context of the phrase. As a result, we develop an understanding of the word “deacon” not by straightforward translation with pinpoint laser accuracy to a Greek equivalent, but by gathering several versions of the word and understudying its use in different contexts.

We get our English word “deacon” from several versions of the Greek reference:

Diakonos - refers to a person, a servant, minister, one who serves

Diakoneo - the action, to serve or to minister, provide care for, verb form

Diakonia - the thing, the service, ministering, esp. of those who execute the direction of others

We could perhaps say something like: A deacon (diakonos) has made a request, or has taken (diakoneo) some form of support (diakonia) to somebody.

If you're a Greek scholar, you will recognize these as definitions as sufficient, albeit not perfect. They do, however, provide a solid foothold for us to develop a clearer understanding about what the New Testament says about the office of deacon. We quickly come to recognize that it is completely enveloped in the concept of serving.

Uses of the Servant phrases in the New Testament

Deacon / Servant / Minister

Mark 10:45 - in reference to Christ

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

It is unlikely that many of us would refer to Jesus Christ as a deacon. Nevertheless, the language used in this passage from the gospel of Mark is of the same root words as previously defined. Christ came to serve - diakoneo - to act in sacrificial service to others.

Romans 16:1-2 - Phoebe the helper

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul requests that they welcome and care for Phoebe, who he identifies as a deacon (servant in some versions) and he goes on to say, that she has been a great help, encourager, assistant, and servant not only to him but to many. Both “deacon” and “helper” (or in this particular version “benefactor”) are variations from the same root language.

1 Corinthians 3:5 - Paul the servant

After all, who is Apollos? Who is Paul? We are only God's servants through whom you believed the Good News. Each of us did the work the Lord gave us.

If you were asked to describe the Apostle Paul, put a label on him in no more than one or two words, those words would not likely be “deacon”. Paul is an evangelist, a preacher, a teacher, a super missionary. Here in Corinthians however, he identifies himself as a servant of God. The phrase “God’s servants” is the equivalent of saying “We are deacons to God”, simply serving him by following through on what he has directed us to do. The idea of Paul, the most dominant author in our New Testament describing himself as “only God’s servant” should be a particular note of interest for us. It is only one of the passages that challenge us to rethink what we understand a deacon to be.

Throughout the New Testament, we find a repeated pattern of describing the actions of deacons, which is that of ones who **serve** in order to see the ministries of the church accomplished.

2 Corinthians 3:6 - Servants to the gospel

He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant. This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit.

In explaining to the church in Corinth how he can be so confident in the work of ministry that he has been given, Paul clarifies that his competence is not in himself, but that he has been made competent for the work by God. God has enacted and provided for Paul and the others who share in the gospel ministry to be ministers - deacons - servants of a new covenant. It is not unlike the language noted in the previous passage (1 Cor 3:5), identifying himself as a servant to God, her a servant to the gospel of Christ and the covenant it offers.

Ephesians 4:11-12 - prepared for service

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

This passage is often referred to when the discussion is about the diversity of gifts in the church, and how each person may be unique in their place for ministry. The emphasis is often on how those unique gifts of ministry are intentionally designed by God to “equip his people”. The focus is that the church as a whole is made stronger through the unique contributions certain groups. What is often overlooked is that the verse also enlightens what that equipping is intended for - works of service. Serving, ministering...deaconing. The point of the many gifts in the church is that we would all be strengthened, encouraged, built up in order to give back. In this passage, the variation of *diakoneo* is not made in reference to a subset group in the church, but to the whole body of believers. Paul argues that Christ gave the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers to equip the whole church for “deacon-like” activity.

1 Timothy 4:6 - being a good minister

If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed.

Paul’s whole letter to Timothy is around the intent to encourage. From a mentor to his student, it is filled with encouragement, instruction and directives. Here, after providing some of that instruction, Paul communicates to Timothy that if he follows Paul’s instructions, he would be acting as a “good minister” to

Christ. The phrase “good minister” is born of the same root language as servant or one who serves - diakonos. Paul is stating that Timothy is acknowledged as a “good minister” as he follows through on doing what has been asked of him in order to proclaim Christ and assist the church.

Identified as a Particular Group

Although the overwhelming majority of references and uses of deacon - servant - minister throughout the New Testament singular in their use (referring to one specific person), there is legitimate grounds for us thinking in terms of a group or subset of the church body as “the deacons”. The number of passages that highlight this is not overwhelming, but they are very clear in how they communicate the thought.

Philippians 1:1 - the simple address of a letter

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons:

Typically, Paul addresses his letters to a church as a whole (Thessalonians) , a group of churches (Galatians), or to an individual (Timothy, Titus and Philemon). We often find phrases such as “to the saints in”, but in this one letter to the church in Philippi, Paul specifically addresses the message to the overseers (elders) and deacons. It is the only time in all his letters that he specifically names those two groups. There seems to be nothing significant through the body of the letter that is exclusively “deacon” instruction, so in one sense the address is perplexing - why name them if you don't have something specific to say to them?

What is valuable for us to take from it is this: As the church was established in Philippi (and presumably in other churches), overseers were not the only unique group that was being recognized in the church. Within the community of faith that was beginning to take shape, the servers, diakonos, were acknowledged by Paul as a particular group of believers within the church. Not only that, a group who had some measure of direct relationship to the elders. The text says nothing of their specific function or whether or not they were granted any specific authority within the church. It does, however, clearly present us with the understanding that deacons were recognized as a unique group of servers or ministers in Philippi.

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find reference to a governing or directing board of deacons. In fact, there is no clear job description for them. However, in Phil 1:1 and 1 Tim 3 we do at least see reference to specific groups identified as “the deacons”.

1 Timothy 3:8-10 - qualifications to be “on the team”

In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience. They must first be tested; and then if there is nothing against them, let them serve as deacons.

It is perhaps a little surprising that this is the most commonly referenced text with respect to deacons. As we've already seen, the words that we get “deacon” from are spread throughout the New Testament, so its not like this is the only passage that helps us understand what they are about. It begins to make sense however when we recognize that it is a defining text for identifying the qualifications that Paul sets out for deacons. he goes so far as to say “they first must be tested (by these standards), and then let them serve as deacons.

The principle the text seems to be establishing is this: as a church seeks to identify specific people as deacons, their maturity in faith and everything that is an outflow of that is of greater importance than their skill set or abilities. Paul focuses more on character than ability, and he makes no hesitation to instruct Timothy that this is the standard for being identified as a deacon for the church in Ephesus. We will expand in future sessions about how that principle for Ephesus perhaps can be carried forward for the church today.

The Origin of the Office

When were deacons first established?

Acts 6:1-4 - making it work

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

The issue: a ministry function of the church was suffering due to lack of organization and delegation (the text implies there was preferential treatment). The problem was brought to the Apostles, likely with some expectation that they would solve the problem, perhaps even practically and personally.

The solution: The solution that Apostles proposed was that the people were to choose a team from among themselves (with certain qualifications) to resolve the matter - the church body steps up to serve the church.

Principles observed from the text: (note the "IF" factor here, that Acts 6 may be a reasonable framework for the origin of deacons, but it is not necessarily a prescriptive absolute)

If Acts 6:1-4 is to be considered a good textual basis for understanding the office of deacons for the church, the following principles seem to be present. Deacons were chosen to:

1. Manage benevolent ministries / ministry work of the church, ensure needs met adequately and fairly
2. Free Apostles to focus on ministry of the word, apparent separation of "spiritual and practical"
3. Selected on basis of commitment, not ability

Notes:

Session 3: The Early Church and Today

***The corresponding participants sheet for this session is:
“Elders and Deacons in the New Testament
Session 3: The Early Church and Today”

Summary Review of Elders

Their Background:

- Jewish roots
- Often associated with priests and teachers
- NT role is NOT a continuation of OT priesthood
- Role and function changes significantly into the NT and early church.

Their New Function in the Early Church:

- General oversight, direction (Acts 20)
- Teaching scripture, boundaries of doctrine (1 Tim, Heb 13)
- Encourage, protect, be example to the church (1 Pet, Titus)

Summary Review of Deacons (who have no OT history)

They’re new, and their function in the Early Church:

- Appears to be born out of the need to delegate responsibilities (Acts 6)
- manage ministry works of the church, free apostles to word
- servants of the gospel (widely used term)
- assist and provide care for...

***PPT provides a simplified summary of these NT roles for both elders and deacons.

The Early Church and Today

What was happening in the early NT church that caused them to need both elders and deacons?
Should the church today still establish a place for both? In what ways are we similar to the NT early church, and in what ways are we different?

Provide a quick and simplified description of the early NT church, highlighting:

- Their historical background was Judaism, hundreds of years of Mosaic law
- this would have included 1000+ years of animal sacrifice and law
- The predominant theme of salvation through OT = redemption from oppression
- Their familiar idea of cleansing was that sanctification came through ritual
- Israel always understood them to be a people “set apart”, distinct from pagan or foreign surrounding cultures, the line between “us” and “them” was easy to identify and articulate

Jesus comes with a VERY troubling Gospel that states:

- Gal 3:10-12 - a wholesale recasting of how to understand the LAW, extreme doctrine shift
- Heb 10:3-10, Gal 5:2-6 - sacrifices and practices of self identification are abolished
- Gal 2:20-21 - Concept of “salvation” is radically redefined
- 2 Cor 3:15-18 - “sanctification” now becomes about “growing in Christ”...what is that?
- Eph 2:11-13 - lines between “us” and “them” are erased....AAAAH!

Take time to note how troubling the gospel would be for the early church, who had a LONG history of Judaism as their historical context - we can imagine why the church needed a group of leaders whose primary responsibility was to protect the soundness of the gospel - the gospel of Jesus Christ would have been a terribly hard pill to swallow. Your ancestors had taught you something very specific for the last 10 generations of your family, and this new gospel was a RADICAL departure from that, so if the church was going to be built around this new message, somebody needed to be tasked with protecting it - the temptation to “tweak it” to make it more digestible would have been very strong.

So, given our historical separation from that time, does the church still need elders today? The immediate historical background for the church today is not Judaism, it’s the church of yesterday...so we don’t deal with the exact same challenges they did...maybe we don’t need elders.

Parallels for Elder Responsibilities

Early Church

Wholesale recasting of law vs gospel
 Abolish long standing rituals with historical value
 Salvation is redefined
 Sanctification, not purification
 Grace of God reaches to Gentiles

Today

Focus and fight to maintain sound doctrine
 Abolish long standing rituals with historical value
 Salvation is constantly being challenged
 Sanctification is a process of maturity
 Grace reaching outside the church

Name some similarities and differences between the elders and deacons of the early church and the church of today

	ELDERS	DEACONS
EARLY CHURCH	Teach scripture so that believers had a clear understanding of the (new) gospel of Jesus Christ Biggest challenge: HISTORICAL CONTEXT	Take ownership of the work of ministry (expression of the gospel), build each other up, gospel lived out in service Biggest challenge: CULTURAL CONTEXT (surrounding culture viewed compassion as weakness, not a virtue worth while)
TODAY	Continue to provide leadership and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ - both core gospel and implications Biggest challenge: CULTURAL CONTEXT (it seems very “old fashioned today to “just keep preaching the gospel”. People want something more exciting)	Take ownership of the work of ministry (expression of the gospel), build each other up, gospel lived out in service Biggest challenge: HISTORICAL CONTEXT (Even though the primary task is the same, the history of the church has evolved to make different demands of deacons)

Session 4: Qualifications and Character

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Session 4: Qualifications and Character”

1 Timothy 3

Late in time (chronology of the NT)

Probably the most commonly referenced text when discussing the issue of elders and deacons

Unfortunately, just as often, it is read with no respect for the literary context of the letter as a whole (what is the broader issue being addressed), or the historical context in which it was written (what was happening in Ephesus that prompted Paul to write). To possess a full appreciation for the meaning embedded in the chapter, one should seek to understand the whole letter.

Historical Context

1 Timothy 1:3-7 - it appears that the church was aimless in its purposes, wandering and prone to being driven by personal opinions, likely by those who had influence. Perhaps not an altogether unfamiliar challenge for the church, but to the extent that we can be confident this seems to be the issue in Ephesus, it is as bad enough that Paul had sent Timothy, and followed up with the letter for encouragement.

Literary Context

1 Timothy 2 - The result of this tension in the church was that the worship gatherings were suffering for it, a troubling lack of focus on authentic worship, and perhaps a general misguided atmosphere or ethos altogether.

1 Timothy 5-6 - Practical needs needed to be met, Paul provided Timothy with advice on how to direct. He also includes boundaries and framework for how to help set things right.

1 Timothy 3:2-7 - THE LIST

Note the numerous similarities between the two lists that Paul provides, note the differences.

What is Paul (primarily) listing here? Character qualities? Skills? Gifts? Behaviours?

Provide the participants with an understanding of the difference between **DESCRIPTIVE** texts and **PRESCRIPTIVE** texts - lead a discussion about which this particular text is (DE or PRE)

What happens when we take a DESCRIPTIVE text like this and demand it to be PRESCRIPTIVE.

We begin to force meaning on it that was never intended.

We must always be conscious to not commit the mistake of **text manipulation** - forcing the text to serve our **own purposes** rather than recognizing its **original intended purpose**.

Open discussion: From 1 Timothy, what are some reasonable expectations we might have of elders and deacons in terms of their character or their roles / responsibilities in the church.

Session 5: Summary Suggestions

***The corresponding participants sheet for this session is:
“Elders and Deacons in the New Testament
Session 5: Summary Suggestions”

Almost all of the discussion regarding elders in the 21st century church can be categorized into two central considerations: **expectation** and **responsibility**

Expectations

In light of New Testament direction and descriptions, given what “overseeing” may include, the following expectations are reasonable for elders in the church today:

1. High moral character, ideal role models, excellent reputation, honourable lifestyle
2. History with the church, familiar involvement, history of serving and contributing
3. Committed to study of the word, familiar with scripture, responsive to its instruction
4. Even tempered, level headed, able to encounter frustration and opposition and remain calm
5. Able to communicate foundational tenets of the gospel, teach either group or one-on-one
6. What other expectations come to mind:

Responsibilities

New testament phrases like “oversee” (1 Tim 3:1) and “be shepherds” (Acts 20:28) are clear indicators of some form of leadership and direction. With that in mind, the following kinds of responsibilities could be included:

1. [*Willingness to stand as*] role models and mentors in the church and community (significant impact on the discipleship of the congregation)
2. Direct input and boundaries for curriculum, ministry emphasis, preaching calendars etc
3. Staffing, peers to pastors, council and advice, filter and advocates
4. Direct feedback and direction for individual ministries (vision and focus)
5. Dealing with concerns, struggles, conflict, guidance and support, foster unity of the body
6. What other kinds of things should elders be directly involved in?

Power Brokers and Private Clubs: One of the most common concerns about churches that either have elders, or ones that are considering adopting an “elder model” is that elders board eventually end up being controllers, power brokers and “old boys clubs” where the same people serve year after year and end up controlling the church.

1. What are some PRACTICAL ways that this can be avoided?
2. What scriptures can you identify that would specifically demand elders not do this? (1 Peter 5:1-4)
3. What kinds of people should the church seek to serve as elders? (Last week, 1 Timothy 3)

What could be the impact on the congregation participation of adopting “Elders as leaders” ? (Prompt the group for both potential negative impacts as well as thinking through the potential positive effects.)

Move the discussion from the “conceptual” or generic church setting to our specific church.

(on screen) Given what we have observed over the past few weeks in scripture about the role of Elders and Deacons in the New Testament church, to what extent do we acknowledge the following tension:

Although the governance style we currently work under may not be clearly condemned by scripture or explicitly wrong, it is suffering the lack of a biblical foundation.

(allow lots of room for this discussion, push but don't force...)

There Should be Elders, but...

Scripture clearly defines elders as:

- leaders of the church community (Acts 20:28, 1 Pet 5:2-3, Heb 13, 1 Tim 3, Titus 1)
- being identified by certain qualities (1 Tim 3, Titus 1)
- serving with character and attitude of Christ (Phil 2, 1 Pet 5)

However, the Bible DOES NOT clearly define for us **how elders will function practically in the church**

How Can Elder Leadership be the Blessing it was intended of the Church?

If Elders were to:

...then the church body should

- | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Focus on seeking God's desire for the church (big picture), provide the congregation with honest and open communications about what they are learning (Acts 20, 1 Pet 5) | 1. Be willing and cooperative to work within the “big picture” understanding the Elders have provided (sandbox analogy) |
| 2. Train, teach and encourage others in faith (Eph 4, 1 Tim 3, Heb 13) | 2. Pray that the Elders are being continually challenged, grown and matured in their own walk of faith by the word of God - and then expect to learn from them |
| 3. Spend significant parts their meeting time in prayer and study of scripture (Acts 20) | 3. Not expect the Elders meeting agendas to make much room for logistic, management or technical concerns of church operations |
| 4. Be aware of the ongoing challenges (interpersonal or ministry related) and humble themselves in prayer to bring about resolution, healing and unity of spirit (Acts 15) | 4. Speak openly and honestly with Elders about concerns or tensions - as well as moments of celebration. God is ALWAYS at work. |
| 5. Be trusted to lead (Heb 13), propose, move... | 5. Seek the counsel of the elders, consider their instruction with honour and respect |

Elders should not:

...so the church body should not:

1. Micromanage. Their input is to provide guidance, overview and understanding for ministry purposes.
2. Require permission before anything can happen in the life of the church
3. Allow themselves to “separate” from the congregation. They are not an elite independent body, they are a specific part of it.
4. Be immediately called into question when what is on their hearts is not yet fully understood by the rest of the congregation

1. Work independent or in opposition to Elders input. Elders point to the target, and the church body builds the vehicle to get us there.
2. Hesitate to make decisions, take chances, try new ideas and take ownership of ministry
3. Promote “us vs them” thinking or chatter when concerns or difficulties arise. We are ONE body and the body rejoices or suffers TOGETHER.
4. Immediately assume the worst of elders when the “sandbox” they build seems unfair. If Elders are prayerfully submitting to God, then a congregation should be listening to them expectantly, not through a filter of suspicion

(on screen)

Whatever governance structure a church establishes, the relationship between elders and the congregation **MUST** be one that is dominated by mutual **trust** and **respect**.

End the session with an open forum discussion about:

- feedback on what has been presented over the past few weeks
- what has been very encouraging
- what has raised concerns for some
- what next steps might be
- what are the hurdles to adopt changes.

Notes:
