

The Primary Functions of Elders

By Jim Dvorak (July 2019)

You may remember when I was confirmed as an elder in January 2017 that we began a system in which new elders would serve for three years and then step off the eldership for at least a year with the opportunity of being reconfirmed by the congregation and rejoining the eldership, if that leader should so desire. This is beneficial for a number of reasons, not least of which is to help elders avoid burnout.

Well, time has a way of flying by, doesn't it?!? I am now in the final months of my three-year tenure as an elder and will officially step out of that role in Jan. 2020. Additionally, Monte, who has served as an elder for a few more than three years, will be retiring from the eldership. Therefore, it's time for you to start thinking about who you will nominate for eldership when the nomination period opens later this Fall. Soon we'll revisit 1 Tim 3, Titus 2, and a few other texts to address the kind of *character* that is expected of those who would be elders, but here, it is beneficial to review briefly the main *leadership functions* of elders as found in the New Testament. These are not arranged in order of importance; each is as important as the others.

First, *elders are to be vigilant protectors of the people under their care*. At Acts 20:28–31, Luke recounts Paul's final meeting with the Ephesian elders. Paul commands the elders to watch/guard (v. 28) both themselves and the people under their charge and to be vigilant (v. 31) because "fierce wolves" (i.e., false teachers) will try to enter *from the outside*, and people will arise *even from within* "speaking what has been distorted in order to entice followers for themselves" (v. 30). Elders are responsible for recognizing this sort of danger and for thwarting it before the whole flock is devoured.

Second, *elders are to equip believers for the work of service that builds up the body and results in wholeness and maturity*. At Eph. 4:11–13, Paul says that God has gifted the church with a variety of types of leaders, including shepherd-teachers. The key function of all of these leaders is to equip believers for service that fosters growth and maturity—a maturity that is expressed through unity and knowledge of the Son of God. Thus, teaching is a core function of those who would be "shepherd-teachers."

Finally, *elders are to shepherd with the best interest of the flock at heart, not their own selfish desires*. Peter says that shepherding is neither about self-aggrandizement (1 Pet. 5:2) nor domineering over the flock (v. 3). That is the way world-oriented, honor-craving leaders operate. Instead, shepherds are to lead in a manner that puts believers and their needs first (v. 2), being examples to those under their care of how they should treat one another. Elders should enact the same sort of grace-giving care for the flock that God demonstrated toward his chosen people—like Father, like children.