

Exploring Scripture: Women & Eldership - Session 4

Intro

In our first three sessions, we explored: God's design for humanity in creation; Christ's restoration of that design; women's Spirit-empowered participation throughout Scripture and the early church; and the value of order in worship in the newly forming early church. Now we turn to the role of elder. What does Scripture say about elders? Why do we have them? What qualifies someone to serve? And how do we, as a church family, discern God's wisdom regarding who serves in this capacity?

In sessions 1-3, we asked primarily theological questions. As we move into session 4, we seek practical wisdom for our church's model and our life together. The Scriptures provide both clear guidance about character qualifications and flexibility about organizational structures. Our goal is not to resolve every theological question but to discern the path forward for our congregation as we serve God's mission in our time and place.

Elders in the Early Church & Discernment

Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Creation, Fall, Restoration and God's Design for the Church	Women Breaking the Mold - Called by God Throughout Scripture	Paul's Letters - Understanding Women's Roles in the Early Church	Elders in the Early Church & Discernment

Prayer

Gracious God, as we consider the leadership model of our church, grant us wisdom beyond our own understanding. Give us clarity in understanding Scripture and discernment in applying it to our context. Help us put aside personal preferences and cultural biases to seek what is best for your church's mission. As we discuss these important matters, unite our hearts in love for your glory and for one another. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Readings

- Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17-32
- 1 Timothy 3:1-7
- Titus 1:5-9
- 1 Peter 5:1-5

Part 1: Understanding Eldership in the New Testament

Biblical Terms and Roles

In the New Testament, the terms "elder" (presbyteros), "overseer" (episkopos), and "pastor/shepherd" (poimen) describe overlapping aspects of church leadership. The terms highlight different aspects of seemingly the same role: eldership emphasizes maturity and wisdom, oversight emphasizes leadership responsibility, and pastoring emphasizes caring for God's people.

Read Acts 14:21-23

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church they established on this missionary journey. As you imagine yourself a part of the rapidly expanding early church, why do you imagine they did this? Does the passage point to any clues? What does this tell us about the structure and leadership of early churches?

Read Acts 20:17-32

In this farewell address, Paul speaks to the Ephesian elders using all three terms: elders (v.17), overseers (v.28), and shepherd (v.28-29). What core responsibilities of eldership emerge from this passage?

How do these various terms for church leaders help you understand the multifaceted nature of eldership?

What similarities do you see between elder/overseer/pastor and other leadership roles we've studied so far in this group (prophets, apostles, deacons)?

How might the different aspects of eldership (maturity, oversight, shepherding) apply to both men and women?

Part 2: Qualifications for Eldership

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7

This passage provides a detailed list of qualifications for elders. Which ones relate to:

- Character and spiritual maturity
- Family relationships
- Teaching ability
- Reputation among non-believers
- Other qualifications

Verse 2 states elders must be "the husband of one wife" or more literally a "one-woman man" (note: this is the only gendered language in these verses. Male pronouns included in some English translations do not appear in the Greek New Testament).

This phrase has been interpreted in different ways:

- *Some see it as requiring elders to be male and married.*
- *Others see it emphasizing marital faithfulness and excluding those who are polygamous or unfaithful.*
- *Still others view it as a relational qualifier that when applied to women would be "one-man woman."*

How might different interpretations of this phrase affect our understanding of who can serve as elders?

How do you think these qualifications relate to the "gifts of the Spirit" mentioned in Joel 2 and Acts 2 that we studied in Session 1? Are they similar? Different?

How would these same qualifications apply to the women leaders we studied in Session 2 (for example: Deborah, Huldah, Priscilla)?

How does this list compare with the character qualities Paul emphasized for all believers in Ephesians 5?

Read Titus 1:5-9

What does this passage add to the description in 1 Timothy 3? What additional insights does Paul provide about elder qualifications here?

How would you describe what is essential to being an elder?

How could a woman demonstrate meeting these qualifications?

Are there any qualifications that you believe are specifically gender-related? If so, which ones and why?

Read 1 Peter 5:1-5

Peter, as a fellow elder, provides additional perspective. What attitudes and motivations does he emphasize for elders? Why are these important for an elder of a church? How might men and women uniquely demonstrate these kinds of attitudes and motivations?

How is the elders' authority characterized in this passage? Describe what a willing and exemplary shepherd might be like in the context of the early church. Are there parallels to the way members of a Christian household are to love one another in Ephesians 5? How is Jesus a model of leadership for us?

Part 3: Wisdom for Discernment

Principles for Church Structure

Throughout Scripture, we see: essential theological principles that remain constant; organizational structures that adapt to cultural contexts; and wisdom in applying biblical principles to specific situations.

As you think about our church context and model, what aspects of eldership are theological essentials that must remain unchanged? What aspects do you think are organizational questions where faithful disciples can differ?

How might the Spirit-empowered partnership we've studied in the first three sessions inform our approach to leadership structure?

How do the qualifications for eldership relate to the gifts and callings we've observed God giving to women throughout Scripture?

What fears or concerns do you have about maintaining our current model? What fears or concerns do you have about changing it? How can we address these with wisdom and grace?

What do you envision to be the practical impact of women serving as elders in our church? Consider the practical impacts for any/all of the following:

- church leadership and decision-making,
- care for our congregation,
- teaching and discipleship,
- ministry and mission,
- our witness to the community, and
- unity within our congregation.

What additional information, discussion, or prayer do you need to participate fully in the discernment process? Are there insights you want to share with others?

Application Questions

As we reflect on the creation-fall-restoration framework from Sessions 1-3, how does that framework inform your understanding of church leadership structure?

Looking across all four sessions, what pattern do you see in how God calls and equips leaders? How does this pattern apply to elders?

People who belong to NSCBC have different convictions and different experiences with this topic. You can read about those in our [survey report](#)! That means regardless of what we decide -- even if we mostly agree on the path forward -- some may yet feel a sense of loss or disappointment. How do you think we can serve one another well? What attitudes and behaviors help build unity amid our diversity?

People can come to different conclusions on this topic while maintaining a high view of biblical authority. How do you think differing perspectives on women's roles reflect different ways of faithfully applying Scripture? Practice taking on a view for women as elders. What theological principles support that view? Now, practice taking on a view against women as elders. What theological principles support that view?

Closing Prayer

Faithful God, you have given us your Word as our guide and your Spirit as our counselor. As our church seeks to discern the most faithful path forward for our model, give us humility to listen to one another, wisdom to understand your Word, and courage to follow where you lead. Whether we maintain our current structure or make changes, unite us in our common mission to glorify you and make disciples. Help us to remember that our unity is found not in organizational details but in Christ himself. May our discussions and decision-making be marked by love, grace, and mutual submission to one another and to you. Amen.