

Leadership: Elders and Deacons

Introduction

At The Summit Church, we are Jesus ruled, elder led, and congregationally accountable. Jesus is the head of our church, as he is the head of every church. As such, he and he alone gets the responsibility of charting the course for all that we do. Through his revealed Word in Scripture, we have our marching orders, given by the King of kings. All that we do must flow from that authority and follow the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

In his wisdom, God has given us a role in leading his church. We believe that the fundamental responsibility, under God, for maintaining all aspects of our public worship belongs to the congregation. It is to the gathered body of believers that God gives the awesome and weighty role of sharing in his ordinances, unpacking the truths of his Scriptures, and spreading his gospel to the ends of the earth.

As with any gathered body of people, the church must be led.¹ Those who lead the local church derive their authority both from Jesus Christ (who alone governs his church) and from the congregation (which holds deacons and elders accountable for their actions). The congregation entrusts its leaders with the responsibility of pursuing the mission of Christ in the spirit of Christ. In turn, the leaders honor the congregation by stewarding that leadership trust with faithful integrity. If either side of this relationship wavers, the church falls into an unhealthy place.

In accordance with the practice of the New Testament, the Summit recognizes two distinct offices within the local church—deacon and elder.

Deacons

Deacons: Who They Are

The word “deacon,” (*diakonos* in Greek) simply means “servant.” Deacons are the servants of our church, men and women (cf. Romans 16:1) who are qualified for the ministry of caring for God’s people. They handle many of the details of the church, allowing elders to focus on shepherding and teaching the church. Their role is to work closely with the elders as they both build the body of Christ up into all maturity.

At the Summit, deacons at each campus are selected by the campus pastor, who—along with the campus elders—determines if a person is suitable for this position. There is no limit to the number of deacons any particular campus may have.

While the book of Acts lacks the word “deacon,” many scholars believe that Acts shows the appointing of the early church’s first deacons. In Acts 6, seven men are chosen to assist the local church in its ministry to widows. Apparently the spiritual and physical needs of the church in Jerusalem had grown too expansive for the elders to manage on their own. The elders, wanting to remain faithful to their appointed ministry of prayer and the Word, appointed godly men to fill the need of the hour.

The men in Acts 6 are described as being “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3 CSB). Later, the Apostle Paul would offer a more expansive list of requirements for deacons. In his letter to Timothy, Paul writes,

Deacons, likewise, should be worthy of respect, not hypocritical, not drinking a lot of wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. They must also be tested first; if they prove blameless, then they can serve as deacons. Wives, too, must be worthy of respect, not slanderers, self-controlled, faithful in everything. Deacons are to be husbands of one wife, managing their children and their own households competently. (1 Timothy 3:8-12 CSB)

Nearly all of the qualifications Paul offers revolve around moral character. A deacon is to be respected, sincere, generous, faithful, and self-controlled. Additionally, they must be students of the Bible, holding to sound theology. Of course, these qualities are not unique to deacons, but are expectations for all believers. The responsibility of the deacon is not fundamentally different than that of the average Christian. As followers of Christ, we are all called to emulate the spirit of servanthood that he embodied during his time on earth. Deacons lead the way in this spirit of servanthood, which is why we often refer to them as “servant leaders.”

A discerning reader may recognize that the list of qualifications for a deacon looks remarkably similar to the list of qualifications for an elder. Indeed, while deacons and elders function in distinct roles, very little separates them in terms of their moral expectations. Those who minister to the local church, whether as leaders (elders) or as servants (deacons), must be those who allow Jesus to take lordship over every aspect of their lives. As the Scottish pastor Robert Murray M’Cheyne once said, “The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness.” The greatest need of the people of the Summit is the personal holiness of its deacons and elders.

Conspicuously absent from Paul's list is any consideration of specific talents. This is not because deacons lack such talents, nor because they are expected to do only the most menial work. Rather, by focusing on character, Paul opens the door for men and women with *all* spiritual gifts to serve the church.

At the Summit, we believe that the role of deacon is biblically encouraged for both men and women. We recognize that this question is parsed differently in various Christian traditions. Much of this difference arises from the fact that the biblical evidence is admittedly scant (on either side), and in most cases deals with *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive* details. For instance, Paul mentions a woman named Phoebe as a "*diakonon* of the church" (Romans 16:1), which can be translated either "servant" or "deacon." Phoebe may have been a deacon of the church in Rome, fulfilling the office we are describing here. But she also may simply have been a house servant that Paul knew. The context of Romans 16 is too vague to make any determinative conclusions from this passage alone.

Despite the small amount of biblical material, however, the evidence indicates that the role of deacon is not restricted to a single gender. Women were integral to Jesus' ministry from the beginning, and were key players in the early church—all in the context of a society in which women would generally have had no voice or influence at all. We believe that women can (and should) serve as deacons without subverting biblical fidelity or undermining an appropriate complementarian view of men and women.

Much of the resistance to women as deacons, we have found, comes from situations in which deacons are not functioning as they should. Many churches have "deacons" who function as a board of directors, telling the pastor how he should be running the church. Situations like this, though common, do violence to the role of deacons, often preventing churches from pursuing a healthy, elder-led structure.

Deacons: What They Do

Deacons have been referred to as the table servants or waiters of the church.² They are concerned with the practical details of church life, including administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs.³

As Acts 6 demonstrates, the first deacons served the church by distributing food to widows. While this specific application may arise in churches today, the responsibilities of a contemporary deacon vary according to the needs of the local church. From the qualifications, we can infer that deacons will generally be handling church money, managing church systems, meeting mercy needs, and interacting with some of the most intimate details of people's lives.

At the Summit, our deacons serve in a variety of areas. They make hospital visits to members who are

sick or injured. They distribute meals to families in times of difficulty. They respond to a variety of other “benevolence” needs within the church—advocating for the needy and assisting them (when appropriate) financially on behalf of the church.

Our deacons also serve through the weekend worship service. They collect, count, and transport the weekly offering. They prepare and distribute the bread and cup for communion. They handle logistical details related to baptism and often perform the baptisms themselves. They serve on one of our many ministry teams at the church—students, Summit Kids, production, First Impressions, prayer, etc.

Beyond these areas, deacons serve the church in a myriad of other ways. Some recruit and manage volunteers. Some lead the way in local outreach. Some advocate for international missions, either by leading trips or partnering with our missionaries overseas. Others create systems that make it easier for us to shepherd our people well.

In short, if the church has a need, chances are you will find deacons in the thick of things, serving the church by meeting that need.

Elders

Elders: Who They Are

In Scripture, elders are also called pastors or overseers. While some people draw distinctions between these three roles, the terms are used interchangeably throughout the Bible (cf. Acts 20; 1 Peter 5).⁴ Rather than representing three distinct offices of the church, the triplicate terms reflect three features that all elders should share in common. They are expected to be mature in the faith (elder); they are expected to shepherd the flock of God’s people (the Greek word for *pastor* means “shepherd”); and they are given special responsibility to watch over the doctrine and practice of the church (overseer). In short, elders are concerned with the spiritual needs and leadership of the church.

The qualifications for the office of elder are given primarily in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-5. As the most robust of these passages, Paul’s instructions to Timothy are worth quoting in full:

This saying is trustworthy: “If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work.” An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not an excessive drinker, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy. He must manage his own household competently and have his children under control with all dignity. (If anyone does not know how to manage his

own household, how will he take care of God's church?) He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and incur the same condemnation as the devil. Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the devil's trap. (1 Timothy 3:1-7 CSB)

In this passage, as in Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5, elders are expected to exhibit exemplary spiritual, moral, and social character. Like deacons, elders live sincere, generous, faithful, self-controlled lives. They are students of Scripture, holding to sound theology. Their family lives prove that they apply the truth of Scripture in all areas of their lives.

The expectations for elders differ from those of deacons in a one critical way. Whereas deacons are not identified by any specific talent, elders are described as men who are "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2). Paul does little to elaborate what he means by this phrase, but the picture of elders throughout the New Testament helps to complement the idea. Elders, as the leaders of God's people, bear a special responsibility to preach the Word and protect the church from false teaching. (More on this in the next section.)

The Bible presents an overwhelmingly clear answer to the question of the *number* of elders. When one looks at the verses containing the words elder, overseer, and pastor, a consistent pattern of plurality emerges.⁵ Luke, Paul, James, and Peter all refer to the office of elder in the church, with each assuming a plurality of elders per congregation (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 4:14, 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-5).⁶ At the Summit, strictly from a pragmatic standpoint, we would hardly be tempted to limit eldership to one person. But our decision to have multiple elders stems fundamentally from biblical convictions, not pragmatic concerns.

Elders at the Summit undergo rigorous scrutiny based on the scriptural requirements listed above. They go through a process designed to assess whether they meet the moral demands of Scripture, whether they have a passion to shepherd God's people, whether they are leading in generosity and service, whether they have the ability to teach, and whether they agree wholeheartedly with the Summit's theology. Those who do not meet the biblical standards do not step into the role.

We believe that the biblical depiction of elders precludes women from serving as elders. Scripture provides no examples of women who served the church in this capacity, and the consensus from church history corroborates this perspective. More pointedly, the Apostle Paul forbids women from teaching with elder-like authority or exercising spiritual authority over men in the church (1 Timothy 2:12), two of the key functions that make up the elder's role. Women should be exercising all of the same spiritual gifts as men, including teaching and preaching. In fact, we need more women stepping up to do so!

But in our efforts to promote more women in leadership, we seek to draw the same lines that Scripture does.

Elders: What They Do

Scripture calls elders to lead the church (1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2), teach the Word (1 Timothy 3:2; 2 Tim. 4:2; Titus 1:9), protect the church from false teaching (Acts 20:17, 28-31; Titus 1:9) pray for the sick (James 5:14), and use proper judgment in theological and doctrinal matters (Acts 15).

While many people in the church will play a part in many of these functions, elders are uniquely called to *lead* in these ways. Every member of the church bears the responsibility to care about doctrinal purity, to teach others the Word of God, and to pray for others. Elders simply perform these functions with the authority (and weighty responsibility) of the church. They are expected to lead primarily by example, calling others to follow them as they follow Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). Only secondarily are they expected to lead others by using their influence in order to shape the direction of the church.

Elders at the Summit are expected to devote themselves to prayer and the Word (Acts 6:4, 20:28). No elder can lead the congregation toward a deeper relationship with Christ unless he is following this path himself. Elders call others along to follow them as they dive deeper into the gospel, both through prayer and Bible study.

Elders at the Summit are engaged members of their campus. They are generous with their money, giving their first and best to the mission of the church. They are generous with their time, volunteering to serve, whether on a weekend team or through some other service outlet. They attend and lead during key Summit events, like campus prayer nights, member nights, ServeRDU, Christmas at DPAC, and other important events.

Elders at the Summit shepherd their congregation. This includes, but is not limited to, overseeing communion and baptism, leading components of the worship service, teaching discipleship courses (like Starting Point or The Gospel Class), coaching small group leaders, and responding to crises.

Elders at the Summit lead. The congregation has given them the responsibility to guide them, teach them, and challenge them to pursue Christ more faithfully and more fruitfully. When not given specific instruction on how to carry out the mission of the church, elders have the freedom to be innovative and charge forward. But elders stand under authority. They know that they both subject to the leadership of Christ as well as accountable to the church at large.

As it is the unique responsibility of the elders to steward their leadership with integrity, it is the unique responsibility of the congregation to submit to the leadership of the church. This does not imply mindless compliance: If members of the congregation believe that the leadership has deviated from our church's mission or the clear testimony of Scripture, we encourage members to speak out according to the process outlined in our bylaws. But unless they perceive the leadership to be violating integrity and ignoring the counsel of Scripture, congregation members should allow the elders to exercise the jurisdiction of leadership that God has given them.

Directional Elders and Campus Elders

We have two types of elders at the Summit—directional elders and campus elders (also called “shepherding elders”). Because of our church's size, we have found it wise to consolidate the decision-making capacity of our leadership with a smaller team (of 8-10), rather than trying to make decisions with a group as large as 100. We recognize that designating two types of elders is not a biblical necessity; we believe, however, that taking this step honors the biblical pattern of shared leadership among qualified, congregationally-accountable men, faithfully creates a way for a church of our size to make decisions efficiently, and promotes a rich plurality of spiritual leaders.

The qualifications for each of these two groups are identical, but the functions of the two teams are distinct. The directional elder team provides oversight for the church at large, dealing with big picture issues such as finances, facilities, church planting, and strategic endeavors. The campus elder teams focus primarily on shepherding at their individual campuses.

Directional Elders

The directional elder team is made up of an equal number of staff members and lay members, for a maximum of ten total directional elders.

Lay elders on the directional elder team serve in four-year terms, with one elder rotating off each year. According to our bylaws, each lay elder can serve two consecutive terms, for a total of eight years. New lay elders are appointed by the existing directional elders and announced to the congregation to allow them to speak into their approval. For a period of at least 30 days, the directional elders hear from any congregation member who has cause to believe that a lay elder candidate is unqualified. If no such disqualifications arise during these 30 days, the candidate becomes a lay elder.

Staff elders on the directional elder team are appointed by the senior pastor, in consultation with the rest of the directional elders. Unlike lay elders, there is no limitation in our bylaws regarding how long

a staff elder may serve on the team. However, staff elders frequently rotate off the directional elder board to allow a variety of people to serve in that capacity.

The directional elder team regularly meets once a month for four to five hours. Occasionally, the team will have specially called meetings or handle matters via email. In addition to the responsibilities laid on elders by Scripture (mentioned above), our directional elders (1) offer **wise counsel**, (2) put on the **brakes** by saying no, and (3) help in times of **crisis**.

1. Wise Counsel. The larger the Summit gets, the more we delegate key responsibilities to paid staff. We consider this appropriate stewardship of the resources and the flock God has entrusted to us, especially since some of our paid staff also function as elders (either directional or shepherding). However, as our church staff increases, we want to ensure that our directional elders are still exercising their biblical authority. When making key decisions that affect the entire church, the directional elders offer a perspective that the paid staff can often miss, being so deeply immersed in the everyday grind of ministry.

2. Brakes. The directional elder team provides an extra layer of accountability for the lead pastor and the staff. Should anything go amiss with the staff of the church, the directional elders have the authority to immediately apply the brakes. They do not micromanage the staff's expenses or programming decisions, since they desire to empower our staff to lead according to their giftings. But they are given an open book for everything that we do as a church, and are encouraged to step in at any time, in any ministry, if they see something unwise or patently sinful arise.

3. Crisis Team in Waiting. The Summit needs a group of godly and wise people who have both the experience and the wisdom to work through the tough calls, sharp disagreements, and dicey issues that come with any major crisis. The nature of these crises varies. Some of the most common are tragedies in the lives of our members, public media needs, and instances of church discipline. By the time these urgent needs arise, it's too late to assemble a response team. The directional elder team is prepared to act as just such an urgent crisis team, handling situations as they arise or delegating them to the appropriate ministry leaders.

While the directional elders exercise authority in our church, they do so under the accountability of the congregation. Thus the entire congregation is given a direct responsibility to vote on certain matters (such as the purchase of property, the approval of our annual budget, or changing our bylaws). The

congregation is also given the right to call *any* decision of the directional elder team into question—according to the process outlined in our bylaws.

Campus Elders (“Shepherding Elders”)

The Summit’s campus elders assist the campus pastors and staff campus teams as they shepherd the people of that campus, equipping the saints there for the ministry. Because their primary role is executing the spiritual mission of the church, they are also referred to as the “shepherding elders” of the Summit. As mentioned above, these elders are chosen according to the biblical standards set out in Scripture and are interviewed by other elders to assess these qualifications.

We place no limit on the total number of campus elders, nor on the maximum number of elders a specific campus may have. We allow the campus leadership to assess how many men are qualified to be shepherding elders as well as how many elders are needed to shepherd the people at each campus. Currently our campus elder team is much larger than our directional elder team, comprising approximately 100 men.

Campus elders engage in more direct ministry within their campuses than most directional elders. They often oversee specific ministries and coach small group leaders. Because of the amount of time needed to engage in many of these ministries, many campus elders also serve as paid staff. Many of our other campus elders, however, are lay members of the church.

Like the directional elder team, the campus elders provide wise counsel for the pastoral staff. They also are the first people to step in during a time of crisis. Unlike the directional elder team, however, the campus elders practice their authority under the oversight and final authority of the directional elders. They are given a significant measure of empowerment to lead in their specific contexts, just as the staff are, but they cannot exercise autonomous authority to exercise church discipline, protect doctrine, or chart the direction of the church.

Just because *final* authority lies with the directional elders, however, does not mean that the campus elders are stripped of authority altogether. The campus elders are frequently consulted, are encouraged to assist the directional elders, and (most importantly) are given the power to execute the vision of the church at each individual campus. Thus, for instance, if an instance of church discipline arises, campus elders will generally be the ones meeting with the member, counseling him, presenting him to the campus, and determining whether his membership should be revoked—but all of this activity comes under the authority of the directional elders who have empowered the campus elders to do so.

Conclusion

Whether we are directional elders, campus elders, deacons, or members of the Summit, every one of us looks not to human authority, but to the “chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:4) who exercised his authority by laying down his life for his sheep. In his eyes, none of us are shepherds or elders or leaders; all are sheep, desperate recipients of his grace. This reality should instill humility and gratitude in us all.

Our chief Shepherd sends us out in his mission, distinctly equipping each of us to fill a needed role as we take the gospel to the ends of the earth. May we be found faithful in that mission, striving together as one flock, so that the voice of the Good Shepherd might be clearly heard—and that those not yet in his fold might come to know the saving grace of our glorious King.

Notes

1. Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 47-8.
2. Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 19.
3. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 231.
4. John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 161.
5. *Ibid.*, 178.
6. Dever, *The Church*, 57-8.