

# Calvary Baptist Church of Santa Barbara

## The Biblical Function and Responsibilities of Elders

The New Testament indicates that God has entrusted the care of the church to a group of men designated by three different terms – elders, overseers, and pastors. In the New Testament these three terms appear to be synonymous. This is seen most clearly in Acts 20, when Paul meets with the “elders” of the church at Ephesus (v.17). Several verses later, the Apostle Paul tells these same elders to keep watch over themselves and over the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” (another translation for “bishop”). In the very next sentence, he exhorts these elders, these overseers, to “be shepherds (from the same root as ‘pastors’) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (v.28). In the space of twelve verses, the same men are referred to as elders, overseers, and shepherds (or pastors).

The Apostle Peter also addresses the leaders in the church as elders and uses the imagery of shepherding (pastor) and overseeing (overseer or bishop) to portray their responsibilities.

“So I exhort the *elders* among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: *shepherd* the flock of God that is among you, exercising *oversight*...” (I Peter 5:1-2, ESV)

The most prevalent term used today for this office is elder. Pastors are elders with the understanding that they may have increased oversight expectations vis-à-vis non-vocational elders because they have been called and set aside by the church to labor full time as an elder-pastor, particularly in preaching and teaching (I Timothy 5:17).

The New Testament indicates that the church is not to be governed by one monarchical bishop. Rather the early church had a pastoral leadership team with a multiplicity of elders or pastors.

The function of oversight and protective care is intended to serve the spiritual welfare of the church. By identifying himself and Timothy as servants, Paul indicated that the spiritual leadership of the church must be exercised with the humble heart of a servant.

**Shepherding:** Elders are responsible for the general spiritual oversight and welfare of God’s flock. They must know the condition of God’s flock (I Peter 5:2). This is accomplished by:

- Personal encouragement and exhortation to CBC members in life’s trials and difficulties.
- Visitation and ministry to the sick and disabled.
- Counseling and teaching the spiritually troubled.
- Regular interaction with the members of the church through a ministry of hospitality.

**Guarding:** The key role of a shepherd is to protect his sheep. Elders are responsible to protect the flock of God from false teaching and to defend the doctrine and health of the church (Acts 20:29-31).

- The church has an established doctrine that the elders should communicate to teachers, along with the admonition that we do not want “false” doctrine taught at CBC. Any false teaching will be subject to discipline.
- Those teachings covered in the church doctrinal statement are considered to be “non-negotiable,” and all elders and teachers at CBC will be expected to subscribe to and abide by them or avoid teaching in those areas where they may disagree.

- Elders are responsible for communicating the doctrine of the church to the membership on a regular basis, providing answers to those who have questions about this doctrine, and dealing with any opposing or erroneous views, always observing a spirit of grace and gently correcting those who may be in error (I Peter 3:15).

**Leading:** The elders are called to rule (govern) the church, providing leadership and direction for its members and various ministries (I Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17). This includes:

- Casting vision for the church. It is the responsibility of the elders to know and understand God's leading for the church. This requires a close walk with the Lord through dedicated study of His Word and regular, prevailing prayer asking God to reveal His will for themselves and their flock.
- Providing clear, consistent direction for the ministries of the church. They are responsible to evaluate and make sure that all church ministries align with the overall mission and purpose of CBC.
- The elders are to be always considering the future wellbeing of the church by recruiting, training, mentoring, and discipling future leaders. They are to provide instruction in leadership and doctrine, appropriate correction and discipline in righteousness to thoroughly equip them for service (II Timothy 3:16-17).
- The elders are to set an example of godly, Christ-like living in all areas of their life (family, friendships, professional associations, etc.). They are to be willing to be accountable to their fellow elders and graciously accept correction from them.

**Teaching:** All elders are to be able to teach the Word of God (I Timothy 3:2) and carry out the consistent ministry of biblical instruction to equip the body of Christ for ministry.

- Elders will assist the vocational pastors in developing a ministry of instruction and counseling for all ages and maturity levels of CBC. This includes the new membership class, and oversight of all of the teaching ministries of the church (small groups, Sunday School, etc.).
- Elders also will assist in conducting worship services by leading in prayer, giving announcements, filling the pulpit as necessary and appropriate.

**Disciplining:** The elders are responsible for the discipline of the church. This requires that:

- They must set a personal example of righteous and godly living. They are accountable to their fellow elders and pastors, and if they sin they should humbly repent and submit to the discipline of their peers (I Timothy 5:20).
- They are to be alert to disciplinary problems in the church. They must avoid creating an atmosphere of legalism or fear, while at the same time, being quick to deal with issues before they disrupt the unity of the body (I Timothy 5:21).
- When exercising discipline, elders must carefully investigate all the issues and follow correct biblical protocol (Matthew 18:15-20; I Timothy 5:1-2, 19-22).

**Potential Conflicts of Interest:** Any elder with a conflict of interest should recuse himself from decisions affecting those interests. The group must hold him accountable on this.

**Meetings of Elders:** Frequency of elders meetings are determined by the elders themselves. It is recommended that they meet no less than once a month and no more than weekly on a regular basis. There may be additional meetings necessary for special concerns.

**Principle of Unanimity:** The board of elders shall make no decision apart from unanimous consent of its members.