

Acts 20:28

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[0 : 00] Act 20, verse 28, pay careful attention to yourselves and to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseer to care for the church of God which he obtained with his own blood.

As I said when we were reading this at the start of what will be a study for a few weeks, I don't actually know how many weeks it will be.

As we look together at the role of eldership we are going to be, God willing, appointing new elders and it's a really important thing to think about not just in terms of the fact that we are going to be appointing new elders but because the whole subject of eldership makes us think about our life as a congregation and how God has appointed his church to be structured.

And so it's not just about those who are possibly going to become elders, it's about our whole church and how God has instructed things to be. We want things to be done in his order, in his way and we want to make sure that we are basing our understanding of the whole thing on what the Bible teaches, it's the biblical teaching that is at the heart of what we do.

So that's what we are going to be focusing on. One of the reasons I want to do this is because I think that quite often there are misconceptions about eldership and the reason I know that's true is because I myself had a lot of misconceptions about eldership.

[1 : 40] There was a lot of things that I thought about eldership that actually were not the case. So it's very easy to misunderstand things and as I learned about how the three church works more and more and how what the Bible teaches about eldership I realised that I had a lot of misunderstandings in my mind.

So in order to kind of get our bearings we are going to do something here and I am going to ask you, is this true or false? Now you don't need to say it out loud, it's not like a quiz, I'm not kind of testing you but I just want you to say it in your own minds.

So when I read these out, tell me if you think this is true or false. So first one, you have to be a deacon before you can become an elder. Right in your head is that true or false.

What do you think? The answer is false. You don't have to be a deacon before you become an elder.

It's very important that we can ask that elders and deacons are two different offices, they are not a ladder. So funny how people think that there is a ladder in our church.

[2 : 48] I was speaking at the Old Folks thing back on Monday night, they had like an Old Folks fellowship, you were there weren't you? And on the way out I was meeting everyone at the door and this gentleman on the way out said to me, would you like to minister in back Monday?

Because obviously I was from there and I just said, oh I said to him, I just want to do whatever the Lord has for me, you know what I'm very happy with where I am. And he says, so you don't want to climb the ladder.

So there you go, back is up and wrong. I guess I was at the bottom of the ladder here but I hope that's the very mutual. But anyway that's the misconception and we've got to see the misconception of thinking that you go from deacon and then you get promoted to become an elder.

That's not the way it is. Deacons, elders are completely separate things. Now very often it will be the case that you'll be a deacon before you're an elder. That's very often the case but it doesn't have to be that way.

Okay so number one, I won't ask if you got that right, I still tend to do that. Next one, once you become an elder you stop being a deacon. Okay, three of faults, answer that in your mind.

[3 : 59] Three of faults. The answer is, faults. Once you become a deacon you stay a deacon for life.

Once you become an elder you stay an elder for life. And this is very important because the likelihood is in their own context that when we elect new elders that will probably be deacons, you're becoming elder.

But they won't stop being deacons and elders are still deacons. They still attend the deacons quote, they still have deaconal responsibilities. So once you become an elder you don't stop becoming a deacon, you're still a deacon.

So it's very important because I don't want people to think, oh well if we get new elders we won't have enough deacons. Not through you because we have a salient of deacons all the time. Once you become an elder you're still a deacon.

Okay, good. Supposing someone was elected and elder was out being a deacon, would he not be a member of the deacon's court then? Well, yes, in theory yes that's true.

[5 : 09] But when the three churches practice was written a hundred and sixty years ago, they actually allowed for elders to sit on a deacons quote, even if they weren't previously elected deacons purely because of numbers.

So you could, if somebody became an elder who wasn't previously a deacon, they would be entitled to sit at the deacons quote. And it would be good because we have relatively small convocation.

If we were huge like Smithton then probably some of the elders wouldn't attend the deacons quote or wouldn't necessarily need to. But in a smaller context people muck in.

But it's an interesting one that it's been kind of accommodated to for practical purposes if you know what I mean, rather than for theological ones. But if you're a deacon you stay there, and if you're a deacon elder you stay there, and you can be both.

So false, false. Next one, minister is the senior elder. Through or false? I hope you all know the answer to that.

[6 : 15] False, absolutely totally false. We believe in a thing called parity of elders.

That means that they're equal. Now there are differences, a minister like me is a teaching elder which we'll come to later in our study. And a non-ministered elder is a ruling elder.

But they are equal, they're absolutely equal. And in terms of decision making, in terms of authority, in terms of status, they're equal. So the minister is not above the elder, so there are many perhaps black people.

They are not above the elder. So the minister is not not not the senior elder. In fact there is no such thing as that, no such thing as a senior elder.

You can have the one who's been there the longest, but he's not ranking more highly. The newly ordained elders are of absolutely equal status within you, with the elders who've been there for many many years.

[7 : 20] All absolutely equal. So there's no, the minister or no one else is the senior elder. Okay so false false false. Last one, let's see what this one is.

Elders are elected by popular vote, those with the most votes are appointed. True or false, then you're mine. True or false? Gasp support.

But it is actually false. And this is the one I want to mention, because this is something, it's almost true, but it's not completely true. It's not that we are elected. Elders are not elected by popular vote. It's not just a case of whoever gets the most votes gets in it. To emphasize how it works I'm going to drop. There's two principles for electing elders, right? The KEPC session has to approve of the question.

Okay, that's number one. The KEPC session has to approve. And they have to have support of the majority of members.

[8 : 49] Now that's the two principles that are in the blue book. And you can see, as I hope to show, that's slightly different from just the most votes.

And I'll explain why. This is the threshold of 50% of members. Okay?

You have to have the support of 50% of the members in order to become an elder, right? So supposing we wanted to appoint 20 new elders.

Obviously we can't, we don't have enough men to do that. But supposing we were a big church and we were appointed 20 new elders. And we were voting, right? And you had 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20.

These 16 get more than 50%. These 6, no, these 14 get more than 50%. These 6 don't. They cannot become elders.

[9 : 54] Does that make sense? They cannot become elders because they don't have the support of the majority. So even though you want to vote 20, say you say we want to vote 20, unless all 20 are above that 50%, you can't appoint them.

Not just a case of the most. So that's one way in which it works. The other way is say you wanted to vote 10, right? Say you decided you wanted to appoint 10 elders.

And 16 of them got more than 50%. So say this is Jeff at this end. No, no, I cannot change that. I'll make that Thomas. So that's Thomas at this end. And this is Jeff here.

And then there's 12 others. The CEP session wants to appoint 10. They can choose any of those 10. And they might decide that Thomas is too tall and spends too long preaching. And they decide they don't want to appoint him.

Even though he's got the most votes, that doesn't guarantee that he's appointed. Because it has to be the CEP session approval and 50% of the congregation. Now, I don't know of any incidents where that has happened with elders, with somebody with the most votes that's not been appointed.

[11 : 13] But it could happen because that's what the legislation says. And so generally speaking, it is the most people who get the most votes will get appointed. But I just want to explain to you that that's how it works.

Because that is how it works. That's the rules that the free church has. And that's what the time for. Does that make sense? Yeah. That's how it works. So this is what I mean about sometimes. And the reason that I say that is because I thought that it was popular vote.

I thought this was true. Most votes gets in. But it's not actually like that. It's slightly different. The elders are actually appointed by the CEP session. The CEP session is the final say. But they can only appoint those who have the above 50% of membership.

So the CEP session could actually go against the wishes of the congregation? Well, not technically because they would be still appointing somebody who has more than 50% of the support. But they could in a sense.

Imagine the situation where the CEP session knows something about somebody that the congregation don't know. Now that could happen. Maybe somebody has a whatever, a conviction or something or whatever that nobody else knows about, that the CEP session knows about.

[12 : 26] And that can happen. And that's the situation. It's obviously very, very rare and it doesn't apply to any other situation at all. But it is the CEP session that makes the final appointment.

But if the CEP session knew that in advance, surely you wouldn't have met the CEP? Well, I would imagine that would be the case. You would think so. It doesn't always happen though.

I mean, I know of a situation where an elder was appointed because he got the vote. Yet there was things about him that were questionable and very quickly after his appointment he ended up under criminal charge.

And a bit of foresight would have prevented that. But it's not necessary. He lost his eldership then. But he put up the street and not a phone.

All I'm saying is that it's the... All I'm trying to say here is this isn't my view. This is not me saying this is what I think. This is what the blue book of the feature of Scotland says. This is the way eldership works.

[13 : 34] Basically, a popular vote does all that. But that's just not what's in the letter of the law. Yes? What happens if the 80 members and the 40 of them are two-fold in in front of the vote?

Yes. In which case you and Peter are four-times. Yes. Well, I think you'd have to come to some sort of an issue and as to what would be considered your active membership.

You could have a significant proportion of the membership who were perhaps in a care home or something and who weren't aware of how to vote. And so what you would... I would imagine in that situation you'd have to come to some arrangement as a quick session and perhaps get approval of the presidency just to say we're doing it under this basis.

That we are taking 70% of our congregation as the individual voter because of the exceptions that we've seen. I think you'd have to do something about it.

But it's interesting if that's how it works. It's all... So the two things work together. Anyway, that's enough about legislation. We need to talk about much more important things than that now.

[14 : 49] But the point in all that is there are misconceptions about eldership in lots of ways. And it's important that we think biblically and that we think clearly about what it really means to be an

elder.

So we are going to ask basically two simple questions. We're going to ask what is an elder and what does an elder do? That's our questions. We're not going to get through it all tonight. So we'll just go as far as we can tonight and then we'll pick it up again because I'm really determined to get into this habit of going on for too long. So we'll just keep going as far as we can and then we'll leave it and pick it up again.

So first question, what is an elder? And to answer that we're going to look at these two verses, verse 17 and verse 28. There's two key words that are used in these verses to describe eldership. In verse 17 it says the eldership and in verse 28 it says over-the-heirs. Okay, so these are the two words that are being described to use eldership.

[15:48] Okay, it's helpful for us to actually learn what the Greek words here. Now before you freak out, I hope this all makes sense. We're going to look at the Greek words here. I think this is so exciting, but anyway.

The Greek word for elder in verse 17 is this, presbuteros. And the Greek word for overseer in verse 28 is episcopos.

So if you recognize those words, this is where we get the word presbyter, and this is where we get the word episcopalian.

Sometimes you'll fancy that bishop. So elders are presbutenos and episcopos. An elder is a presbyter and an elder is an episcopos.

Now we have to basically ask the question, what do these words mean? Because these words lie at the heart of what being an elder is. What do they mean? Well, what does the word presbyter mean?

[16:55] We hear that all the time. Three presbyterian church. Thomas is going to be presbyterian. Positively presbyterian in the constant we hear it. The word presbyter basically means old.

Which is actually quite interesting, but it does mean old. In Luke 1.18, Zachariah says to Gabriel, how can I have a child since I am a presbyter?

I am an old man. It basically means old. That's where it comes from. That's why we use the translation elder. Elderly. Somebody older. Somebody old.

Now in terms of eldership, the emphasis is on seniority and on experience. If you look at an elder, it should be somebody who has an elder seniority.

When we come to the qualifications for elderships, Paul says in 1st Timothy, an elder should not be a recent convert. This is the element of seniority. Now that does not mean that elders have to be over the age of 70.

[18:02] It does not mean that. Because in the New Testament, a lot of younger men were appointed elders. People like Timothy, they were young men.

Paul died probably before he was 60. So Paul was probably in his 50s when he died. He had been a leader for a long, long time. So it doesn't mean like a bother.

But it does mean somebody who has experience as a Christian. Now that can take various forms. You might have a 30 year old who has been a member for 20 years.

You might have a 70 year old who has been a member for 5 years. Now in that context, the 30 year old is more qualified than the 70 year old.

But really if someone has been a member for 5 or 10 years, then I would say that if they are growing well, then they would be qualified whatever their age. The point I am making is, although the word basically means old, we are thinking in terms of seniority.

[19:05] Somebody with a bit of experience. That can depend on our circumstances. It depends when we were converted. It depends when we went forward. But the key point is you don't want somebody who has just come in.

Somebody who has just come to faith in the last 6 months or the last year, or who is very, very new to the faith, very, very new to the church. They would not be considered ready by the New Testament legislation.

They would have to wait until they are a little bit more senior. And so a presbyter is somebody with a bit of experience. It doesn't mean that a presbyter knows everything.

An elder is not expected to know everything because no elder knows everything. An elder, we all are learning so much and we have so much to learn.

But this word, presbyter, presbyty, I can never really explain it. Is there an unit? No.

[20 : 05] Presbytery. Yeah, why? That's just the gathering of the presbyter, the elder. And when we say that we are a presbyterian church, we are just saying that we are led by elders.

You could call it an elderian church if you wanted. But that's not really easy to say. But that's basically what we mean. When you say presbyterian, it doesn't mean harsh, it doesn't mean whatever people associate with presbyterianism.

It means elder led. Elders make up the courts of the church. So presbyter, somebody who's experienced, somebody who can take a senior position in the church.

The other word is episcopos, which is really interesting. It's translated, sometimes the word bishop, and in the ESV it's translated overseer.

Now, again, I just want to emphasize this point because it's good to know. In the Episcopal church, in the Roman Catholic church, in the Anglican church, they would say that this and this are different things.

[21 : 18] So that's why you've got a priest, which some say comes from the word presbyter, they have a hierarchy of a priest, then a bishop, then an archbishop.

They've got this hierarchy, so they have an Episcopalian church, an Anglican church, in the Roman Catholic church, because they say that these are different things.

Acts chapter 20 is a key chapter for saying that that's not the case, because the elders who came from Ephesus are called in verse 17, presbyterian and in verse 28, Episcopos, the same thing, they're in different, interchangeable terms.

That's why we don't believe that we don't have a bishop's nerve, that's why we don't have a bishop's nerve church above us, because we believe that they are equal. But anyway, the key question is what does it mean?

What does Episcopos mean? Well, I didn't actually know this until I started studying at all, I didn't realize this, but I thought it was really interesting. Episcopos is made up of two words, Episcopos and Scopos.

[22 : 34] Two Greek words, Epi and Scopos. Now, any ideas what Scopos means? What do you use to look at the star?

Telescope. Scopos. Scopos means to look at. It means a watcher, to watch.

That's where we get the word scope, telescope, microscope, scope, scope, scope, comes from this word, scope, so you can see. So it's somebody who, it's a watcher.

The word Epi just means over. So an overwatcher, or a watcher over it.

Which is why we've got the translation over, seer. So Episcopos means somebody who watches over somebody.

[23 : 37] And I think that is a beautiful description of what it means to be an elder. An elder is somebody who watches over the congregation.

One dictionary elected, defined it like this, that Episcopos is one who watches over the welfare of others. And so when you think of an elder, that's their job.

To watch over you, to make sure that you're okay, to guard you, to keep their eye on you. And so it's a real expression of care, a real expression of commitment, a real expression of concern.

The elders are looking after the spiritual needs of the congregation. An elder's job is to make sure that you are okay in your Christian work.

And I think that's a beautiful description, and that's so helpful to look and see what these words actually mean. Somebody who watches over us.

[24 : 46] So that's a question, what is an elder? He is a presbyter, somebody's senior, somebody with experience. And he is a watcher over and an Episcopos, someone who makes sure that you are safe.

So that's the first question. That's the New Testament words for elder. Our second question, which we're just going to start, we're not going to finish it, but we'll just start it, what does an elder do?

What does an elder do? Well, if you look at this verse, it gives two things, two verbs that an elder has to do.

The two jobs of an elder are to pay careful attention and to care for the church.

That's the job description of an elder. Pay careful attention and to care for the church. So I want to look at these two together. We won't be looking at the second one, but we might get through the first one.

[25 : 55] Let's see how we get on. This first word, to pay careful attention, is a really interesting word. It literally means to have towards.

That's what the literal word means. It's the word to have and the word to have, to have towards, to be an S in the end of that. And it's used in various ways. Sorry, no, two five.

Here we are. Here we have it in different versions. Same word in all these different versions.

Matthew 6.1, beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them. It means kind of being careful in that sense. Acts 16, one who heard this was a woman named Lydia from the city of Thyatira, a cellar of the Precipite Boots, who was a worshiper of God, Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul.

Same word again, paying attention. Acts 5.35, Galatians says, Men of the cell, take care what you're about to do with these men. Then you'll be careful. So turning your attention, being careful.

[27 : 02] 1 Timothy 4 uses the word devote to translate the same word. Until I come, devote yourselves to the public reading of scriptures. The idea of just being really committed to something. And really interesting, the 1 Timothy 3 translates the word as addicted, because that's what it can also mean.

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tank, not addicted to much wine, not gritty or dishonest skin. So that word, that word, that word, that word.

Are all the same word that we have in Acts 28, describing what the elders should do. They should be utterly focused, addicted to looking after the congregation.

It's a total devotion to them. And so the emphasis is that your mind, your focus, your commitment is towards your duties.

And then it tells us that there's two things that you have to be devoted to. You have to be devoted to yourselves and to all the flock.

[28 : 07] And that's really, really interesting. It emphasizes the fact that an elder has to be devoted to himself and pay attention to himself. And that's a reminder that elders are constantly learning.

And please don't ever think any of you that an elder is supposed to know it all from day one.

Nobody does. An elder is constantly, constantly learning.

I always remember going through college thinking, oh well, I thought in the first year, by second year I'll know enough. And then in third year I thought, oh, by third year I'll know enough. But then in third year I thought, by the end of this I'll know enough.

And then I reached the end of my final year and I just thought, oh dear, because you never, ever feel like you know enough. But we're constantly learning.

An elder is always learning. An elder is always a disciple, always a student. And so an elder is there to learn. And that's a good thing.

[29 : 04] And I know that all the potential elders in this congregation are terrified at the thought of it and think of themselves very unsuitable. But that's actually a very good thing to be feeling like that. So an elder must pay attention to himself.

But an elder must also take care of the flock. Now this is where it's really important. We can ask the question, what are the main duties of an elder?

And we might think to yourself, well, an elder's got to serve the elements on a communion Sunday.

An elder should be sitting at the front at the services. An elder has to have that formal position of status in the church.

None of these things are priorities. None of them. The number one priority of an elder is to have his mind deeply and compassionately devoted to looking after the flock.

And notice it says all the flock. And that's one of the wonderful words that I love, that the Bible includes, that it emphasizes that every single member is precious.

[30 : 17] Every single member needs to be looked after. And so when you think of the church session, it's a word that, it's a phrase, two words that in many ways are probably shrouded in mystery to so many people.

What does a church session do? What happens at a church session? What's the church session saying? What's going on at the church session? When you see those words, you should be thinking of the fact that God has appointed these men to take very, very good care of you.

That's their job to pay attention to themselves and to all the flock. It all comes back to the fact that God wants to look after you.

And all of these structures are in place so that God can take care of you and take care of your congregation and bind us closer together so that by His grace we support one another, we look after one another, and we are helped along in life's journey.

The Christians should never have to go to alone because we're part of a church, we're part of a flock, we've been shepherded by the church session and over it all is our Heavenly Father, happiness and leading.

[31 : 42] We'll leave it there because I've run out of time. We'll pick it up from there. Do you have any idea of the idea of the elder of the box? No, I don't.

I actually don't. What about that? It does, it does, it does. It's hard to say, Donnie, what that goes from.

Because sometimes there's things that we've been doing for generations and we don't even know why we're doing that. And that's again why it's so important to come back to scripture and think to yourself, well, you know, I mean, there's a question for you to ask.

There's a question, you know, the flock needs to be looked after. Who should the elders be sitting beside?

Me or the flock? You know, I'm not saying that to be controversial at all, I'm just saying let's let the Bible guide us because this is what it's all about.

[32 : 40] We're looking after it. Let's pray it's on three together.