

# Elders in the New Testament

George Wieland, 2019<sup>1</sup>

This is a collection of references to elders in the New Testament. It serves as a convenient way to observe and think about what sorts of people and functions are envisaged when elders are mentioned in those contexts, first of Jewish community life and then of new communities of Jesus-followers in mission contexts around the Roman world.

Read against the background of those traditional cultures, elders are assumed to be exactly that – older people! Though it was possible for a younger person to earn the respect and recognition usually reserved for more senior people. Every traditional culture has “elders” who hold and embody the identity of their community, connect it to its heritage and through their knowledge, wisdom and care, guide its life in the present. An example of this in Aotearoa New Zealand is seen in the [kaumātua](#) (koro and kuia) of the living traditional culture of Te Ao Māori. It is through moral influence at the heart of a community rather than assuming a position of power over it that such people exercise their community-shaping and guiding role.

## 1. Jewish elders

“Elders” (Greek: *presbyteroi*) appear frequently in the New Testament. In Jewish communities these were people who were evidently respected and exercised some responsibility. In Jerusalem the elders, with other leaders, formed a council that we see deliberating on issues pertaining to the life and faith of the Jewish community and authorising action on behalf of their people, e.g.:

*Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the **elders** and chief priests and scribes [Matt 16:21]*

*And as soon as it was morning the chief priests, with the **elders** and scribes, and the whole council held a consultation; and they bound Jesus and led him away and delivered him to Pilate. [Mark 15:1]*

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers of the people and **elders** ...” [Acts 4:8]*

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*[Paul speaking] “. . . as the high priest and the whole **council of elders** bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brethren, and I journeyed to Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.” [Acts 22:5]*

## 2. Christian elders

We see from the Book of Acts and the New Testament Letters that as Christian communities emerged they too recognised certain people as “elders” in the way that the Jewish communities out of which the first Christian converts came had done. Here are all the New Testament references to Christian elders:

### a. The elders of the Jerusalem church

*And the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brethren who lived in Judea; and they did so, sending it to the **elders** by the hand of Barnabas and Saul. [Acts 11:29-30]*

*But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the **elders** about this question. [Acts 15:1-2]*

*When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the **elders**, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses.” The apostles and the **elders** were gathered together to consider this matter. [Acts 15: 4-6]*

*Then it seemed good to the apostles and the **elders**, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, with the following letter: “The brethren, both the apostles and the **elders**, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings.” [Acts 15: 22-23]*

*As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and **elders** who were at Jerusalem. [Acts 16:4]*

*When we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James; and all the **elders** were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. [Acts 21:17-19]*

## b. Elders appointed in missionary churches

*When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed **elders** for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed. [Acts 14:21-23]*

*This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you, if any man is blameless, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of being profligate or insubordinate. For a bishop, as God's steward, must be blameless; he must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled; he must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it. [Titus 1:5-9]*

## c. Guidance to and about elders

### **Paul speaks to the Ephesus elders**

*And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church. "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God which he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, and to those who were with me. In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" [Acts 20:17, 28-35]*

### **Paul gives guidance to Timothy about elders in Ephesus**

*Let the **elders** who rule<sup>2</sup> well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching; the scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain," and, "The*

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<sup>2</sup> The English word *rule* is unhelpful here. "Exercise leadership" or "manage" (the household of faith) might be nearer to the sense of the Greek term *proistēmi*.

*labourer deserves his wages.” Never admit any charge against an **elder** except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without favour, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor participate in another man’s sins; keep yourself pure. No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments. The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good deeds are conspicuous; and even when they are not, they cannot remain hidden. [1 Tim 5:17-25]*

#### **Peter’s appeal to fellow elders**

*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 to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory. Likewise you that are younger be subject to the **elders**. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” [1 Pet 5:1-5]*

### e. Examples of elders exercising ministry

#### **Representing the church in its care for its members**

*Is any among you sick? Let him call for the **elders** of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. [James 5:14-15]*

#### **Representing the church in commissioning people for service**

*Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Till I come, attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophetic utterance when the **council of elders** laid their hands upon you. [1 Tim 4:12-14]*

### f. “The Elder”, letter writer

*The **elder** to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth [2 John 1]*

*The **elder** to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. [3 John 1]*

## g. The twenty-four elders in Revelation

*Round the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four **elders**, clad in white garments, with golden crowns upon their heads. [Rev 4:4]*

*And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four **elders** fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints; [Rev 5:8]*

*And the twenty-four **elders** and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who is seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah! " [19:4]*

*(See also Rev 4:10; 5:5, 6, 11, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 14:3)*

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In addition to elders the New Testament speaks of overseers (*episkopoi*) and deacons (*diakonoi*) who performed particular roles in some of the churches. The picture is not uniform, but where they are found we have to ask how the various functions were related within one church or group of churches. In the missionary churches elders exercised oversight and pastoral ministry in local communities of faith, but there were other ministry roles that could be exercised trans-locally, both in pioneer mission and in the continuing care and guidance of new communities of faith in Jesus. Paul's letters indicate that when he moved on from a place he often left or sent co-workers to continue the sort of church-establishing ministry that he himself had been exercising. It is not always clear whether those roles were only temporary or were intended to be taken up by local successors when the missionaries moved on.

For the most part what the New Testament has to say about those ministry roles is descriptive rather than prescriptive. We are not given a "New Testament manual of eldership." However, we can observe the practice of some of the first Christian communities which can guide us in our situations, and behind the practice there are principles that we can work out in our different contexts.

So what did elders actually do in New Testament churches? From the material we've gathered the following activities can be observed:

- taking responsibility for overseeing and managing the life of Christian communities (churches, but not just when they meet together)
- pastoring Christ's people
- keeping the faith of the church healthy, by teaching what is right and correcting those who are teaching error
- modelling Christian living, at home and in the church
- representing Christ and his church to the wider community
- deliberating on issues concerning the church's life and mission and, with the whole church, take decisions and action to advance it

- on behalf of the whole church setting apart people with prayer and laying on of hands for specific ministries and missionary roles
- receiving reports from returning missionaries and reflecting on the implications of these experiences for the church's understanding of God and salvation and its practices
- praying for the sick when they request it
- being accountable to the church and submitting to its discipline

There does, however, seem to be variety in the New Testament. In the newly founded churches on Crete (Titus), leadership seems to combine elder/overseer/manager functions. In the more developed church(es) in Ephesus (1 Timothy) there appears to be more distinguishing between functions (overseers, elders, deacons) and specialisation among elders ("those who labour in preaching and teaching"). What matters is that there are people who can exercise responsibilities of care and leadership within the Christian communities with regard to their faith, life and mission.

With this in mind, we need to ask:

- How are the functions of oversight and care being exercised in my fellowship?
- How does the church recognise people who can model authentic discipleship?
- In our appointments how may we give due weight to both competence for tasks and qualities of life and character?