

Elders Handbook

CONTENTS

Introduction

The Role of Elders

 The role of a shepherd

 The qualities of shepherds

 How to choose an elder

The Ecclesia

The Breaking of Bread Service

Bible Reading

Bible Class

Teaching Others

 Teaching the family

 Teaching children

Preparing to give talks

Prayer

Praise

Widows, orphans and the needy

Ecclesial organisation

Finance

Elders in the Old Testament

Brothers and sisters who sin

 Justice and Mercy

 Making decisions

Funerals

Regional & country elders

Final Message

Introduction

We read about the appointment of elders in New Testament

ecclesias in Acts 14:23; "Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust."

Paul advised Titus to do the same thing; *"The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you"* (Titus 1:5).

Ecclesias with spiritually strong elders tend to be spiritually strong, are keen to preach and look after one another well.

Ecclesias with spiritually weak elders tend to be spiritually weak, are often divided, don't do much preaching and tend to struggle.

This means the best way to help ecclesias to be spiritually strong is to help them have spiritually strong elders. This handbook has been put together with the aim of:

- explaining the role of elders
- helping elders become spiritually strong
- helping elders understand their role in assisting the ecclesia to become spiritually strong.

The Role of Elders

The role of an elder is the role of a shepherd. Just as a shepherd looks after the sheep, so an elder looks after the ecclesial members as Peter explains;

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them" (1 Peter 5:1-2).

Peter himself was given the role of a shepherd when Jesus told him to; *"Take care of my sheep"* (John 21:16). Jesus set the example by being the good shepherd.

Paul used the same language when he spoke to the Ephesian elders, *"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood"* (Acts 20:28). Both Peter and Paul agree on the fact that elders are shepherds.

It is clear from references in the book of Acts (Acts 15:2, 20:17, 21:18) that several elders were appointed in each ecclesia to look after the members. An elder does not look after an ecclesia on his own. He shares this work with other elders. This is just like several shepherds looking after a flock.

If an ecclesia has only one elder, they need to appoint others so that the New Testament model is followed.

Several other words are used to describe the work of elders, which support this shepherding role. One is the word 'overseer' (Acts 20:28, Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7) which means 'to watch over the welfare of others'. This is like a shepherd watching over the flock.

There is also the word 'leader' (Hebrews 13:7, 17) which means to 'lead the way' or 'guide'. This is the way a shepherd guides the flock. In every case, the role of an elder indicates the role of a shepherd.

Unfortunately, traditional church leaders have changed Bible words for elders to mean something more like 'rulership'. This is not what the Bible teaches.

The word 'bishop' used in the King James Version (eg in 1 Timothy 3:1) simply means 'overseer'. Similarly, the word for 'pastor' used in some versions in Ephesians 4:11 is the word for 'shepherd'.

All references to the work of an elder indicate the work of a shepherd not a master or ruler.

Jesus tells us that elders are not to use special titles to distinguish themselves from other brothers, *"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi', for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father', for you have one Father, and he is in heaven"* (Matthew 23:8-9).

An elder is a brother among many brothers in the ecclesia – he is nothing more than that.

Let us now look at the role of a shepherd so that we can understand more about the role of an elder.

The Role of a Shepherd

Psalm 100:3 tells us; *"Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture."* Psalm 23 describes the ways God shepherds his people.

God could behave like a ruler because He owns the whole world, instead He chose to take on the role of one who cares for the sheep. He provides his sheep with water and food. He cares for the weak and sick. He protects the flock from danger. More than that, He enables them to live in His own house. Imagine that – a shepherd living in a house with his sheep!

Like a shepherd, an elder must provide for the spiritual needs of the flock who are the brothers and sisters in the ecclesia. He must feed them with spiritual food and drink. He must care for the weak and sick. He must protect them from spiritual dangers. He must help them live in God's house – that is, the ecclesia.

Spiritual food and drink are the things to do with God and Jesus (1 Corinthians 10:4). We need to feed the flock with the spiritual messages found in the Bible so that they have a strong individual faith. The spiritually weak and sick are those who are not strong in faith or are losing their faith. Spiritual dangers may come from the things of the world that turn people away from God. These dangers can also come from false teachers within the flock who are described in some places as 'wolves' (Acts 20:29, Matthew 7:15, Luke 10:3).

While the role of an ecclesial shepherd (elder) is primarily concerned with spiritual matters, the elders must also help the ecclesia in practical ways as well. This is clear from passages like James 2:16, "If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?"

We can learn how a good shepherd should behave by considering God's condemnation of the bad shepherds of Ezekiel's day described in Ezekiel 34:1-6;

"The word of the Lord came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not the shepherds take care of the flock? You eat curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them."

This is an appalling situation. Shepherds are supposed to care for the sheep. But these shepherds only cared for themselves. They even killed the sheep! As a result of their selfishness they were more like wolves than shepherds. This is how bad things can get if elders care more about themselves than the needs of their sheep.

This passage helps us understand how shepherds should behave:

- They care for the flock, rather than themselves
- They look out for the weak and sick and care for them
- They search for the strays and search for the lost
- They are caring and gentle in their manner

This is the way God looks after his sheep and elders need to follow God's example.

Another example of God being a shepherd is given in Isaiah 40:11; *"He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those who have young."*

In Psalm 77:20 we learn; *"You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron"* We note that while God does shepherd His people, He also does this through other shepherds like Moses and Aaron. David was another example of a good shepherd.

Jesus is also the good shepherd (John 10). Those who listen to his voice are his sheep; these are the brothers and sisters in the ecclesias. Jesus cared for the sheep during his life. He gave them spiritual food and drink, guided them and protected them from evil. He was even willing to lay down his life for the sheep.

We have learnt about the role of a shepherd. But what are the qualities and behaviours that a shepherd must have?

The Qualities of Shepherds

Peter lists some of the qualities that shepherds (elders) must have in 1 Peter 5:1-4;

"To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow-elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be: not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

Shepherds must:

- Be willing to serve
- Not greedy for money
- Not lords but servants
- Be good examples

The remainder of 1 Peter 5 gives us additional qualities:

- Be humble (v5-6)
- Trust in God (v7)
- Be alert to dangers (v8-9)

We will look at each of these qualities more closely.

Willing to serve

A shepherd must be willing to be a shepherd. No-one can be a shepherd if they are not willing to look after the sheep! A shepherd looks after the sheep, that is what he does.

Those who are shepherds must be 'eager to serve', in the same way that Jesus was willing to serve.

It is a good thing to be a shepherd, "*Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer (**shepherd**), he desires a noble task*" (1 Timothy 3:1).

Not greedy for money

A shepherd must not love money or use his position to gain money for himself. Such behaviour sets a very bad example to the flock. Instead an elder is to be honest and handle ecclesial finances well. An elder who takes money from the flock causes much upset and division.

Jesus was not interested in money for himself. Judas was an example of a bad shepherd because he was a thief. Elders need to follow Jesus' example.

Not lords but servants

Shepherds are servants. They must not behave like 'lords' or village elders who just give orders and take the best for themselves. They are servants, serving the flock and making sure the flock has what it needs.

Jesus explained this important difference, *"The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves"* (Luke 22:25-26).

Jesus set the example of this type of service by washing the disciples' feet. The disciples all thought they were too important to wash feet so Jesus took on this servant's role. He instructed them, *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done"* (John 13:14-15).

Jesus did not behave like a worldly 'lord', and elders must not behave like 'lords' either.

Be a good example

Elders have a position of great responsibility because others copy their example (Hebrews 13:7). Jesus set a good example to others, and elders should do the same.

As Paul said to Timothy, *"set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity"* (1 Timothy 4:12).

If the example is of a spiritually strong brothers in both knowledge and practice, then the ecclesia is more likely to be spiritually strong. If the example is of spiritually weak and selfish brothers, then the ecclesia is more likely to be spiritually weak and selfish and be disunited.

Be humble

A humble person is more likely to listen to the flock and help them. A proud person is more likely to tell people what they want and not to listen to others. Peter says, *"All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble""* (1 Peter 5:5).

Jesus was meek and humble. He submitted to the will of God and served the needs of the flock. All the good shepherds mentioned in the Bible were humble people therefore elders need to be humble.

Trust in God

The shepherd needs to trust in God. He must do this because there are many things in life that could make him afraid and anxious. Peter says, *"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you"* (1 Peter 5:7).

God and Jesus are the good shepherds and will take care of the elders when they face difficult situations or decisions. Elders do not need to fear because their lives are cared for by these chief shepherds.

Be alert to Dangers

The shepherd must look out for dangers and protect the flock from them. A bad shepherd runs away from danger and leaves the flock at the mercy of others. Dangers can include those in the ecclesia, such as false teachers, who are 'wolves in sheep's clothing' (Matthew 7:15, Acts 20:29). Dangers also include those outside the ecclesia such as local religious or political leaders who become enemies of the flock.

How to choose an elder

Paul gives us clear advice on the qualifications for an elder in 1 Timothy 3:2-7. It is clear from the list, that elders can only be brothers.

The list is not a list of worldly qualifications but of personal characteristics and behaviours. We read:-

"Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."

A similar list occurs in Titus 1:6-9,

"An elder must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless – not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it."

We note that the two lists are very similar although the list in Titus places greater emphasis on teaching God's word. In fact, there is more about this in 2 Timothy 2:15; *"Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth"*

Elders should be chosen based on the advice given in the above passages and elsewhere in the Bible.

Elders need to focus on developing these qualities in order to be good shepherds of the flock. The main points are:

- 1) Having a good Christian character
- 2) Looking after his family well
- 3) Being self-controlled
- 4) Avoiding the love of money.
- 5) Being able to teach God's word

A good summary of these points is that elders should have the same qualities and characteristics that we saw in the good shepherd – that is, they should be like Jesus.

We learn to be like Jesus by getting to know what the Bible says, thinking about how to apply it in our lives and putting it into practice.

An elder will read the Bible. He will read it with his family. He will read it with his ecclesia.

He will encourage his family and his ecclesia to read the Bible for themselves (or have it read to them), to think about what they read/hear and to do what it says. In this way, he makes himself, his family, and his ecclesia spiritually strong.

An elder will be known as a person who reads his Bible regularly and behaves in a godly way.

The Ecclesia

In the New Testament, the word for 'church' is the Greek word 'ecclesia' which means 'assembly of called out ones.' It refers to the believers who have been called out from the world. The 'ecclesia' refers to the believers who meet together and not to the place of meeting (ie the building). This means that an ecclesia exists because the believers exist.

Since the ecclesia is an 'assembly of called out ones', this means they must 'assemble' or meet together. The most common form of meeting place in the New Testament was not a church building but the home of individuals (Acts 12:12, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2).

Elders must make sure that the brothers and sisters in the ecclesia do meet together on a regular basis. The meeting place and time need to be agreed by the brothers and sisters in the ecclesia.

An ecclesia is a group of brothers and sisters who meet. If the brothers and sisters do not meet together then there is no ecclesia.

We are told what the brothers and sisters did when they did meet together in Acts 2:42; "*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayer*" (Acts 2:42).

Elders must help the ecclesia to do these things. In this way, they guide the flock to be spiritual. We will highlight other ways in which the elders can help the ecclesia later.

The elders do not need to do everything themselves. They can use others to do what is necessary to ensure arrangements are made and carried out. Elders should train others to make sure this happens (2 Timothy 2:2).

The only limitations are that sisters should not teach or pray at meetings where brothers are present (1 Corinthians 14:33-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-15). Sisters are also not elders and must not lead the ecclesia. However, they can perform many other roles of service and must be regarded as valued members of the ecclesia (see *Developing an Ecclesia* booklet).

Each ecclesia should have several brothers who are shepherds. There will usually be a greater number of elders taking care of a larger ecclesia than looking after a smaller ecclesia.

There are several reasons why it is important to have more than one elder shepherding an ecclesia:

- 1) There is a danger that, if there is only one elder, he may think he owns the ecclesia and they have to do things his way. Of course, the ecclesia belongs to God not man.

- 2) If something happens to that one elder, it is difficult for the ecclesia to keep on functioning. For example, the ecclesia needs to be able to continue even if one elder becomes sick or moves away.
- 3) When there is an important/difficult decision to make, it is better to have the wisdom of more than one elder. As the Bible says, *"Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed"* (Proverbs 15:22).
- 4) If there is more than one elder, they can encourage each other when there are difficulties and disappointments.
- 5) If there is more than one elder there is greater wisdom and love to share for the benefit of the ecclesia.

The Breaking of Bread service

The Breaking of Bread service is an essential activity for every ecclesia. In this service we follow Jesus' command to break bread and drink wine in memory of his death and resurrection (Matthew 26:26-29, Mark 14:22-24, Luke 22:19-20, Acts 2:42, 2:46, 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23 -28).

Following this commandment is one of the most important purposes of an ecclesia. If there is no Breaking of Bread, then there is no ecclesia.

The elders must make sure that the ecclesia breaks bread together on a regular basis and that appropriate arrangements are made for this to happen. Elders do not have to do everything themselves, but they must ensure sure that the arrangements are made.

Only baptised Christadelphians are permitted to break bread and drink wine in a Christadelphian ecclesia. Others can watch, but they must not break bread or drink wine.

A Breaking of Bread service must include these four elements:

- A prayer for the bread.
- The breaking and sharing of the bread
- A prayer for the wine
- The sharing and drinking of a sip of wine

There are other activities which, while not necessary to include, are mentioned in the Bible and are usually added to the service:

- A spiritual talk, usually called an exhortation (Acts 20:7)
- Hymns (Matthew 26:30, Mark 14:26)
- A collection (1 Corinthians 16:1-2)
- Prayers (Acts 2:42)

Each ecclesia should decide the order of service which best fits their needs. A possible service order could be:

1) Hymn, 2) Opening prayer, 3) Bible readings, 4) Exhortation based on the Bible, 5) Prayer for the bread, 6) Breaking and eating of the bread, 7) Prayer for the wine, 8) Sharing and drinking of the wine, 9) Hymn for the breaking of bread, 10) Ecclesial announcements (news of members and ecclesial activities, prayer requests), 11) Collection, 12) Hymn, 13) Closing prayer.

This possible order is merely a suggestion to help new ecclesias think through how they might run their own service. Provided the first four elements are included then each ecclesia can decide what is the most appropriate and helpful way to run this service to strengthen each other in their faith.

In the New Testament they broke bread once a week, usually on the first day of the week which is Sunday (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:2, Acts 2:42), and sometimes more often (Acts 2:46, Hebrews 10:24-25). Once on a Sunday is the practice we usually follow. However, the service can take place more frequently and on other days of the week if that suits the ecclesia better.

The ecclesia needs to know the time and place to meet (it helps if the meeting place is a quiet place). A brother needs to be chosen in advance to lead the service and another to give the exhortation, so they both have time to prepare. Someone needs to bring the bread and the wine.

It is useful to draw up a quarterly or half-yearly rota which shows which brother is leading and which is exhorting each week (plus any other activities as the ecclesia decides). This ensures the duties are shared out among those who can do them and no single person is carrying the whole burden.

It is good to have a register of those attending. In this way, any who have been absent for a while can be contacted to check that they are OK and, if necessary, helped. This is like a shepherd who counts his sheep to make sure none are missing. If there are any missing, then he seeks the lost.

Personal Bible Reading

Personal reading of the Bible at home must be encouraged as this is the main way that brothers and sisters learn to become mature in the faith.

Husbands and wives should read the Bible together. Parents should read the Bible with their children. The Bible should become an important part of family life. Where brothers and sisters cannot read, arrangements can be made for the Bible to be read to them.

The elders must help families to read. They must make sure that brothers and sisters have a Bible and a Bible Reading Planner. 'The Bible Companion' Reading Planner is often used and provides Bible chapters to be read on each day of the year. This plan can also be used to select the Bible passages to be read at the Breaking of Bread.

However, this is not the only way to read the Bible. The important thing is that everyone takes time to read something from the Bible each day and think about what they have read.

Asking questions is one of the best ways for people learn. For example what is the main message of the passage? What lessons should we take to ourselves? Are there any parts that are hard to understand?

Brothers and sisters should be encouraged to note down any questions they have and ask the elders about them. If elders do not know the answer, then they can ask other elders.

Everyone should read the Bible carefully so that they get the right understanding. Many passages can be easily misunderstood. We must search for the right understanding, so that we teach what is right (2 Timothy 2:15). We must search for God's thoughts rather than following our own thoughts.

All brothers and sisters must grow in their faith. As 2 Peter 3:18 tells us, *"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."*

Whatever knowledge and understanding we have we should want more. As Proverbs 9:9 tells us, *"Instruct a wise man and he will get wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning."*

However, we must not merely increase our knowledge, we must also put it into practice. Jesus makes this clear in the parable of the wise and foolish builders (Matt 7:24-27).

We need the right attitude towards God's word. God tells us, "*This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word*" (Isaiah 66:2).

This means we must listen with humility. We must not think we know it all already. We must listen very carefully as if God was in the same room talking to us.

Bible Class

The Breaking of Bread meeting may be the only meeting a new or small ecclesia holds due to the time needed to prepare for each meeting or the lack of brothers available to do the duties.

However, as the ecclesia grows or gains experience, most ecclesias will run additional meetings to help all members (eg Bible Class) or specific groups within the ecclesia (eg sisters, youth, etc).

Usually, the first additional meeting of an ecclesia is the Bible Class which allows ecclesial members grow together in their understanding of God's truth.

It is good practice to have a plan for the Bible Class. In this way, brothers and sisters can increase their knowledge in a systematic way.

For example, the Bible Class could go through a book of the Bible such as Luke or Genesis, follow themes such as forgiveness or prayer, or do some character studies such as Joseph, Abraham or Ruth.

Alternatively, the Bible Class could go through a course like 'The New Life' or 'Growing into Christ' or a Christadelphian study book. Prayers and hymns can also be part of the class.

Whatever plan is followed, it is important that the brothers and sisters grow in their knowledge and understanding of God and His ways.

For this to happen a brother needs to make his own personal study of a topic, prepare a talk and then present what he has learned to the rest of the ecclesia.

The Bible Class should encourage questions and discussion, so that everyone learns together. The class should also make sure that brothers and sisters of all abilities benefit. Some Bible Classes could be used to answer scriptural questions from ecclesial members.

Teaching Others

The ecclesia is blessed with the hope of eternal life in God's kingdom. It is our Christian duty to share this hope with others (Mark 16:15-16). In this way their lives can be saved and God's name glorified.

Teaching others about the hope of eternal life is one of the most noble things we can do. It is important that every brother and sister shares their faith with others. It is also important that the ecclesia as a whole teaches God's message of salvation. Elders should make sure this happens and be actively involved.

Where a number of people are interested in learning the gospel, classes can be held to teach them. These could be held as a meeting of the ecclesia. Where only a few people are interested, they can be taught individually.

When deciding what to teach others, a good place to start is where Jesus and his disciples started. They taught the kingdom of God and repentance from sins. The kingdom of God is the answer to the problems in the world and the problems in the lives of the people we teach. It is a message of hope. Our sins are not a barrier to this, providing there is repentance.

Teachers should be able to teach the first principles of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:12, 28:31). Teachers need to know the first principle topics well so they can teach others (1 Peter 3:15). It is good for the ecclesia to keep being reminded of the first principles subjects, so that they can teach the Gospel to others. Special classes can be held for this if necessary.

Elders should know the verses which talk about these topics and be able to answer questions on difficult verses they may be asked about.

When we teach others, we have a duty to set a good example. If we are not Christian in our behaviour, students will not listen to our Christian message. A good teacher is someone who teaches with knowledge, patience, humility, and gentleness. A bad teacher is proud, angry, shouts, asks for money, and does many other ungodly things.

Jesus sent out his disciples to preach in pairs. This is good practice. Two people are a better witness of the Gospel than one person. A second person can confirm that the words and teaching are true. It is also safer. Husbands and wives can preach together. It is best if brothers do not go preaching with sisters who are not their wives, because this does not look good.

Sisters can teach other women. They are often better at teaching women than are brothers. It also avoids concern from husbands that other men are talking to their wives. For a similar reason it is often better that sisters do not teach unbaptised men. Whoever does the teaching, they must be careful to fit in with the local culture and not upset people.

If a teacher cannot teach all the first principle Bible subjects, then they should teach what they can and then ask someone else to finish the teaching on other topics.

Once the series of teaching is finished, the person could be asked if they want to be baptised. The implications of the action should be explained. In particular they need to think about areas of their life which may need to change, the impact their baptism might have on their family relationships, etc so that they clearly understand what they are doing.

If they do want to be baptised, then they should be presented to an interviewing brother or sister. The interviewer will assess their understanding and decide if they are ready for baptism. It is important for the student to have the right understanding before baptism.

If a student does not have a proper understanding or is not totally convinced they want to be baptised then the teacher and interviewer should continue to help them get ready. God wants all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2:3-4). When they are ready, then they should ensure that the person is baptised.

Interviewing brothers and sisters are appointed by the Country Elders with the agreement of the Linkman. They are brothers or sisters who have a good knowledge of all the first principles, can teach well and have the wisdom to assess whether a person is ready for baptism.

Teaching the Family

God saves families. God saved Noah's family from the flood. God saved Lot's family from the destruction of Sodom. He saved Rahab's family from the destruction of Jericho.

If family members are not baptised, then it is desirable that they get to this point. We have several examples where one person was baptised, and this led to the baptism of their whole family – such as Lydia (Acts 16:15), the jailor in Philippi (Acts 16:33) and Crispus (Acts 18:8).

Husbands and wives should want their partner to be baptised so that they can be saved (1 Corinthians 7:12-16). God wants husbands and wives to share the blessings of the gospel; *"Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as **heirs with you** of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers"* (1 Pet 3:7).

Husbands must show their love for their wives by teaching her the gospel so she can be ready of the return of Jesus (Eph 5:25-30). Elders should set an example in this and ensure that they teach their wives the gospel not only by talking to them about the Bible but also by loving them as Christ loved the church.

Sisters with unbelieving husbands should submit to their husbands. They should try and win them for Christ by their Christian behaviour (1 Peter 3:1-2).

Children

Teaching our children is important if God's message is to be passed onto the next generation (Ps 78:1-8). Without this, the gospel message will die out and our children will not receive the blessing of the gospel.

Parents have the duty to teach their children about God. We read this in Proverbs 22:6, *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it."*

This advice is repeated in the New Testament, *"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord"* (Ephesians 6:4). The father has the responsibility to ensure that this happens. Here again, the elder should set an example by teaching his own children.

The mother is especially important in teaching the children (Proverbs 31:1, Song of Solomon 8:2, 2 Timothy 1:5).

If either the father or mother is not a believer, this makes teaching the children much harder. This is another reason for teaching one's spouse the gospel so both the husband and wife are baptised.

The most important thing a parent can do for their children is to read the Bible with them. They should also ensure that prayer is an important part of family life and the children are taught to pray.

If children do not have a believing parent, it is more difficult for them to find the gospel. This is where a Sunday School can be a big help.

The ecclesia should consider running a Sunday School for the children of the members. If they have a sufficient number of teachers the ecclesia could also invite children from the neighbourhood.

A Sunday School is also a help to children who do not have believing parents. Sisters are especially important in teaching the children in Sunday School.

Where possible it is good for the Sunday School to have different classes for different age groups. If a single class is run for all ages, then the lessons must be simple enough for the youngest children to understand. This means that older children get bored and learn little and may stop attending.

Young adults also need a special class for them, so they can learn first principle topics and have their questions answered.

Preparing to Speak

The above topics have highlighted the need for brothers to talk about the Bible. They must give exhortations, Bible classes and teaching sessions about the Gospel. There is no other way for the words of God to get from the Bible to the listeners unless someone speaks about them. This is an essential part of any ecclesia. An elder should take a lead in this and ensure that other brothers are able to share this work.

Most brothers have not been trained to speak and find this difficult. However, it does not matter whether someone is good at it or not. Many of God's speakers were poor at speaking. Moses was weak at speaking (Exodus 4:10) and so was the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 10:10).

God is content if we speak His words and teaching with weakness and humility. This is better than with human greatness and pride. In fact, there is a danger that good speakers could become proud.

Speaking about the Bible is shepherd's work because it shows care and concern for others. Speakers should concentrate on the Christian virtue of helping others rather than worrying about how good they are at speaking. The listeners concentrate on the words spoken rather than on the way it is presented.

The most important thing is for the speaker to speak the truth of God found in the Bible and faithfully present God's message. Speakers must remember that God is watching and listening, and that God is willing them to do this work in a faithful manner.

Speakers need to prepare for speaking by reading and re-reading the Bible passage they are going to speak about and thinking about its message. They should then create a list of the main points to be made. It is good to connect the key passage with other Bible passages to explain the topic clearly.

The speaker should have a list of verses and main points that he wishes to use in his talk.

The speaker needs to decide on the main message of the talk and make sure this is repeated.

The introduction is important to catch the interest of the audience.

The ending is also important so that the audience is reminded of the main message of the talk so they can remember it after they have left.

Different talks have different purposes:

- An exhortation needs to lead the people to think about Christ and his sacrifice and include practical advice on how we can be like Christ.
- A Bible Class needs to explain the lessons God wants us to learn from the passage under consideration. It should not just give information, but help brothers and sisters to understand what it means in their daily lives.
- A gospel teaching talk needs to cover the first principle topic simply and clearly. It should include any explanations of common difficult verses on the topic. This should also highlight the importance of practical living.

Teachers need to be aware that they must not just teach by words, but also by example. Because of this responsibility, teachers will be judged more severely; *"Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly"* (James 3:1).

Prayer

Prayer is an important part of the life of a individual Christian and of the life of an ecclesia (Ephesians 6:18, 1 Thessalonians 5:17). The early ecclesias prayed together (Acts 2:42). Prayer should be part of our ecclesial meetings and also our personal gatherings.

We pray because prayer works: *"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective"* (Jam 5:16).

God listens to the prayer of the righteous. In the passage from James, the righteous man was an elder who was asked to pray for the sick. They went to the sick person and prayed for them. This passage teaches us the importance of the elder living a righteous life and also praying for others.

Prayers can be offered when the ecclesia learns of a brother or sister in difficulty or of a general situation (like rain shortage). Such prayers can be offered whenever one hears of a problem.

An elder should encourage prayer in the ecclesia. This could be by speaking on the topic. It should certainly be by example. Men of prayer we can learn from are David, Nehemiah, Daniel and Jesus.

Ecclesial prayers should not be offered by sisters (1 Corinthians 11:3-16, 1 Timothy 2:8-15).

Prayer offered in the right way is like incense (Psalm 141:2, Revelation 5:8) – it smells right to God.

When we pray, we think about God, His relationship with us and other spiritual things. The more we pray, the more spiritually minded we become. We should all do this. As it says in Colossians 3:2, *"Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things."* And *"The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth"* (Psalm 145:18).

Prayer helps us all trust in God. We can share our concerns with Him. As it says in James 5:13, *"Is anyone among you in trouble? Let him pray."* Through prayer we can find peace with God (Philippians 4:6-7, Psalm 55:22).

It is good to offer a prayer of thanks for food before we eat it, just as Jesus did (Matthew 14:19, Mark 8:6-7). We should thank God for everything He has done for us in prayer.

It is important to keep praying and not give up (Luke 18:1). The ecclesia and its members should pray always. We should all, especially the elders, encourage each other to be prayerful.

Ecclesial prayers should be given with humility, as if we are talking to God in the same room. We should not use prayer as an opportunity to show others how clever we are.

The prayer of the Pharisee is an example of this (Luke 18:14). He was told (about his prayer), *"For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."* Long showy prayers do not impress God. As we are told in Ecclesiastes 5:2, *"God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few."*

We do not have to pray with clever words or educated speech. What God wants to hear are sincere and right words from a humble heart.

If we want God to listen to our prayers, we first need to listen to God. Proverbs 28:9 says, *"If anyone turns a deaf ear to my instruction, even their prayers are detestable."*

We need to make sure we have turned away from sin, *"If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened"* (Psalm 66:18).

An elder must set the example in listening to God by reading the Bible, by avoiding sin and by always praying.

Praise

We praise someone when we admire something about them. God deserves our praise for every aspect of His character and for all His wonderful works. Psalm 33:1-2 says, *"Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre."*

When we praise Him, we exalt Him in our own mind and in the minds of those who are listening. We praise God because He deserves it. He is so much higher than us in every way. We praise Him because we value Him and the things He has done.

Praising God in song and music is an important part of Christian worship. Ephesians 5:19-20 says, *"Speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

One of the reasons we sing is to praise and to thank God. Another reason is that it cheers us up when we think about what God has done for us. Singing is one way of reminding each other about God and His blessings.

The parallel reference in Colossians 3:16 says the same thing, *"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."*

Singing is more than just a way of thanking God - it is an important way of teaching ourselves and others. It is therefore important that the words we sing are based on what the Bible says and not on the ideas of man.

The elders have a role in ensuring that songs are chosen do not contain false teaching.

It is helpful to have a selection of a number of hymns which the ecclesia can learn and sing regularly. A hymnbook can be put together which contains hymns with the right words, and fit in with the culture of the country. Church hymns can be used if the words are correct, but these must be chosen with care. Many church hymns have false teaching in them.

Where members of the ecclesia can play musical instruments, then these can be used to help worship. Although we must be careful not to slip into music for entertainment, which serves to please man and is not directed to God.

Larger ecclesias can consider forming a choir and having regular choir practice.

Simple songs can be used to help the Sunday school children learn the Bible message. These songs must teach the children the right message of the Bible and not contain any false teaching.

Widows, orphans and the needy

Christians must look after the needy as James 1:27 tells us; *"Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."*

This is not only personal requirement, but also a requirement for the ecclesia. The ecclesia must look after its members who are widows and must look after its orphans.

The first organised Christian committee was for looking after widows (Acts 6:1). The elders took the lead at that time and it remains a very important activity for elders today. They should know who the widows and orphans are in the ecclesia and make sure they have food and clothing. In times of food shortage or famine, the elders should visit the widows and orphans and make sure they are not starving.

We are told that the first person who should ensure the widows are fine is their own family (1 Timothy 5:4-8, 5:16). If a believer does not look after their own family, then they have denied the faith and are worse than non-believers.

If a widow in the ecclesia does not have any help from their own family, and they are without basic needs, then the ecclesia must help. This could also include old or disabled believers.

Ecclesial elders must ensure that no member of the ecclesia lacks basic food and clothing. They should ensure that collectively the ecclesia meets these needs. As we are told, "*Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality*" (Romans 12:13).

God does not want members of the ecclesia to be naked or starving. This is the teaching of the parable of the sheep and goats (Matthew 25: 31-46). This parable teaches us how the chief shepherd (Jesus) will judge believers based on how they care for these basic needs of others.

Ecclesial Organisation

An ecclesia can arrange a number of activities. We have already mentioned the Breaking of Bread, Bible Class and teaching meetings.

Small ecclesias should consider having a Breaking of Bread and a Bible Reading Class as a minimum.

In addition to the Breaking of Bread and Bible Class, large ecclesias should consider having a Sunday School, meetings to teach others the first principles, regular preaching activities, ecclesial meetings to discuss ecclesial arrangements, regular visits to the needy, maintaining the meeting place, youth activities, choir, sisters' classes and other appropriate events.

Ecclesial activities should meet the spiritual needs of the brothers and sisters. These needs can change for many reasons. If young adults come back from college, they should be provided with a first principle class. If the ecclesia has grown and needs a Sunday School, then a Sunday School can be arranged.

The elders are responsible for ensuring that ecclesial arrangements meet the needs of the ecclesia. If these needs change then elders must change ecclesial arrangements to meet these new needs. This is like the shepherd ensuring that the sheep are being cared for in the best possible way. .

One way of organising these is to have a plan or ecclesial program. This program should be more than just what happens in the next week. It could be a plan for a month, 3-months, 6-months or even a year. This depends on how many brothers there are to do duties and how predictable attendance at the meetings is.

The advantage of a plan is that duties can be shared so they do not end up being done by the same person. It also means an elder can announce the arrangements during (eg) the Breaking of Bread service and remind people about duties and events coming up.

All arrangements are subject to the will of God, and we should say that they are "God willing" when we plan and announce them (James 4:13-15, Proverbs 16:3).

Finance

The ecclesia should have a collection for its own ecclesial needs. These funds can be used for:

- Purchasing bread and wine for the Breaking of Bread service
- Food and clothing for the poor
- Running preaching, Sunday School, and youth events
- Maintenance of the ecclesial meeting place
- Chairs and furniture for the ecclesia
- Musical instruments

The ecclesia must decide jointly how to use its own money. Money should not be handled by a single person. All transactions must be checked by a second person so that there are no disagreements.

Written records of money received and money spent, together with the reason for the expenditure, must be kept and be available for inspection by members of the ecclesia.

The ecclesia may appoint a 'treasurer' for this work. The treasurer does not automatically become an elder.

Elders need to make sure that money is handled honestly, in accordance with the decisions of the ecclesia. This is very important for the peace and unity of the ecclesia. Great care must be taken in this area, as people are often suspicious of how money is handled and this can lead to argument and division.

Elders in the Old Testament

The role of elders in the Old Testament helps us understand the role of elders in the New Testament and in our own day.

In the Old Testament, the elders did the following:

- Remembered the words of God (Deuteronomy 32:7, Jeremiah 5:5, Joel 1:2, 14)

- Ensured the commands of God were kept (Deuteronomy 31:9, Joshua 8:31, 24:31)
- Ensured that the appointed activities of God took place. (In New Testament times, this refers to the Breaking of Bread service and baptism).
- They represented the people.
- They made essential decisions for the people (Judges 21:16).
- They led repentance when community repentance was required (eg 1 Chronicles 21:16).
- They gave spiritual advice (Jeremiah 3:15, Ezekiel 7:26).
- They carried out social duties, such as burials (Genesis 50:7)

Ecclesial elders need to carry out these duties as part of their shepherding role. Many of these activities require a good knowledge of the Bible and the wisdom that comes from understanding the ways of God.

If anyone feels he does not have sufficient wisdom, he can pray to God for it: *"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does"* (James 1:5-8).

There are two items on the above list that we will give more advice on in the next two sections.

The first item is decision making which is addressed under the title of 'Brothers and sisters who sin'. The other is funerals.

Another social event that could be considered is weddings. However, local culture and practice vary so much, that it is difficult to give guidance in a document like this.

We will simply say, brothers and sisters should make their marriage vows before God, and elders can pray for God to bless the marriage. The ecclesia can rejoice in a marriage by having a service which highlights Biblical principles.

Brothers and sisters who sin

Elders act as representatives of the ecclesia. This can involve making decisions on behalf of the ecclesia. Many of these decisions concern brothers and sisters who sin.

When a brother or sister sins, it is the duty of the elders to guide that person to repentance and restoration.

Not all sins are easy to resolve, but the key to all sins is the need for repentance in order for spiritual healing to occur. All the elders in an ecclesia should discuss the situation together following Biblical guidance so that they combine their wisdom.

When a brother or sister sins, it is important that the sinner recognises it as a sin. If the sin is not recognised as sin and dealt with in a spiritual way then others may copy it. An example of this is the case of sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2.

There are times where it is appropriate to rebuke the sinner or sinners (1 Timothy 5:20, Titus 2:15, 2 Timothy 4:2). In some cultures, a sharp rebuke is necessary to ensure the ecclesias remain spiritual (Titus 1:12-13).

There are also times where it may be appropriate to keep the sin discreetly between the sinner and the elders.

Elders must choose the most appropriate way to ensure the spirituality of the individual and ecclesia.

When someone sins, the sin takes them away from God. It is the duty of elders to ensure that a sinner is restored (Galatians 6:1-4).

Elders must do this gently knowing that they are also capable of sin. It is our duty to save sinners (James 5:15, 20) and we do this by bringing them to repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9-10, 2 Peter 3:9).

The New Testament describes sins regarded as so serious that consideration should be given to withdrawing fellowship from the brother or sister. The purpose of this not to get rid of them, but to bring them to repentance. Examples of this are incest (1 Cor 5), brothers deliberately not working (2 Thessalonians 3:6-15), divisive people (Titus 3:20, Romans 16:17-18) and false teachers (2 John 1, 2 Peter 2).

What is common to all these examples is that their sin can spread beyond themselves, be copied by other brothers and sisters, and corrupt them. If we use the analogy of the flock, these are sins that could spread, divide and damage the flock.

Justice and Mercy

Whatever decision elders make, they make before God and Jesus who are watching. Elders must act as if Christ would make the same decision. They must act with justice and mercy. Justice means that they must do the right thing.

Elders must first decide whether a person is innocent or guilty of a sin within the ecclesia (compare Deuteronomy 1:16, 25:1). Then they must decide what must be done about it.

If there is an opportunity for mercy, then this should be considered (Matthew 5:7, 18:28-33, 23:23-24, James 2:12-13). The elders must be careful in judgement. They must remember the words of Jesus, "*For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you again*" (Matthew 7:2).

If we wish to be treated with justice and mercy, then we should treat others this way.

Making Judgments

The Bible gives us advice on how to judge and elders must follow this advice when judging issues:

- 1) Make a thorough investigation (Deuteronomy 19:18, John 7:51). Both sides of the argument need to be heard, not just one side. Get as much information as possible.
- 2) If there is not enough evidence, then a clear judgment cannot be made. Commit these cases to God and let God judge them (Deuteronomy 1:17, 17:8-9).
- 3) One witness is not enough to convict someone (Deuteronomy 19:15, 2 Corinthians 13:1, 1 Timothy 5:19). There must be two or three witnesses.
- 4) If any witnesses are found to be false, this itself is a sin (Exodus 20:16, Deuteronomy 5:20, 19:16-21). These witnesses need to be judged with justice and mercy too.
- 5) Do not show favouritism (Exodus 23:3, Leviticus 19:15, Deuteronomy 1:16-17, Deuteronomy 16:19, Deuteronomy 24:17). Favouritism may be **against** the poor, the weak, the foreigner or the enemy. Or it may be **for** the rich and powerful or one's own family or friends. It is very hard for a judge to be impartial. An elder who is too close to the accused (family, friend, business contact, etc) should not judge these cases.

- 6) Justice must be with mercy. There are limits that judges must not go beyond. They must not (eg) take away a widow's shelter or source of food.
- 7) Do not accept bribes (Exodus 23:8, Deuteronomy 16:19). Bribes make the judge blind to evil.
- 8) The judge who brings about injustice is guilty of sin (Exodus 23:7). God will ensure that justice is done in these cases. Even if the judge thinks he can get away with it, God will judge these judges.
- 9) The ecclesia should follow the decision of the elders (Deuteronomy 17:9-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Hebrews 13:17).

If an elder is found to be at fault, they should be treated in the same way as any other member of the ecclesia, with justice and mercy. This should be carried out by the other elders and the ecclesia.

If a case proves too difficult then the ecclesia can ask elders from another ecclesia to help them.

When the elder who has sinned has repented and is restored to the ecclesia, they should no longer be an elder.

Funerals

Of all social duties an elder has to perform, the funeral of members of the ecclesia is the most common.

Elders should show their care for the brothers and sisters by ensuring that their funeral is carried out in an appropriate way.

Unfortunately, most non-Christadelphian Christians do not understand the truth about what happens at death. If they were to run a funeral service, they may use inappropriate hymns, prayers, and words. Therefore, it is desirable that a Christadelphian lead the service.

A funeral is an opportunity to provide comfort to the family and friends and to explain to them the hope of the person who has died and what happens after death.

Suitable hymns and words of comfort should be chosen, which can include the state of the dead (who are no longer suffering) and the hope of the resurrection and the kingdom.

The death of the righteous is a spiritual victory because the dead person has kept their faith right to the end. Their next conscious moment will be at the resurrection.

Other verses that can help in a funeral service are:

Numbers 23:10,

Psalms 63:3, 112:6, 116:15,

Proverbs 10:2, 7, 11:4, 12:28, 14:32,

Ecclesiastes 7:8,

Romans 8:38-39, 14:8,

1 Thessalonians 4:16,

2 Timothy 2:11,

Revelation 14:13.

Regional Elders and Country Elders

It is the responsibility of the ecclesial elders to ensure that their ecclesia is spiritual and strong. They are accountable to Jesus and God for the ecclesia of which they are shepherds.

If the elders of an ecclesia need help in any matter, they can contact other elders.

There are several options as to which elders to choose and these are given below in the order that they should be used:

- 1) They can contact the elders in nearby ecclesias.
- 2) If the country is divided into areas, then they could contact Area elders.
- 3) If the country has country elders, then they could contact country elders.
- 4) They can contact the Linkman, who is an elder from another country.

A Final Message to Elders

You have been appointed as shepherds over God's flock under the guiding hand of God and Jesus. In this role you have a responsibility to ensure the spiritual health of the flock as well as the growth of the gospel in your country.

Please take this responsibility seriously. The example you set and the guidance you give will have a significant effect on the way the ecclesia runs and the spiritual well-being of all the brothers and sisters under your care.

Remember you are shepherds of the flock not their ruler or master.

Make sure you are familiar with all the qualities you need in order to be a good shepherd and try your very best to develop these qualities on a daily basis.

Make sure you are fully aware of all the duties a shepherd is required to undertake and carry them out to the best of your ability in love and humility.

Encourage your flock to read God's word and pray regularly, to care for the widows, orphans, sick and needy and to preach the gospel to friends and family. You will do this best by showing these behaviours in your own life.

Work together with your fellow shepherds for the benefit of the flock, making every effort to ensure the ecclesia remains united and is a haven of faith, hope, love, joy and encouragement

Search for the lost sheep and do all you can to bring them back into the fold

Protect the flock from danger.

We conclude with the advice Paul gave to the elders at Ephesus, when he saw them for the last time:

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the holy spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28-29).

We leave you with the priestly blessing:

"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace"

(Numbers 6:24-26)



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