



Elders and Eldership: Being Who You Are

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Elders and Eldership: Recently it became apparent that there was a need to explore and define how we understand and apply these terms. It is likely a far reaching topic so consider this a step in the direction of clarification, though not the final thought. I think many view an elder as one having an appointed position which may or may not be equivalent to what has been understood as a pastoral role. Small or independent fellowship groups are my focus here more so than those groups that are under an umbrella organization that has an established way to identify and confirm leadership. We may look to the Scriptures for some patterns for how this is done. We find that there are both those who were able to remain in an assembly with a formal leadership where the rabbis accepted Yeshua as Messiah as well as those that fled the maledictions of unbelieving leaders, forming house fellowships. Today, we have a common struggle in being clear on who would have authority via calling, anointing or ordination. I see this as an issue between the “credentialing authority” of either traditional Christian or Judaism since those who now honor BOTH Messiah Yeshua and Torah have gone beyond either training. This topic is further examined in [“Calling, Anointing and Ordination”; Under Whose Authority Do You Lead?”](#)

There seems to be much confusion over the similarities and differences in these terms “elder” and “eldership” and what it means to function in either or both roles. There is a difference between what is called **formal or informal leadership roles** and how they function in community. This topic is further explored in part 2 of our series: [“Where Are the Men? And Is That The Best Question?”](#)

I do not think that I can speak here for how others may interpret these matters. I will outline how they appear to us here in the hope that it will cause others to reflect and perhaps become better able to articulate their understanding.

An Elder is one who has attained a level of maturity by virtue of many things, among them their age and stage in life and their confirmed ability to offer wise counsel. This status can be from either an informal or formal position. We would point to the theme of the need for maturity throughout all of Scriptures, often presented in metaphorical ways. Because the English word “maturity” is not found in the KJV, some have [questioned whether this is a Scriptural concept](#) though we believe it is.

Blessed is the man who trusts in ADONAI; ADONAI will be his security.

*He will be like a tree planted near water; it spreads out its roots by the river;
it does not notice when heat comes; and its foliage is luxuriant;
it is not anxious in a year of drought but keeps on yielding fruit.*

Jeremiah 17:7-8

*We have much to say about this subject, but it is hard to explain,
because you have become sluggish in understanding.
For although by this time you ought to be teachers,
you need someone to teach you the very first principles of God's Word all over again!
You need milk, not solid food!
Anyone who has to drink milk is still a baby,
without experience in applying the Word about righteousness.
But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by continuous
exercise to distinguish good from evil.*

Hebrews 5:11-14

We use the definitions found in **The Life Model** as benchmarks for the various stages of maturity and how it looks within community. I will include a portion of the description of what it means to be an elder which follows a description of each of the earlier stages of life. Optimum understanding here would require familiarity with all of the stages. We heartily recommend this model to other fellowships interested in discipleship. Dr. Wilder opens this description with a personal observation based on his many years of working with people all over America.

***Elder (beginning when youngest child becomes an adult)** sadly, most in our culture never make it to this level of maturity. This is unfortunate because the success of any country, community, school or church body will have a direct correlation to the presence of true elders who are guiding and directing. To qualify as an elder, one needs to have raised children to maturity and completed all the prior maturity tasks.*

True elders can act like themselves in the midst of difficulty. They can establish an accurate community identity by finding out what their community has been designed by God to be, rather than imposing what they would like it to be. Furthermore, true elders prize all community members and see them as God sees them—looking past their flaws and facades to see the persons they have been designed to be.

True elders are also willing and able to parent and mature the community. They are qualified to do this because they have learned from a lifetime of experiences. They can handle criticism and rejection, speak the truth even when it is not easy or popular, serve without being appreciated, encourage needed growth and change, delight in younger people's skill and power, and place what is best for the community over personal fairness or preference.

Lastly, true elders realize that those without sufficient biological families need real, live, loving spiritual families to heal, to grow and to thrive. Therefore, true elders are open to

God's voice when He orchestrates a spiritual adoption, and are willing to give spiritual children the same unselfish care they gave their own children.¹

With these qualifications in mind, for our community, we have taken the time for each member to complete a personal evaluation of where they stand in development of their own maturity. This includes the perspective of two others who know them well as we often need other eyes to be as fully aware as possible of our own stage. The Life Model includes descriptions of what it looks like in a community sense when one has reached each level of development and what is needed for one who has not yet reached it. The person in the elder stage of development is able to give sacrificially in order to nurture and direct the community in what is best for them. When they do not do so the community itself suffers from lack of order, boundaries, and direction. Those most in need of care do not receive it for their own growth. The quality of the interactions between people in a community deteriorate and the sense of being life-giving declines.

The parallel to scripture is seen in many ways, among them that this stage is never considered to be one of "perfection" in the sense most people think of that term, but rather in the fullness and completeness of one who has demonstrated their ability to walk in wisdom. This subject is examined further in a brief video entitled "[Be Ye Perfect](#)" currently on the home page of our website. Grey hairs are to be held in esteem yet we do know that some people can *grow old* and never *grow up* so age alone is not enough.

The role of Eldership in many communities seems to be one of election or appointment and would be a formal leadership role. Such a formal role would involve the elder having decision-making status on behalf of the community. This election/appointment may be accomplished in a formal way through prayer and discussion or in some other ways which are not all equally fruitful. The qualities and the function of elders is often intertwined with the role of leadership. It may be a matter of leadership succession of a particular family from generation to generation in a long standing community though these are rare in Messianic or "Hebrew Roots" small fellowships. It may be due to the perception of the group that the person has the most knowledge of Scriptures or that their home offers the most hospitality for a group. It may also fall to someone because they are the eldest among the group or because they are able to take on the most share of responsibility for the work of community. Sometimes it falls to one who has the most available funds to support the community. In some groups, no matter how able an elder may have proved to be, if they are not of Jewish lineage their leadership would end should one of Jewish heritage appear on the scene.

Though the authors don't appear to have a faith perspective they are speaking from a more family or tribal type of understanding, which would really be more consistent with how our Abba organized Israel. Some very astute comments are offered at this site on Eldership:

Eldership is what happens when a person with the qualities of an Elder fulfills the role of an Elder. A person may try to fulfill the role, but lack the qualities. Or they may seem to have the qualities yet never play the role. Eldership is the qualities actively and consciously applied.²

¹ **Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You: The Life Model**; by E. James Wilder, PhD, et al., Shepherd's House, Inc., Pasadena CA, 1999, 2000, 2004. Pages 41-42.

Their point speaks to my practical concern about our need to understand the role of being an elder more fully. I heartily agree that the highest good for a community is when those who have the qualities of elders are also in the formal role of being elders. At least one person functioning as an elder is so important for the spiritual, emotional, relational health of community but more than one is better. I haven't seen any indication that only one person is to have a singular leadership role per Scriptures, but rather a plurality of leaders/elders. We also see that it is great wisdom to recognize the appointment of elders that our YHWH has indicated more so than human choice.

I see being an elder as closely related to being a shepherd; teaching, encouraging, disciplining, discipling those who are coming along in their faith walk. Yet just as I have written, shepherds can't shepherd without the recognition of their calling or authority to do so <http://www.set-apart-ministries.org/shepherdsneedtoknow.html> , so is it true that elders can't fully function unless they are recognized in some way in their community. They need to know their value and place in order to speak into situations as needed. So I understand that the identity and boundaries of a community are influenced by the elders therein as well as the identity and boundaries being instrumental for an elder to be able to function well. Just as a passing comment, I might also add that it is very difficult and even emotionally painful for one to have the qualities and gifting of an elder but not to have the place in any community in which to exercise it!

[Everlasting Life Ministries](#) has done an exhaustive description of the role and function of elders within the church as they view it from Scripture. It includes recognition of both the personal qualities of elders as well as what the formal role involves. Though we do not agree with them in every doctrine since they teach that [the Law, though nothing is wrong with it, was abolished at the cross,](#) their observations here on elders are well worth noting. They, too, note the similarities of elders and shepherds.

Recently I came to the Torah picture that is involved in my concern about the need for appropriate expression of elders and eldership roles as it pertains to boundaries for Messianic groups, whether it be a small home fellowship or a larger organization. I believe this terminology, "boundaries," is often discounted because it is associated with a psychological perspective rather than a Biblical one. Thus, many groups have not viewed it necessary to be clear about their boundaries or the function and structure of leadership. Many have viewed having great fluidity in their identity and participants as a sign of hospitality or openness to seekers. Because many of us are cautious about "membership status" due to concern about misuse of it and spiritual authority being abused in our past experiences we may then not see any need to be clear about it now. For comparison, as we have examined this process over a number of years, we developed a [four stage picture](#) of various ways of organizing a group interested in learning about Torah.

Great fluidity and openness can also work in the opposite way in that people do not really know where their position "begins" or "ends" in regard to their community life. If it isn't clear who has decision-making capacity on behalf of the group, decisions can be made independently that do not address the

² <http://www.eldership.com.au/about/> , November 2, 2012.

well-being of the entire group. When the proverbial right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing, chaos usually ensues. If it isn't clear who holds a position of elder, whether formal or informal role, the community will not be clear on who is exerting a YHWH honoring influence that they can emulate or seek. If the elder doesn't know under what circumstances they can function as they are called to do, they may not carry out their important contributions. Some people seem to think that regular communication confusion is normal and to be tolerated though we would differ on that.

"When you build a new house, you must build a low wall around your roof; otherwise someone may fall from it, and you will be responsible for his death.

Deuteronomy 22:8

A "low wall" around your roof was and is a protection that those who are walking there not fall. It is a physical picture of the spiritual truth of our need for His Torah so that we know the way we should walk within the confines of what is good. It is also a physical picture of the relational boundaries that we need in our communities so that we are able to relate and work together in YHWH honoring ways. I believe this is true whether it is a local fellowship or a larger organization that gathers fellowship group leaders together.

I see a common recurrent problem within the American Messianic Movement that I have personally experienced on several occasions and am aware that others have experienced as well. I express it here in the hope that it may be a small part of the process to erect a "small wall" where it is needed! A large organization, national or even international, that offers a pedestal or a teaching platform to those they view as having important things to say is generally in some way recognizing the maturity or elder status of that person. Such gatherings usually take place at a hotel or convention center and bring together both those known to the sponsoring organization and those who come as guests.

Although this is good in that more people have an opportunity to learn from those more experienced in walking the Torah walk, it also presents a hazard. Often such teaching leads to contact with individuals who are dealing with a similar issue to what has been addressed by a teacher. Naturally, they will often then seek out that teacher for assistance. If the situation is all handled amicably and any input is prayerfully and humbly received all may be well. However, on many occasions, the effort to apply what has been taught in such a setting leads to contentiousness and difficulty. On these occasions, there seems to be quite a bit of confusion as to what status that teaching elder has; whether or not they have the authority to speak into the student's life, how their perspective may or may not match with the sponsoring organizations guidelines, and confusion over exactly what their position within that organization may actually permit them to address. The sponsoring organization may have few or unclear guidelines...thus no "wall" to keep people from falling over the edge into strife and division. Because the individuals represented are not on their own "turf" so to speak, neither the irascible student nor the teaching elder find it easy to know how to respond. Since we do not have an overarching body such as the Sanhedrin to effectively adjudicate such matters, there has often been no viable pathway to bring a YHWH honoring conclusion to the matter when a difficulty arises under the auspices of a national or international organization teaching Believers in such a setting.

Though many of us have found great benefit in the teaching we have received in such settings I continue to pray and consider how we might address this concern too. Though we appreciate the efficacy of drawing large numbers of people from distant places to teach them, I can't help but ask if that is Yeshua's mode of operation. Gaining knowledge outside the boundaries of relationship and accountability of elders and shepherds surely seems to me to be a double edged sword; not ALWAYS desirable.

When we know who we are and we know where we stand we are best able to walk as He would have us walk. When we are unclear about these matters we may be hesitant or negligent to walk in the manner worthy to our calling. The whole body suffers when elders are not able to function in the wisdom they bring.

...the success of any country, community, school or church body will have a direct correlation to the presence of true elders who are guiding and directing. ³

Resources

Other than that specifically referenced in the text or footnotes here, the materials we draw from in our Scripture studies are listed at our [Bible Research Tools](#) page.

³ **Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You: The Life Model**; by E. James Wilder, PhD, et al., Shepherd's House, Inc., Pasadena CA, 1999, 2000,2004. Pages 41.