“How Should Elders Be Appointed in the Church?”

In the biblical point of view who is supposed to appoint a person to become an elder? Is it the pastor, the board of elders or the congregation?

First, let me recommend an excellent resource on the topic of leaders and leadership in the church. Dr. Gene Getz has written a book titled Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church (Moody Press, 2003). It is his view, and mine, that God has given us considerable freedom in how we govern our local congregations, both in organizational structure and in the number and the appointment method of elders/leaders. Far less flexible, or perhaps I should say far more important is the character and maturity required for someone to be considered qualified to be a leader in the church.

The Bible uses two terms interchangeably to describe the leadership position in the early church. In the earliest days of the church, the Greek term *presbuteroi* (elder) was consistently used. This is the same Greek word used by the Jews to describe elders within the Jewish community. By the time of Christ, every Roman city with a significant number of Jews had a council called the Sanhedrin composed of twenty-three elders. There was also a “Great Sanhedrin” in Jerusalem comprised of priests, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. Although the term “elder” was borrowed from the Jewish community, the role of “elder” in the church was quite different from an “elder” in the Jewish faith. Later, the term *episkopoi* (overseer/bishop) is used by the Bible to describe leaders. This term was more familiar to Gentile believers. The Romans used the title to refer to a superintendent or leader of a colony. When there were both Jewish and Gentile believers present, the Bible uses both terms (elder and overseers) to

signify the leadership function.

The key is not the term used, but the function that these men served in the church. How these men were selected also varied. In some cases they were chosen directly by Paul and Barnabas. Timothy and Titus are given instructions by Paul regarding how they were to select elders and what qualifications were to be used. Apollos is another example of one who most likely appointed elders/overseers in the churches. Beyond these early examples of Apostolic appointment by Paul and those he approved of, we have no clear model for the selection process. Both the appointment method by existing leaders and forms of congregational selection coexisted into the future. There are some indications that self-appointed leaders existed in the early church as well. Titus 1:11 mentions an example of a leader that was causing problems by teaching things he ought not to teach.

I believe that both appointed and congregationally chosen methods are permissible as long as the qualifications for elder/overseer are taken seriously. The form of selection and the name or title given leaders is secondary to the function that they are to perform.

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