

OpenTheo

Q&A#41 Are Young Elders a Contradiction in Terms?

September 6, 2018



Alastair Roberts

Today's question: "What are your thoughts on 'young elders' in the church? Is there an age restriction for the office of elder?"

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account:
<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these videos, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>.

My new Soundcloud account is here: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes:
<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, what are your thoughts on young elders in the church? Is there an age restriction for the office of elder? Even reading that question, there's something jarring and oxymoronic about the expression young elder. The very name of the office suggests that the person occupying it should be of older age.

I think one of the reasons why we struggle with this question today is similar to the reason why we struggle with the question of women in ministry, pastoral ministry. It's because we have formed the church into an institution that's detached from the organic structures of life. We don't think in terms of the organic structures of family and how that spreads out into society, nor do we think in terms of the organic structures of human development.

We think primarily in terms of abstract offices and skill sets that correspond to those. And so when it comes to the position of the elder, we don't think in terms of human beings having a natural pattern of development that's fairly inescapable. You must grow from the infant to the boy to the young man, to the youth, to the young man and the man and then the father and then the etc.

Until you become a grandfather, a sage, an old man and then an ancestor. There is a pattern of human development here and there are certain ways that people can speak at different stages that have different sorts of power and influence. The influence of the old man is significant, the elder, because he represents something.

He represents something about that future stage of development that he has arrived at and that he can speak from the authority of experience and also the authority of developed character. He has worked out in himself what it looks like to walk the destination of the path that he's calling others to walk. And so the position of the elder is to be occupied by someone who exemplifies the route that he's advocating and teaching to others.

Now, the elder is not the person who does much of the tough work. The young men tend to be the ones that, whether as deacons or as those who function as in a more priestly capacity, they are the ones that do much of the harder work. But they do it under the guidance of the elders.

Within scripture, I think we can see a certain pattern for this within the characters of the Levites and the priests. Priests entering their ministry at the age of about 30 and then concluding at about the age of 50. But at that point, there would be they wouldn't cease completely from any sort of priestly activity.

Rather, they would enter into an older and elderly stage of their ministry where they'd be primarily overseeing others and guiding others, young men, as they perform the primary tasks. So I think we see this more generally within the church. Often the person who's engaged in the primary pastoral work will be a younger man.

But under the guidance of older men and representing their authority and acting in their authority. And so there will also be deacons. Deacons are often people who are apprenticed to the elders, people who will become elder than time themselves, who act under the guidance of an elder person.

We see this with Timothy. Timothy, probably around 30 or 40 and under the guidance of Paul. And as he grows in maturity, he will become someone who leads in the way that Paul does.

Paul's the elder man at that point. And Timothy will become an older man who will lead the church and be an example in his turn. And so these are natural patterns of life.

And the church, I think, is supposed to recognize the significance of these natural patterns of human development and to use those in a way that's structuring its own life. Israel already had elders before Moses equipped the elders with or gave the elders authority under him. And so Moses led the people of Israel more directly until the chapter 18, where under Jethro's advice, his father in law, which again is significant.

He takes Jethro's advice and sets up the elders as those who will help to run the nation of Israel. What he's doing at that point, he's taking an organic structure of human life, these figures that are the older men within the community, those who are the authority figures over the younger men and taking a generational pattern, a father son pattern. And he's using it as the structure of the life, the civic and political life of Israel.

And I think this is the same for the church. The church is taking a very natural structure of human life and it's relating it to its own community. And so the people who will be the elders within the church are the old men, are old men within the community that are fitting character and represent the example and the character and the learning and the skills necessary to exercise a role in the household of God.

And so these are people who have generally proved themselves within their own household. They have raised their own families and now they're called to be those who oversee the household of God. So I think there isn't a strict age restriction.

These things are a matter of prudence. But when we look at the scriptural pattern, when we look at the pattern of human society, when we look at the pattern of human development and the different stages of human life, I think it would be unwise to have elders who are under the age of 50. Ideally, elders, I think, should be in their 60s or upwards.

And those sorts of figures can speak with a different type of voice. They can speak with the voice of experience and the authority of that which has been worked out in their experience. Now, when you have young elders, one of the problems is that the young elders have to exert force more directly because they don't have the same force of that's grounded in actual character that's worked out over time.

Nor do they have the same authority that's grounded in experience and in proof of what they have done, how they've raised their families, things like that, and how they've kept stable marriages, whatever it is, how they have conducted their business in an appropriate and wise and shrewd manner. They have authority on that sort of basis. But a young man who's exercising the office of an elder has to be a lot more assertive and forceful and exercise a sort of authority that can be far more restrictive and oppressive because they do not have that natural force that comes with age.

And so I think what we're looking for in elders are people who have the weight of experience, the weight of age, the weight of years behind them. And what we see, I think, in scripture is the description even of someone like Rehoboam, who's in his early 40s, leaving the advice of the elders and going to the youths that he grew up with. He's in his early 40s and he's described as a youth, but yet he's associated with youth.

But the elders, I think, are at least 50, ideally in their 60s, that sort of age. And that helps us to understand, I think, some of the patterns that we see in scripture. The

pattern, for instance, of the older man with the younger apprentice.

Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha, Paul and Timothy. These sorts of patterns are patterns that we see in scripture. It's a father-son pattern.

We see Elijah referred to as father by Elisha. I think we see the same with Joshua and Moses at a certain point. And then we also see the same with Paul and Timothy, that Paul speaks of himself as like a father to Timothy or Timothy is like a son to him.

These are patterns of father-son relationship that develop within the church. As younger men teach older men and oversee younger men and the younger men act in the name of their fathers with the authority of their fathers. And that pattern, I think, is seen in relationship to elders and often pastors may often be younger men under the guidance of the elders, but acting in their authority.

And then I think there will also be deacons and other people who are working within this network of authority and representation where you have a strong intergenerational bonds. Now, within the modern understanding of society, we've rendered everything undifferentiated. So men and women are undifferentiated.

But beyond that, we have the breaking down of the differentiation between the generations. And the elder is someone who brings the differentiation of the generations into prominence within the life of the church. That there is a passing on of the life of the church from one generation to the next.

That there is a succession of fathers and sons. And that this is needed for the healthy overseeing of the life of the church and the healthy succession from one generation to the next. And when we think about the church just as a more abstract organisation or system, I think we miss the organic structures of life that it should have at its heart.

And so I would argue that when we are talking about elders, we mean elders. People who are of older age within the church. People who can represent a later stage of life that younger men should be aspiring to.

That can represent in their character, in their achievements in their life, what they have done. And the way that other people around them have been formed. They can present an example and they can present something that others can aspire to.

That we want to become like them. And when you see an older man who represents that, they can speak with weight into your experience. And so I think that is where we must settle on this.

That unless we really take the differences of age seriously within the church and move beyond the modern perception of the church as just something for undifferentiated religious consumers. Staffed by a ministry team that can be of any sort of age. Until we

move past that, we are in serious trouble.

The church has broken up the relationship between the generations in the current day. Largely along the lines of music. And so for this and other reasons, we need some drastic changes if we are going to restore healthy church office.

And healthy church office requires an intergenerational relationship. A relationship between elders and deacons. Deacons being younger men, elders being older men.

And until we do that, I think we will face many problems. If you have any further questions, please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support these videos in the future, then please do so using my Patreon account.

The links for both of those are below. If you have found these videos helpful, please pass them on to your friends and others. Hopefully see you again tomorrow.

God bless.